Claiming Quality: Discourses on Quality and Arts Education in Sri Lanka

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Abstract - Discourses on quality are central to how the corporatization of the State university system has occurred in Sri Lanka. Neoliberal universities maintain an extensive governance system that implements quality through a disciplinary system that aims to produce quality within the university. In this paper, I examine how such disciplinary measures are also productive. They produce discourses on quality that are then performatively enabled by the university community. I particularly focus on how Arts faculties navigate such discourses on quality by examining how policy documents, guidelines, self-evaluation reports, annual reports, and even promotion circulars perform a productive role, leading the university community to produce the practices that are demanded of them. I will specifically focus on IR guidelines, SLQF, annual reports and SERs produced by the UGC and the University of Kelaniya as well as publicly available data on academics from the two Arts Faculties at the University of Kelaniya. In this paper, I focus on the *Manual for Institutional Review* in my analysis.

Keywords *– Quality, Corporatization, Neoliberalism, State universities, Governance system*

This paper is a preliminary examination of how claims to quality are made within Sri Lanka's State university system. It was in 1996 that the first discussions on quality and quality assurance began in Sri Lanka (Warnasuriya et al, 2015, p. 10), and in 2001, the first Quality Assurance Committee was established (Ibid.). From being a marginal presence, often seen as a simple document check, today, it has become the central node of governance, teaching, and research in our university system. In this paper, I want to raise some questions about quality, our claims to quality, and the kinds of practices that become productive, or performative within our system and begin to function as something more than a set of criteria for assessing quality. Drawing on the various documents that frame quality within our system, I wish to examine how our system is being transformed from within, framing it through what seems like an ideologically neutral set of claims about quality, and turning our universities into corporate/neoliberal entities.

One point of reference for discussions on how the neoliberalization of Sri Lankan State universities are taking place is the Kuppi series that treated the theme quite extensively. I have reviewed some of these articles in the literature review below. While agreeing with the stance taken by the Kuppi Collective, in this paper, I wish to ask why, despite the obvious mismatch between the core values of the humanities and discourses on quality, these quality assurance programmes somehow seem to work in our faculties. If you examine the many voices that have forwarded critical arguments, they belong to a small minority of people who have refused to internalize the neoliberal doxa. So how, exactly, do claims to quality made by Arts Faculties square with the neoliberal agendas forwarded by quality assurance?

Sri Lanka's state university system has been a contentious political ground over which several battles over the right to education have been fought. I will just point to two: the 1972 language standardization that left Tamil medium students at a distinct disadvantage over Sinhalese students. That move, often seen as a crucial form of engineering the power of Sinhalese majoritarianism in Sri Lanka, was not just unfair; it was a violent means through which the economic and social aspirations of Tamil medium students were slashed, contributing to the youth uprising of the North that began in the early 1970s (DeVotta & UNU-WIDER, 2022); de Votta points out that "Standardization thus legitimized the claim that only Eelam (a separate Tamil state) could ensure Tamils' dignity and enable them to fulfil their economic aspirations" (DeVotta & UNU-WIDER, 2022, p. 1). The second is the 1981 White Paper on education and the establishment of the North Colombo Private Medical College. The latter played no small part in the popular youth support for the 1987-89 uprising of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, particularly in universities[17]. If you are not a historian, you are probably wondering why I am invoking these old ghosts in a discussion about quality. To me, it seems we have not learnt anything from this history. Educational aspirations are grounded in race and class, as well as gender, caste, and various other axes of inequality that exist in our society and when we speak of quality and claim excellence, it is important to remember that no discussion of quality can take place outside discussions of such power. The other reason I raise these old ghosts is to remind ourselves that the privatization and ethnicization of education has met with sharp resistance in our society. Thus, the privatization of higher education has happened piece-meal in Sri Lanka, and not as one direct move coming from the top. Turning state universities into fee-levying and profit-driven institutions

[1] For a discussion of the 1982 White Papers on education, see Manuratne, 2017 (Manuratne, 2017)

directly cannot, I argue, be done even today without serious political repercussions. Thus, new soft control systems such as quality assurance have taken the place of such direct intervention.

The second context I would like to lay out here is a remarkable contradiction that is at the heart of the state university system: the everyday governance of our universities is carried out through a fairly rigid system of circulars and establishment letters etc., that are hard to change and harder to challenge. Yet, our universities are expected to function like modern neoliberal universities—ranking first, maintaining dynamic student-driven classrooms (which, unfortunately are sometimes coded as keep the customer-student happy), maintaining web-presence, flexibility with labour, flexibility with time etc., which are the hallmarks of new neoliberal universities. Given the above two contexts, the research problem framing this paper is how Arts Faculties have incorporated quality assurance regimes and claimed quality within these faculties. To make my argument, I draw on theories on the neliberalization of higher education, particularly that by Wendy Brown.

Research Questions

- What is the nature of the discourse on quality that is proposed by the various documents pertaining to quality, quality assurance, and qualifications frameworks?
- How does this discourse become productive within a system that is rigidly managed through a system of circulars issued by the University Grants Commission that are formulated through a highly hierarchical system?

What I argue in this paper is that discourses on quality function as an ideological framework, particularly when it comes to Arts Faculties, to bridge the gap between the hierarchies of the old university governance system and the neoliberal aspirations of the same universities.

Literature Review

As mentioned earlier, the most sustained engagement with quality assurance and its many ways of corporatizing state universities has been carried out by the writers of the Kuppi group. Of these, I would like to mention a few, as they help to build up my argument directly. Kaushalya Perera has pointed to the way quality assurance standardizes arts education, thereby creating a set of criteria for graduates, teaching and learning processes, and instruments of management such as corporate plans that attempt to quantify what is essentially unquantifiable

(Perera, 2021). Mahendran Thiruvarangan discusses the way curriculum development is limited by the "prioritization of skills" over knowledge, "the templatization of assessment," and a facile interdisciplinarity that is made difficult by territorial academic interests of departments and faculties (Thiruvarangan, 2021). Ranga Kalugampitiya has examined the compartmentalization of theory and practice imitative of the sciences that is impossible to reproduce in Arts curricula (Kalugampitiya, 2021). Farzana Haniffa has discussed the way Humanities and Social Sciences perspectives have been entirely disregarded in the formulation of policy and in the many annoyingly anodyne "training workshops" that we are made to endure about writing learning outcomes (Haniffa, 2022). Most usefully, Sivamohan Sumathy has examined the need to retheorize academic autonomy in terms of the democratization of university structures, and points to the way official and explicit hierarchical structures within universities function alongside "informal networks of power and hierarchy that act in tandem with the structural hierarchies" (Sumathy, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation that I draw on for this paper is Wendy Brown's essay titled "Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics." In this essay, Brown argues that neoliberalism draws on a form of governance that Michel Foucault identified as extending "market metrics and practices into every dimension of human life" (Brown, 2016, p.5). Neoliberalism's tendency to marketize all aspects of human life lies at the heart of how contemporary quality regimes envisage education:

> When it takes shape as a political rationality, this form of normative reason displaces other modes of valuation for judgment and action, displaces basic liberal democratic criteria for justice with business metrics, transforms the state itself into a firm, produces everyday norms of identity and conduct that configure the subject as human capital, and configures every kind of human activity in terms of rational self-investment or entrepreneurship. (Brown, 2016, p. 5)

Thus, the entire system is developed based on a set of metrics and measurement that universities are expected to live up to and perform.

The other aspect of Brown's argument that I find useful and will draw on to make my argument is the idea that neoliberal forms of soft control also function as performatives, where the affirmation of a certain value also ensures that it is enacted. For example, when an SER claims that it practices OBE-LCT, it is like

saying, you are now man and wife—it enacts what it says. They are what Judith Butler calls performatives. But the performatives issued by quality assurance systems are not value-neutral. Instead, they function to propagate neoliberal ideologies, turning them into technocratic jargon that obscure the actual class and other agendas behind them. As Brown points out,

> the discourse and practice of governance depoliticizes its own deployment and field of application on several fronts. As governance "responsibilizes" each element in its orbit, it eliminates from view the stratification and disparate positions of these elements — the powers producing, arranging and relating them. Governance also disavows the powers *it* circulates, the norms it advances, the conflicts it glosses or dispatches. As it promulgates a market emphasis on "what works," it eliminates from discussion politically, ethically or otherwise normatively inflected dimensions of policy, aiming to supersede politics with practical, technical approaches to problems. (Brown, 2016, p.5)

Thus, for example, when neoliberal documents speak of "problem solving" they are necessarily talking about solving certain problems in certain predictable ways; when they speak of networking, they are talking about the economization of social relations.

As it is amply clear, these paradigms propagated by quality regimes are not in tune with the kind of critical and creative thinking that traditional arts education values or imparts. Thus, my question is, how is it, then, that Arts faculties continue to make claims to quality, and how do the standards and best practices laid down by quality assurance regimes function as performatives.

Ontologically, I approach the problem of quality as something that is discursively and ideologically constructed. As such, in this study, I treat quality as something that can be interpreted, rather than as an attribute of education, graduates, teaching/learning.

My epistemological approach is deconstruction and interpretivism. This paper aims to deconstruct the idea of quality assurance by pointing to the way that quality is discursively constructed, and therefore, can be reformulated and resituated depending on the power interests framing education. Thus, I interpret existing quality assurance documents that construct the idea of "quality" in specifically political ways. Such forms of understanding quality as driven by a regime of auditing and reviewer obscure the way they are not neutral forms of monitoring quality, but ways of framing how education is valued. As an academic

staff member of a state university, I do not claim any objectivity in this research. It is necessarily partial, as the standpoint from which I can articulate how quality assurance works within universities is shaped by my own encounter with them. I have contributed to writing Self-Evaluation Reports on behalf of my faculty and have been an editorial member of the Institutional Review SER writing team. Drawing on this experience, I close read and interpret the Quality Assurance documents, particularly the *Manual for Institutional Review* to identify how it constructs the discourse on quality.

Analysis

One most revealing document reflecting the values and ideas of the new quality regime is the *Manual for Institutional Review*. Particularly enlightening is the introduction to quality assurance laid out in the manual, with which I shall start.

The IR manual begins by citing Karl Jaspers, who identifies three interconnected centres that comprise the role of a modern university:

a. Training centre—to produce society's professionals
b. Research centre—to solve its problems
c. Cultural centre—to provide a liberal environment for its thinkers (Warnasooriya, Narada et al., 2015, p. 38)

Despite beginning with this useful distinction between different centres, its primary institutional review criteria only focus on two of the above, predictably, the training centre and the research centre; the cultural centre is almost entirely forgotten except in one telling place in Criterion 4: Learning resources, student support and progression. But even then, the cultural aspect is reduced to a formulaic nod towards ethnic cohesion:

> The University/HEI promotes social harmony and ethnic cohesion through programmes and activities coordinated through institutional mechanisms such as student counselling and welfare systems and a multicultural centre. (p. 38)

Let me return to the 10 criteria, and examine how they envision quality in the university:

1. Governance and Management

2. Curriculum Design and Development

3. Teaching and Learning

4. Learning Resources, Student Support and Progression

5. Student Assessment and Awards

6. Strength and Quality of Staff

7. Postgraduate Studies, Research, Innovation and Commercialization

8. Community Engagement, Consultancy and Outreach

9. Distance Education

10. Quality Assurance

At a glance, none of these criteria seems problematic. But as Kaushalya Perera notes succinctly, the devil is certainly in the details (Perera, 2021). Consider, for example, what seems like a self-explanatory criterion: Criterion 8. Community Engagement, consultancy, and outreach. Notwithstanding the heavily marketizing language, one hopes that this would be the one criterion that would spell out how the HEI is expected to engage with the community, and what forms its outreach would take. Disappointingly, however, this is the criterion that spells out how the knowledge produced by the university can be marketized, rather than made to work for and with the community it serves. It uses community service and community engagement interchangeably, but focuses specifically on income-generating activities, consultancies, industry-institution-community links, business centres, and work-based placements/internships. As I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, the "community" that we must "engage with" is certainly not a homogeneous one; nor is the business community even its key constituent. But the entire conception of community engagement is envisaged in marketizing terms, with no regard to the actual needs of the broader community in which we work.

Criteria 06 also brings out the key problem I try to address in this essay: Strength and Quality of Staff. The best practices associated with Criteria 06 insist on human resource planning and training and retraining, emphasizing professional development over career development. As we know, the actual human resource policies that determine recruitment, promotions, study leave, etc., are managed through a set of rigid UGC circulars that are neither flexible nor dynamic. For example, many issues related to recruitment and promotions lead to even court cases, where real or perceived injustices against members of the staff are carried out by citing these circulars. As Sumathy has pointed out, and I quoted her above, there is a set of informal networks that actually determine who has access to what resources, and while most administrators would be careful not to

violate regulations, there are informal ways in which these seemingly rigid circulars are bent in favor of some and not others. Yet, the best practices seem to insist on a completely different set of criteria, where the evolving needs of the department will determine who can or should be recruited into a department. Once they are recruited, again, human resource plans dictate who can do what at what stage in their career, and these can be particularly deleterious to younger lecturers whose ability to negotiate within the system is minimal. Moreover, despite insisting on foreign exposure and foreign postgraduate degrees, the leave process is complicated and prohibitive, particularly when it comes to bonds, returning after study leave after master's degrees etc. For example, until quite recently, a teacher who studied abroad on an international scholarship for a master's degree was required to serve for four years before they could return to complete their PhD. Given the realities of foreign funded scholarships and returning to studies after a four-year hiatus, most young academics now choose to complete their master's degrees locally before they seek foreign PhDs, if they ever do.

On the other hand, severe bonding, which includes bonding for scholarships an academic gets for his/her own merit, is a practice that deters many academics from seeking foreign qualifications. Some choose to simply resign before departing for postgraduate studies. Particularly in Arts Faculties, where the distinction between a foreign postgraduate degree and a local one is negligible, most academics now prefer to advance their careers faster through local postgraduate degrees, rather than jump the hoops set down by the Ministry of Higher Education such as IELTS requirements, funding obligations etc. Thus, while insisting on training and continuous career development in quality assurance, the actual circulars that govern what access the teacher has to training is generally limiting. This is particularly clear in the way the professor application process functions. As spelled out by Circular 916, the only qualifications that count are postgraduate degrees and professional affiliations. The proposed circular for awarding professorships does not even count study leave as part of one's service.

The above points bring me to why I argue that despite the measured opposition of a few discerning academics, the quality assurance regime has been accepted and internalized by most academics in Arts Faculties. The dictates of quality assurance act as performatives. In some exceptional cases, however, we find that some academics go even further than the dictates of the quality assurance in order to align themselves with the new quality assurance regimes. Despite its claims to quality, the manuals and guidelines do not challenge the way teaching

and learning or even research occurs within universities. The only document that attracts widespread interest is revisions of the professor circulars; with most other documents, anything goes. Farzana Haniffa describes in her piece titled "Undervaluing Social Science and Humanities Teaching in the Sri Lankan University System" how a group of trainees responded during a workshop on curriculum development:

> The usage of a metaphor of production to refer to students also meant half the participants at the workshop were completely put off by the presentation. More troublingly, the other half were eager to learn the corporate language to ensure that they performed well in keeping with the requirements of the current dispensation. In the process, irreparable harm was being done to how both sets of young H and SS scholars approached and valued their disciplinary training. (Haniffa, 2022)

My guess is that in the current realities of Arts Faculties, more than half are "eager to learn the corporate language" not only for personal performance, but also because that is where the money is. Yet, as we have seen, time and again, even more progressive changes that are possible to be made through World Bank funding are marred by the hierarchical and territorial nature of faculty boards and senates, and changes can be introduced if they stay well within the corporate logic of neoliberal reform and don't rock the boat too much. Younger scholars have learnt the lesson of not jeopardizing their career, not asking too many questions, and abiding by the rules of the new regime by simply taking them even farther than they are intended. For example, the annual report of the University of Kelaniya describes the achievements of a young film-maker who is a member of the staff for winning several international film awards:

> Apart from the research activities, the film Viyasiduru, produced the by the University of Kelaniya has won awards in Paris International Film Awards 2021, Calcutta International Cult Film Festival 2021, World Film Carnival - Singapore 2021, Golden Sparrow International Film Festival 2021, and in Halicarnassus film Festival Turkey 2021. Apart from that, the movie has been officially selected in Port Blair International Film Festival 2021, Indo French International Film Festival, Vanilla Palm Film Festival & Art Competition California 2021, Druk International film Festival 2021, Tagore International Film Festival 2021. (*Annual Report and Accounts 2021*, 2021, p. 8)

As anyone familiar with film festivals would be aware, several of these are film festivals, sometimes sending an award a month, somewhat similar to predatory journals. I am using this example to show how the combination of quantified

quality and regressive informal networks are creating a generation of scholars within Arts Faculties who are, not only not attuned to what was once considered the core values of arts/humanities education, but even taking the doxas of measuring quality in quantitative ways beyond their intended limit. The same phenomenon was common with predatory publications until greater awareness of it has now incited a backlash against those who publish in predatory journals.

Several keywords used extensively within quality assurance frameworks are also worthy of note:

Criteria
Best practices
Strategic management plan (formerly, corporate plan)
Stakeholders
Performance appraisal
Employability
Indicators of excellence in teaching
Performance indicators
OBE-LCT
Quality culture
Regular review and monitoring

As we have seen, the entire quality assurance process is organized around criteria and best practices. These are the types of soft control that are symptomatic of neoliberal articulations of governance. As Brown points out, governance is a term that makes power invisible, by replacing overt manifestations of power within the system with terms that suggest participatory, consensual behaviours that are nevertheless subtly enforced upon their subjects:

> Thus, in governance speak, guidelines replace law, facilitation replaces regulations, standards, and codes of conduct (disseminated by a range of agencies and institutions) replace overt policing and other forms state coercion. Together these replacements vanquish a vocabulary of power, and hence power's visibility, from the lives and venues that governance orders and organizes. (Brown, 2016, p.5)

Thus, criteria and best practices don't lay down a rule. Instead, they function as disciplinary mechanisms (in the Foucauldian sense) that make the actual performative power of these terms and the power regimes coded into these terms invisible. The word "strategic," that was once a militarized term, is today a business term indicating the planning required to run a business or a company

effectively. While it may make sense to use this term in a business setting, the "strategic" value of planning a state university needs to consider a much broader agenda when planning its activities. Central to strategic planning are SWOT analyses, where the entire assessment of an institution's possibilities are enumerated as Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Since SER documents that I had originally planned to use for this analysis are confidential and there was no mechanism to get approval to use them, I will draw on a fictionalized, but not unreal possible scenario. Imagine a department that teaches the English language. The threat, most immediate to such a department, would be the vast social stratification that exists in Sri Lankan society, where English is not only a language of privilege and prestige reserved for a few, but is also a tool of upward mobility that is denied to most segments of our society. Now the department compelled to write "threats" might be tempted to state "class inequality" as a threat; in reality it is a colossal challenge that is tied to socio-political histories that are much larger than the English Language classroom. Given how quality regimes are also tied to funding, they will put "World Bank funding to develop curricula" as an opportunity with a sigh of relief. Yet, as those familiar with the scene of English Language Teaching in Sri Lanka would know, that is hardly an opportunity; not any more than class inequality is a threat. That doesn't even make sense, when you consider the realities within which we must work every day, in a society that is plagued by neoconservative ideologies, informal networks of distributing privilege both inside and outside the university, and even the everyday violence, from ragging to chronic fatigue that many active academics now suffer from.

The new quality assurance regime, then, produces the student and values about the education in two directions: student as product and student as client. The diagram below outlines how this production takes place through quality assurance documents:

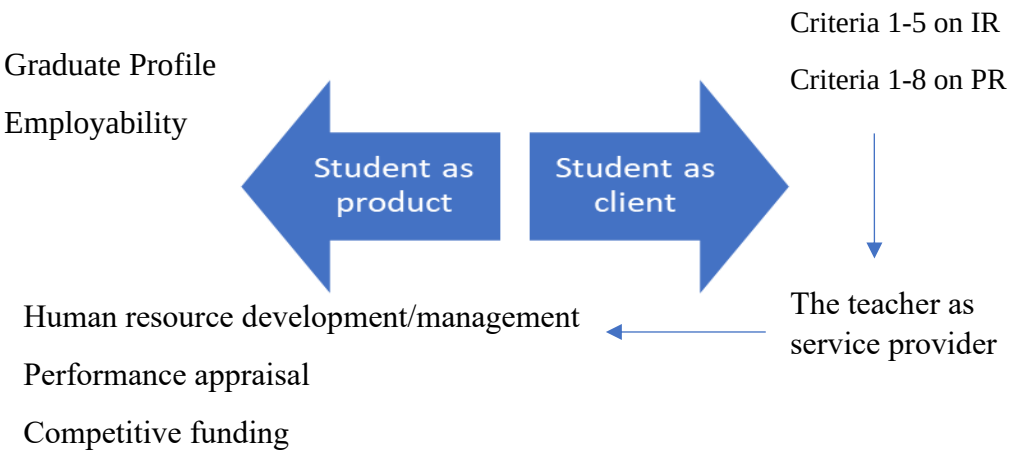

Diagram 1

As this dragram shows, on the one hand, the quality assurance regime constructs the student as a product, in the more industrial or market sense, rather than as someone who has gained knowledge. The level of this objectification of the student is complemented by the way the teacher, then, becomes a service provider. On the other hand, even as the student is the product of the education process s/he also becomes the client of the services being produced. So the education process is geared towards satisfying two types of market demands: the labour market's demand for skilled labour and the educational markets' demand for education that will give students such marketable skills. This, at its core, is the essence of neoliberal education.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that quality can no longer be seen as simply an attribute of education, but as a set of practices that are produced through discourses on quality assurance. I have examined *The Manual for Institutional Review* as the main document that shows us how quality is understood within the quality assurance regime and to examine how this document produces discourses on quality. Finally, I have argued that this new regime sees the student as both product and client, thereby turning the teacher and the broader institutional set up that the university is into a service provider that must at once please the client and produce the client as a product that is marketable.

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