researchintelligence

News from the British Educational Research Association

August 2007 ISSUE 100

Welcome to the 100th Edition!

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British Educational Research Association

Research policy and education research: Accountability phobia, or a clash of interpretations?

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This brief piece reflects on the shifts in public understandings of researcher accountability over the past few decades. In particular, it looks at what has been described as a decline of professional, ethical and communicative accountability in favour of more technical, managerial and bureaucratic modes. This was accompanied by a conceptual change, from accountability as responsibility and communicative reason to accountability as hierarchical answerability (with corresponding shifts in values, concepts of public good, and hierarchies of knowledge).

In the process, attempts have also been made to generate hybrids between professional accountability (i.e., accountability that resides within education and research communities and relies on conceptions of intrinsic excellence and on professional ethics – Winch, 2001) and bureaucratic accountability (i.e. financial concepts of accountability and auditability, transposed to the context of professionals being held to account by third parties such as government and administrative structures or corporations – Biesta, 2004) that are acceptable to all parties. However, rather than producing accountability regimes with wider legitimacy, such attempts have been criticised by commentators for having aggravated the 'erosion of professional power from state governments and the corporate community' (Webb, 2005, p.191).

The past two to three decades have seen significant changes not only in conceptualisations of accountability, but also in its structures, regulation, and mechanisms, across a range of contexts, from state administration, to education and research. Ranson (2003, p.460) describes the recent changes in accountability regimes in the context of new public management systems as a 'revolution in accountability' aimed at remedying the 'loss of public trust' in society (O'Neill, 2002), to the extent that accountability ceased to be 'part of the system' and became 'the system itself', the distinctive features of which – consumer choice, contract efficiency, quality, and capital ownership – have been introduced gradually since 1979. Ranson's 'revolution' involved a succession and partial overlap of no less than five modes of accountability (one professional, and four instrumental): professional (based on professional judgment and using specialist knowledge as criterion); consumer (market competition; consumer responsiveness; consumer choice); contract (competitive tendering; service efficiency; technical efficiency); performative (public inspection; product quality; national standards and targets); and corporate (business plan; control infrastructure; profitability) (pp. 463-464).

Research policies affecting education research over the past decade seemed to exhibit a mixture of features characteristic to each of the above modes. Recent research policies encourage contractualism and client orientation on the part of research 'providers', as well as a focus on measurable outputs (e.g. the volume of publications and of research income as in recent proposals for replacing the RAE with a metrics system (Oancea, 2007). However, satisfying contract specifications, the needs of the client, or pre-specified standards of measurable output are not commonly accepted measures of success in research, as they are both highly questionable from the perspective of the researchers concerned, and seen as merely a basic 'minimum requirement' (thus not a reason for praise) from that of the commissioners/contractors.

To a significant extent, recent criticisms of educational research (e.g. Tooley and Darby, 1998, Hillage *et al.*, 1998, on 'value for money', 'relevance', and 'impact') were an extension of this mode of reasoning, especially once its legitimacy had been reinforced by several different governments in the 1990s (particularly so during the 1997 shift of power from a Conservative to a New Labour government). They reconfigured the relationship between policy makers, practitioners and the public, on the one hand, and education researchers, on the other, as one between 'investors (in)/consumers (of)' research and 'service providers/producers' of education research; the gates to managerial definitions of accountability were thus thrown wide open. Hammersley's (2006) argument about critical research also applies to criticism of research: 'continual criticism tends to undermine public trust in those criticised and opens the way to demands for 'transparent' accountability, the impossible requirement that everything be made fully explicit and thereby open to sound immediate judgement by anyone' (p.189).

The emerging 'new accountability' regime featured, among other things: a focus on performance and development of targets at various levels; ground-level units of accountability (institutions and departments); quality assurance strategies; inspections; multiplication of assessment categories (i.e. from pass/fail to expanded rating scales); audit and public reporting; and the attachment of consequences to performance levels. A glance at policies affecting education research in the UK over the past two decades quickly reveals similar features; for example: the ever sharper focus on 'performance' and performance-related funding; the concentration of reporting and assessment on 'research units' rather than systemic indicators; the emphasis on 'transparency'; the expectation that private sector-inspired strategic management practices are adopted at unit level; the increasing number of categories for RAE ratings from one exercise to the next; the expansion of public reporting of research outputs at national and international level (e.g. OECD), etc.

It is not news that such trends can be highly problematic and have perverse consequences. For example, the focus on visibility and high-stakes accountability systems can endanger capacity building processes. In this scenario capacity building can be replaced by capacity trading as may have happened with researcher mobility in England, partly under the influence of the RAE. Far from being a discrete event, accountability as 'formal answerability' becomes inexorably oriented towards routinisation and thus re-directs practice towards narrow criteria of performance, emphasising the external imposition of targets and quantifiable outcomes as the means of improvement (Ranson, 2003, p.469).

Some have argued that, together with increasingly specific regulation, such internalisation of accountability as a constant routine rather than a defined event increases the risk of generating 'fabrications of performance' and 'constructions' of success and of good practice based on 'selective truths' that are likely to attract the benefits attached to the expected assessment of performance, rather than honest, transparent and democratic accounts (see Ball's, 2001, systems of 'performativity').

More emphatically, the emphasis on quantifiable models of evaluation (and of research quality) may in fact conceal a dangerous shift from a focus on internal excellence to one on external effectiveness; or, paraphrasing MacIntyre (1982), from 'the internal goods of excellence' such as epistemic honesty, benevolence or virtuous deliberation, to 'extrinsic goods of effectiveness', such as wealth creation, gaining and retaining power, or competitive advantage. All of the latter are recognisable as core values in the string of research policy-relevant White Papers and governmental documents stretching over the past two decades, as well as in the official criticisms of educational research in the late 1990s.

By contrast, a system of discursive accountability involves exchange of accounts, dialogue (Thomas and Martin, 1996), a focus on internal 'goods of excellence' (MacIntyre, 1982), reasonableness of communication (Habermas, 1984), and reflective agency. The differences between accountability as hierarchical answerability ('holding to account' for assessment purposes followed by a distribution of punishments or rewards) and accountability as communicative reason ('giving an account' – producing and exchanging narratives that explicate the reasons behind activities and their normative grounds – Giddens, 1984) highlight the ways in which overly instrumental hierarchical accountability entails a denial of professional agency. As such, its mechanisms of 'specifying performance and regulating compliance' (Ranson, 2003, p.460) can lack legitimacy within professional communities.

Recent controversies about the role and quality of educational research do not necessarily translate either policy-supported administrative close-mindedness, or a wholesale refusal of accountability on the part of the academia and of researchers – they can be seen instead as a clash of interpretations of accountability. Hence 'corporate' answerability may be advocated in public management circles but deemed dangerous and unacceptably narrow in academic ones, while 'collegial' accountability may be perceived from outside the inner sanctum of academia as too weak and unstructured. If this is the case, the way forward is not the reinforcement of targets, indicators, standards and techniques of managerial accountability, nor the closure of academia to external scrutiny, but to strive towards restoring the discursive, democratic and ethical dimensions of the relationship between research, the public, and policy. Looking towards the future, this involves reclaiming the ethical core of education research, scrutinising its epistemological basis, and reaffirming its internal standards of excellence.

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