Academic games in validation events: A study of academic roles and practices

Rebecca Khanna[1] & Maggi Savin-Baden[2]
[1]*Sheffield Hallam University*
[2]*University of Worcester*
Corresponding author: r.khanna@shu.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a three-year study that examined academics' espoused and actual practices in validation or approval events of UK degree courses. The study used narrative inquiry to explore academics' accounts. The paper provides a literature review and then presents the findings which indicate that often procedural processes interrupt the process of curriculum making. The paper uses scenarios to illustrate the ways in which procedural processes can result in subverting and subversive practices during the validation process. It is, therefore, argued that academics take up particular stances, defined here as positional identities, which may help or hinder the validation process. The paper argues that by ignoring staff experiences, the risk is that dominant discourses of regulation become accepted without question and the spaces available for dialogue about professional futures, alongside creation of flexible curricula to address these needs, are crowded out by the performative requirements of the process.

Keywords: validation, external-monitoring, neoliberal, curriculum, positionality

Introduction

Although the practice of course validation is commonplace in academic life, few questions have been raised or research undertaken about the implications of the ways in which academics deal with these practices on the nature and content of curricula. Meeting a multiplicity of regulatory requirements within higher education (HE) in the form of benchmarks and standards is now taken as the norm. Based on in-depth narrative research, this paper argues academics (termed faculty in some countries) are complicit in engaging in micro politics within validation activities. Such activities derail the purpose of validation, making the role of academics as curriculum-authors contestable.

This research study is set against a background of regulatory policy changes aimed at enhancing the quality of treatment and care received by patients accessing the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom (UK). Consequently, pre-registration health and

social care programmes supplying future academics for the workforce and, specifically related to this study, those working within allied health profession (AHP) courses, have experienced new forms of governance and external monitoring practices. The process of course approval, which is the focus of this research, is an example of one of these practices. This paper begins by providing a literature review and explains the methodology it adopted. It then presents the findings and the discussion, which includes illustrative scenarios. Finally, it provides recommendations for the future and prompts critical debate about the purpose of a taken for granted process occurring across HE, which has potential to influence not just the nature of course but also professional futures.

Literature Review

Literature that relates specifically to the experiences of AHP course teams is somewhat sparse and, therefore, research from the broader university context of external monitoring practices is presented here. A broader concern emerging from this review is that the process of validation, and understanding of its purpose by staff, may be assumed as unproblematic and uncritically applied.

Health profession courses were, and continue to be, scrutinised within a nexus of at least four main sources: a regulator approving programmes, the respective professional body, a commissioner for pre-registration education of student places, and university annual quality processes. Further, through a series of UK Government reforms, the importance of accountability aimed at modernising and assuring quality in health and education sectors was intensified. These enhanced forms of external monitoring placed course teams, for example within allied health and nursing, at the centre of what has been termed earlier as a 'mixed regulatory regime of scrutiny' (Jackson, 1997: 166). Course planning teams are constituted by experienced academics in the field, who form a working group together to prepare for a course validation or approval event. The nature of the weighting or co-presence between various interest groups and their positions within it tends to influence the approach and potential outcomes of an approval event, as illustrated in the scenarios below.

For the public, compliance by education providers with regulatory requirements highlights attempts to safeguard and protect patients (Davies, 2004). Indeed, for those HE organisations who demonstrate a lack of compliance, this may result in a loss of reputation and market share and may have significant financial consequences. Such challenges are acknowledged by Strathern (2000: 1), who argued that 'HE is being moulded and managed according to what seems an almost ubiquitous consensus about aims, objectives and procedures'. While Strathern's perspective is informative, this argument seems to emphasise the pernicious effects of the audit culture on practice. Such a view may preclude the idea that course planning teams might adopt a collegiate approach and assume an 'honest' stance, and exercise choice in how to deal with external monitoring on their terms. Limited research in this area means that little is known about the extent to which forms of governance influence validation outcomes, alongside the consequences for the nature of course design. Much criticism has been raised about the damning effects in HE of neo-

liberal managerialist principles and how these are distorting education, specifically approaches to learning and teaching. Ongoing criticism has documented the damning effects of standardised learning practices, and Naidoo (2005) has highlighted measures taken to 'teacher proof' course delivery. There are also a few examples where the views of academics show forms of external monitoring, such as audits, that have promoted increased attention towards learning and teaching, for instance research by Cheng (2010).

What does seem clear within current practice is the influence of neo-liberalism and performance management in HE. Adcroft and Willis (2005) provided a critique of performance management in the public sector; the most likely outcomes of these systems were greater commodification of services and deprofessionalisation of academics, rather than enhancement of services. Further, Willbergh (2015), highlights, from a Scandinavian perspective, the effects of some of the concepts that are typical of performance management, arguing that competence must be abandoned as an educational concept since it hides the content of learning. Instead it is suggested that *Bildung* should be revised since it will enable education to be open to debate by autonomous individuals on all levels from the transnational to the classroom. Yet Deng (2018a: 1), taking a view from Singapore, proposes that the problem is one of theory, suggesting that there is a crisis because of confusion stemming from the 'task of theorizing being mistakenly viewed as the pursuit of "complicated" curriculum understanding'. Whilst the arguments are compelling, Deng does not engage with the impact of validation and approval events on curriculum development and implementation, which inevitably can have a positive or negative effect not only on potential theorising about course design, but also implementation. However, what is of more concern is a study by de Paor (2016) who examined whether the professional accreditation of professional higher education programmes could complement other quality assurance endeavours in pharmacy education programmes in Ireland. What was worrying was that quality assurance and the processes and practices associated were not seen as problematic in any way. Blackmur (2010), on the other hand, examined global education from a South African stance and argued that quality assurance systems are based on the public, that there is a need to develop and the need for the use of new forms of evaluation to be adopted across higher education. In particular, he suggests that the notion of 'best practices' and the idea of peer audit, are contestable and suggests three proposals:

> (a) the terms 'quality', 'assurance' and 'quality assurance' must be abandoned until they are defined precisely and used consistently; (b) the functions of public agencies should be limited to (i) conducting annual evaluations of the extent to which the core capacities, such as analytical skills, possessed by graduating students meet (preferably) internationally agreed minimum standards, (ii) regulating the establishment of new universities, (iii) last-resort adjudicator of stakeholder complaints and (iv) advising governments; and (c) individual higher education institutions must manage the transformation of educational inputs into outputs exclusively. (Blackmur, 2010: 67)

In terms of the influences of neo-liberalism across the UK, Europe, and the U.S., it is evident that new forms of management were developed as a response to mounting concerns about how public-funded services could be delivered and maintained. The new form of management being applied to public sector services, initially labelled as 'new managerialism' (Clarke & Newman, 1994) and similar concepts, such as managerialism or 'new public management' (Hood, 2000), were characterised by organisations being run on quasi-business principles. The focus was one based on effectiveness and efficiency in order to secure continual increases in performance. The furthering of managerialist discourse and practice imported from the private sector provided the means to support regulation within public services such as universities. Salter and Tapper (2000), in their analysis of politics in governance, identified a discourse associated with quality assurance. This discourse, imported from the private sector, has had a lasting effect by unsettling the professional values of academics and the liberal ideal of education for education's sake.

Milliken and Colohan (2004: 383), in their discussion paper debating management as a means to enhance quality or increase control in universities, highlighted that '[t]he imposed changes are a manifestation of government belief that public services should be managed in accordance with the same criteria as any other economic undertaking'. Similarly, Delanty (2003) concluded that in the new public management culture, the concept of society had been superseded by the mantra of the market. Extending the scope of this review, Deem and Brehony (2005) highlighted how 'new managerialism' was much more than a set of technical, rational practices, arguing that it should rather be considered an ideology. The research, involving academics across 16 universities, went beyond an inductive study focussing on experiences of regulatory governance. Instead, the authors questioned the wider context and processes emphasising 'new managerialism' as a politically driven ideology, which 'serves to promote interests and maintain relations of power (Deem & Brehony, 2005: 218). The authors identified 'new managerialism' as having the following characteristics (Deem & Brehony, 2005):

- The right to manage above all other activities, including the capacity to challenge professional autonomy,
- Monitoring employee performance and encouraging self-monitoring,
- Attainment of financial and other targets,
- Mechanisms to demonstrate public audit of the quality of service delivery, and
- Development of quasi markets for services.

Following Bernstein's (2000) view on the effect of curriculum reforms, in this study the culture of course approval seemed more orientated towards disallowing proposals that would not fit with external requirements, rather than considering innovative ideas for curriculum development generated by professional practice interests. Across HE, the breadth of Bernstein's theoretical work has provided the basis for further research in a variety of areas, such as the recognition of students' prior learning on entering HE (Harris, 2000), challenges

and changes to professional knowledge (Beck & Young, 2005), and reconceptualising the relationship between curriculum and assessment (Shay, 2008). Bernstein, particularly, demonstrated a keenness to ensure his work had the capacity to generate descriptions. Whilst Bernstein argued for education for a democratic society, along with a clear social justice agenda, he also provided models that illuminated how pedagogic practices could be shaped. For example, Bernstein identified that 'power constructs relations *between* and control relations *within'* (2000: 5) different forms of interaction. These two concepts are aligned with two other terms used to underpin Bernstein's theories, 'classification' and 'framing'. Classification constitutes the nature of the social space in which 'power' is often disguised (Bernstein, 2000: 7). For instance, how boundaries or limits are placed on thinking about possibilities for approaches to teaching and learning which may be deemed risky, the styles of communication encouraged, and the subsequent effects on relations between those involved, including how relations are organised. Bernstein distinguished forms of classification as either 'strong' or 'weak' (2000: 7). Within a 'strong' classification, each group or individual has a unique identity, language, rules for relating to others. In contrast, a weak classification reflects a disparate identity in which, language is less specific and makes the group more permeable to interactions from others involved. Thus, Bernstein's work provides a means of examining frameworks and power relationships in areas of practice, such as education, in which regulatory agencies and their practices hold consequences for the identities of those involved.

A central concern from this review is that due to the lack of published work, the process of validation or course approval, and understanding of its purposes for academics, may be assumed as unproblematic, and so uncritically applied. Based on a review of the literature review, two questions arose, namely:

- How do AHP academics experience course approval events?
- What are the influences on the construction and approval of pre-registration AHP courses?

This research aimed to examine how governance processes inform the practice of validation, influence ways staff practice in these circumstances, which guides the appraisal and construction of professional courses.

Methodology

The aims of this study were to examine the experiences of academics involved in Allied Health Professional (AHP) pre-registration course approval processes, and to explore the influences on the construction and approval of AHP pre-registration courses using narrative inquiry. The study sought to move beyond the 'public' version(s) of the approval process, influenced by mounting regulatory policy, and provide a research-based narrative that could contribute to how academics could deal with the demands of these processes in the future. Through using a narrative approach, value was placed on the stories of participant

experiences. Narrative inquiry did not present any 'routine' places to start. Furthermore, the 'historically-produced theoretical bricolage' commonly informing a narrative approach (Squire et al., 2008) made clarity concerning how to conceptualise what is narrative, and reasons for its importance, challenging. Polkinghorne (1995: 6) maintained that 'narrative' includes 'any data that are in the form of natural discourse or speech'. More specifically, Chase (2005) highlighted that narratives may resemble anything from a short descriptive account to an extended story the teller observed or participated within about something of significance associated with a particular event. Here, we understood participants' narratives to be talk or writing organised around significant events; relating to the past, present and future and prompted through conversation, interviews and responses to other media, such as symbolic objects. Coherence between the chosen research design and the questions this study sought to address are explained in Table 1, below.

Table 1: The Link between assumptions about narrative research and design of this inquiry

Assumptions on which the research design is based:	Link to research question(s)	Implications for the choice of narrative inquiry
1. People understand and maintain their lives through the use of narratives.	What are the patterns of practice, and stakeholder perceptions of these, within the journey of curriculum construction and approval?	Participants can make sense of events through talk or the re-telling of stories about significant or consequential circumstances.
2. Narratives form an integral part of life; people shape these to enable their own goals; at the same time their own narratives are exposed to influences external to themselves.	How do governance structures surrounding the regulation of health professionals and higher education institutions shape the review and approval of allied health professional undergraduate curricula?	Through talk, participants' may describe significant 'others' including the actions of individuals, and discourse that has become enmeshed within their own narratives, for instance, reproduction of policy rhetoric.
3. Narratives may provide an insight into people's identities, how these are enacted over time and what they may become.	How does stakeholder experience of curriculum construction and approval influence educational practice and professional identities? What 'preferred' stories of curriculum review and approval exist amongst stakeholders, which may be of use in the future?	Participants experiencing conflict may use metaphorical devices as a means to represent the 'untellable'. They also might use language to explain their own action that can demonstrate ways identity is shown and used in events.

Research design

Due to multiple stakeholders being involved in AHP course approval, the study focused on gaining the views of academics connected with one UK higher education institution providing pre-registration AHP courses. The reasons for this were:

- By concentrating on one site it was possible to gain an in-depth, rich, contextualised account of experience.
- Whilst generalisation would not be possible from this study, principles could be drawn on, since all pre-registration courses are subject to the same processes for (re)approval, as well as similar arrangements for the external monitoring of quality and funding.

Ethics and Consent

Ethical approval was obtained from the research site, though ethical conduct within this inquiry did not just centre on approval granted by a committee, but required vigilance throughout the whole journey, and followed the 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' by BERA (2011). From the outset, the following principles underpinned the intentions in this study:

- To enable the free and informed consent of volunteers;
- To maintain confidentiality and anonymity of participants and the host institution;
- To do justice to the information shared by participants; and
- To avoid the likelihood of harm with a focus on beneficence at all times.

Data collection

A cross sectional approach was taken, (Maxwell, 1996) involving academics connected with three AHP subject disciplines: Dietetics, Occupational Therapy, and Physiotherapy. It involved academics, manager-academics, professional body officers staff who experienced or had oversight of quality processes in HE. Participation was invited through group-wide email addresses covering each of the three departments and relevant professional bodies. The email provided an overview of the purpose of the research and an invitation to get in contact if academics wished to volunteer. This in-depth study included 12 participants, and their roles with pseudonyms are presented in Table 2. In contrast with traditional research interviews, characterised by a directed agenda, emphasis was placed on an 'inter-view' involving 2 people conversing about a theme of mutual interest (Kvale, 1996). Similar to Rogan and de Kock (2005), conversational techniques were used, for instance:

- Making open comments
- Using ways of 'reflecting back' to clarify meanings
- Negotiating meaning through spontaneous questions
- Encouraging new perspectives
- Responding to their questions and conversational leads

Additionally, participants had the right to control amendments to the transcript as well as whether, and how, they perceived they were being represented. Table 2 summarises how many interview conversations were undertaken with each participant.

Table 2: Summary of participants and interview conversations

Participant	Role	Number of interview conversations
Alex	Manager-Academic	2
Chris	Academic	2
Diane	Academic	2
Jac	Academic	2
Janet	Manager-Academic	2
Julia	HEI Quality Team	1
May	Professional Body Representative	2
Paula	Professional Body Representative	2
Sam	HEI Quality Team	1
Sandra	Professional Body Representative	2
Sue	Academic	2
Sylvia	Manager-Academic	2

Data analysis and interpretation

Participants' conversations were multi-layered, since the nature of narratives varied depending on the standpoint of the teller and the temporal impact of the approval journey. The approach to analysis and interpretation needed to accommodate a series of perspectives, which together here formed an interpretative montage of the study. This strategy is an example of what Maxwell and Miller (2008) refer to as an integrated approach to analysis and included both 'categorizing and connecting strategies in qualitative data analysis' (Maxwell and Miller, 2008: 461). Through adapting an approach by Gilligan et al. (2003), four 'snapshots' of analysis were developed to form an 'interpretative montage' as presented in Table 3. The experience of accessing the data in this way was not in a linear manner; rather, it was active and messy.

Table 3: Interpretative montage: Illustrating different stages of interpretative analysis

Stage/Reading	Features of this stage	Benefits
1. Listening for the plot and detailing response to each narrative	Several iterations of listening and re-reading. The plot was underlined on each transcript. Record of interpretative notes made on each transcript.	Assists in foregrounding the stories of participants as actors in the overall performance of the approval process. The use of memos encouraged transparency and credibility of findings.
2. Listening for the voice of 'I'	Focussed on the 'I' of who was speaking. Narrative maps created for each participant on flipcharts by following each thread of their conversation, illustrated by quotes.	Provides a means to deepen the conversation and seeks to capture experience of approval and individual responses to it. Using quotes to verify each thread of the conversation inhibited a move to abstract concepts at this stage.
3. Listening for relationships and places where people are located in context	Listening for interactions with others and the context in which individuals were located. Writing of a short narrative profile, of each participant, including quotes from each interview conversation. Participants invited to comment on their profile and offer amendments to it.	The compilation of narrative portraits. Participants involved in the initial interpretation of themselves within the research.
4. Discovering trajectories across narratives	Involved a categorising move Comparison of individual narrative maps and threads. Record of similarities/differences against threads with quotes.	Looking for patterns of similarity and detours or difference across narratives.

The interpretation sought to comment on what appeared to be the instrumental, uni-dimensional processes of approval and the use of methods that seemed geared towards 'process efficiency' rather than 'purpose effectiveness' alongside the contrast of the dialogic, creative and relational qualities of curriculum review, as presented in the findings below.

Findings

Bernstein's work offered a set of conceptual devices, which held within them the capability of generating models applicable to all aspects of professional life. The course approval process, characterised by relationships between different stakeholders, provides one such example of practice in professional life. In such circumstances, staff were in a struggle amongst the structured, stable mechanisms of governance operating on, and within organisations, and the intuitive, resourceful, dynamic location of themselves as academics and practitioners. The consequences of these cultural conditions were understood in this

study as the realisation of a 'positional identity', which was adopted by an individual and reflected particular ways of dealing with their situation. Following Bernstein, each of the four *positional identities* presented in this study, namely, the Boundary Broker, Professional Guardian, Enabling Strategist, and Governance Trustee, is recognised as, 'a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices' (Bernstein, 2000: 65). These performances, or positions, that emerged from this research, were connected to how those involved coped with power and control in the process.

Analysis of the data from this research showed that in order to deal with the demands of the approval process, academics appeared to adopt a certain 'position'. A position, or positional identity, is understood as a temporary way of being, adopted by an individual in response to a particular situation, or series of connected events, demonstrated through ways of thinking, acting and relating to others. Whilst each participant shared their own experience of approval, there was a strong sense of convergence and divergence amongst their narrative repertoires and performances, which highlighted the four positional identities. Although each of these positional identities held similarities in their understanding of the process, there were also substantive differences in ways each coped with preparations and events. As a result, the position adopted seemed to influence not only the nature of the participants' journey towards course approval, but also the journeys of other people. A brief narrative description of each positional identity is given next, with supporting data and interpretation.

Boundary Brokers

'Boundary Brokers' can commonly be recognised by the status of their academic work, or presence at national level, within a professional area. They possess a large network of contacts and easily navigate unfamiliar spaces. Boundary Brokers have an optimistic outlook and, alongside their abilities as 'reflexive translators', are pivotal in negotiating agreements to benefit their own area. Within organisations, they frequently hold intermediary roles, which allowed them to be transient, yet generally to escape the strong hold that organisational governance placed on others. Of the twelve participants, only Jac and Paula adopted this approach consistently. Jac and Paula held several characteristics in common with each other. Both were academics in AHP departments, each had national profiles, and were astute about the demands surrounding the course approval process. The data also indicated that for people in this position their worldview of Boundaries was that they were not understood as limits, but as borders that could be navigated across. One of the ways was by being practical about what needed to be done.

> I think they've [the Regulator and Professional Bodies] become more real, more realistic, and there are certainly discussions happening between the Professional Bodies and Health Professions Council now, and they meet to discuss issues and they meet to look at ways forward. But I wouldn't say it was necessarily from the position of choice, I think it's a pragmatic position. (Paula)

Paula's comment belies the Boundary Broker position, since in their actions they were prepared to relegate their own opinions or 'choice' to achieve a commonly desired goal. Consequently, those who adopted this position were more likely to be pragmatic in order to overcome difficult situations. For instance, Jac recounted a validation event in which a course had not been granted approval. This was in the early days when AHP courses had relocated into universities. The shift into HE had mainly been driven by the impetus for AHPs to become established as degree entry professions, with a recognised body of knowledge. However, this move meant that course teams were required to acquiesce to university structures:

> So there were overarching principles of the modular course, which we were supposed to fit into, but there were always bits where we couldn't, so you know, you were setting up pre-requisites for modules and people saying 'well you can't have that as a prerequisite' and then saying 'but you have to have that as a prerequisite' or 'we have to have, if a student fails this so many times', so you know, then doing this balancing act but actually quite a useful backup of saying the Professional Body says we have to. (Jac)

As lead for a course team, Jac's narrative above shows her experience of conceding to organisational requirements, in order for her course to be approved and accepted within the university system. For this positional identity, yielding to a request was also a conduit for achieving another aim or objective. The use of levers was consistent with the position of Boundary Broker; in this case, demands from Jac's Professional Body were used as negotiating tools to achieve compromise for all involved. Boundary Brokers were not only adaptive as contributors, they also seemed to pass on this knowledge to benefit the people with which they worked.

In comparison with the other three positional identities, Boundary Brokers were much more transformative in their approach. In contrast, at least to the Governance Trustee and Enabling Strategist, approval was a task that needed to be achieved. Boundary Brokers appeared much less driven by the corporate, centralist agendas of the organisations in which they worked, and so moved towards agreement or approval in more open and confident terms.

Enabling Strategists

Enabling Strategists are academics holding senior positions within a higher education institution, commonly academic leadership roles. These individuals have substantive experience of working and navigating around hierarchical organisations. Whilst Enabling Strategists can sometimes be intimidating, they are also open to harvesting and supporting innovative ideas from academics, in order to secure a beneficial outcome for their area.

These participants are politically astute, efficient and adept in anticipating the likely moves of others.

Three of the participants, Alex, Janet, and Sylvia, were associated with this position, Sylvia most consistently. Of the three participants, Sylvia was explicitly task orientated and focused more on how approval contributed towards fulfilling corporate goals. Preliminary analysis of the narratives revealed that a background as a senior clinician and manager-academic was a consistent aspect of the Enabling Strategist. Janet described how, prior to working in HE, she had been a service manager. Similarly, Alex and Sylvia had been senior clinicians with supervisory responsibilities. All seemed to understand working as a tutor within a university as an opportunity. Sylvia described the moves in her career like this:

> I'd become a senior therapist and I was in charge of either the wards or the department, in quite a short period of time and actually I got quite bored. I got to the stage where I was sort of looking for something so, in a kind of nice way, this came out of the blue and it suited me at the time. Well I really missed it [clinical practice] when I first went into teaching and so what I did for a couple of years was, I used to go back and do locum covers for my boss when she was away on holiday. So, I went back into practice, and then eventually the students almost took the place of the patients.

The above narrative illustrates two points of interest. Firstly, Sylvia's comment reflects the rapid career progression to a supervisory position commonly associated with an Enabling Strategist positional identity. Additionally, highlighted here, is Sylvia's openness towards new challenges and strategic mindfulness towards the importance of maintaining clinical skills. Secondly, there is an alternative meaning behind what Sylvia says about how students replaced her patients, indicating the presence of an underlying power dynamic. Here, Sylvia appeared to be making an association with the power and control she held in practice. As a therapist, her patients perceived her as an expert; she would advise on what was best. Similarly, perhaps the students replaced the need to receive acknowledgement from others.

The positional identity of Enabling Strategist was the most pivotal identity within the process of approval. Due to their wealth of experience as academics, managers and clinicians, the Enabling Strategists possessed a comprehensive range of skills and knowledge enabling them to deal with the process. A course team led into approval by an Enabling Strategist would be in safe hands with, no doubt, approval achieved. However, troublesomeness was attached to those who adopted the Enabling Strategist identity. The challenge was that their focus was chiefly motivated towards dealing with the structures put before them. Whilst those who adopted this identity handled these structures expediently, there was a concern that such a perspective could be inclined towards managing the immediacy of events and specification determined by others, instead of advancing an agenda based on long-term professional and educational futures. The outlook of Enabling Strategists was not too dissimilar from Professional Guardians, in which the idea of course

approval was akin to the act of rubber stamping. Yet, in order to manage the threat of not being successful, Enabling Strategists deliberately managed their own feelings by depersonalising the process. Janet put it like this:

> I think there's a need for pragmatism. And sometimes that gets lost. I think you do have to see ultimately the final course document as a job that someone has to do, and take responsibility for, and lots of people will be happy.

Professional Guardians

Professional Guardians are portrayed by their unwavering concern for upholding professional knowledge and standards of practice. In HE, Professional Guardians would largely reside at department level, where they demonstrate a commanding knowledge and experience of their subject area. They can often be found in discussions, defending subject interests against what they perceive as the encroaching business orientation within university life. In situations where they sense a threat to the scope of their professional practice, Professional Guardians are inclined to either carry out subversive actions or may remove themselves from challenging interactions.

The position of Professional Guardian was the most common across the data, with five of the twelve participants having adopted this way of negotiating the demands of the process. Of the five participants, two, Sue and Chris, were the only ones consistently associated with this position; the others, May, Diane and Sandra, appeared to be on the cusp of Professional Guardian and Enabling Strategist position. Within the arena of approval preparations and events, Sue and Chris rarely moved away from the micro locality of their department. Both had worked as AHP academics for some time. Each had previously experienced several iterations of their course, alongside the associated approval events. Prior to becoming a university tutor, Sue told me about how she had been an experienced clinician. In fact, her manner suggested that she did not suffer compromises in standards of professional practice. Despite her no-nonsense exterior, Sue was also very thoughtful towards the needs of others, and it was this interest that attracted her into HE, as she put it:

> So, I actually enjoyed being with students and sorting their problems out, rather than trying to sort out problems that I could never sort out.

In demonstrating a genuine interest in ensuring that students were supported in their development, Sue's motivation for moving into HE resonated with the position of Professional Guardian. Similarly, Chris's narrative revealed a sense of responsibility towards inspiring students to cope with the demands of practice. Chris compared the approval process to a bingo game:

> Well it's sort of playing the game isn't it? Sort of because you know, you might have three learning outcomes for each module, but are they written in such way that they

don't mean anything? What's the hidden agenda? And I know that's something, you know, what's hidden beneath the surface? What else are you doing?

Chris not only questioned the efficacy of approval but also seemed to associate it with hidden micro politics. In other words, the authenticity of the process appeared dubious, since the incentives to achieve the targets of the process were valued more highly than the purpose itself. Professional Guardians found these circumstances difficult; gamesmanship was counter to the authentic involvement of academics ensuring that professional education equipped graduates to provide excellent patient care.

Unlike the other positional identities, the Professional Guardians found the experience of course approval the most challenging. Participants who adopted this identity represented the antithesis to all that external monitoring in its inspectoral guise was about. The presence of a Professional Guardian ensured that a platform was still maintained for professional issues and that the body of knowledge of the profession was presented as a central concern. Yet, Professional Guardians seemed unprepared to challenge and navigate the nature of the metanarratives that surrounded them in the process.

Governance Trustees

Governance Trustees are characterised within the university setting by their concern for assuring quality and maintaining governance systems. They are often the gatekeepers of technical or procedural information. Governance Trustees use this knowledge to shape the compliance of others to fulfil the organisation's agenda. Those adopting this position could be considered as inflexible characters. Such action results in Governance Trustees often becoming solitary people, and their individual actions are subsumed by the systems in which they work. From the 12 participants, only 2, Sam and Julia, adopted this position consistently.

Julia represented the position of a Governance Trustee who worked between national and institutional level. From this viewpoint, Governance Trustees still presented an equal commitment to fulfilling institutional rules within course proposals; however, the approach was more 'at arm's length' and reflected the espoused decentralised approach to regulation by the UK Government at the time. Indeed, from Julia's perspective, the process of external monitoring was not seen as a mechanism that was achieved wholly through adherence to what she termed 'a prescriptional rule book'. Instead, Julia preferred to describe the input of her organisation as 'what we call best practice guidance'. Within this approach there was a sense of delegated responsibility to those at local level within universities, to provide evidence of quality mechanisms and produce information that was auditable. For instance, Julia gave her standpoint on the use of subject benchmarks for each professional group:

I think they're absolutely essential. Erm, they didn't exist before 2000 and one of the reasons that they were designed, maybe it was '99, but one of the reasons that they were designed was because there was no real consistency across the sector for what

might be in a given programme. I guess health, again, was the exception because the regulator laid down what they wanted to see in a given programme, or though I understand they're moving away from that now, so I understand, so there needed to be a way of saying, 'well this is what a programme in say music looks like, this is what a student of music will actually undertake and these are the sort of expectations that we would expect them to come out with in terms of their skills, ability and knowledge'.

The use of 'essential' in Julia's narrative implied there may be some form of separation, between those who do the assessing of evidence regarding compliance with subject benchmarks in the approval process, from those involved with enacting it. In addition, whilst consistency of information is important in order to demonstrate progress, it suggests that from the Governance Trustees' stance, a curriculum can be summarised and measured in a definitive way. The position of Governance Trustee was the least adopted by those involved within course approval preparations; the position was devoted to safeguarding routines, practices with which academics had to comply, in order to ensure consistency and standardisation of their approach.

Discussion

Whilst this study generated several findings, of particular interest were divisions between academics and manager-academics with several of the latter group having utilised 'new managerialism' as the means 'it affords for their own purposes, including status and future careers' (Deem & Brehony, 2005: 229). Analysis and interpretation of the narratives from this research into the experiences of academics involved in course approval has revealed two key findings. Firstly, that the journey of approval is complex, though the experience is commonly over simplified due to the façade created by the procedural nature of the process. Secondly, the study also illustrates how, in order to deal with the demands of approval, those involved adopted a positional identity that represented particular ways of understanding, relating, and acting towards others involved within the journey.

Long after the acknowledgement of an 'audit explosion' (Power, 1994), approaches to quality assurance in higher education continue to proliferate. Whilst, increasingly, requirements are placed on academics to account for the quality in their academic portfolio, most recently through the Government's Higher Education Green Paper (BIS, 2015), there still seems to be a dearth of agency from within the academic community about dealing responsibly with these demands. Perhaps it is the case that curriculum -making and preparations for validation are no longer understood as an academic responsibility, meaning that academics acquiesce to the conformist pressures of professionalisation (Fuller, 2005).

We are proposing, then, that due to ways academics choose to deal with forms of external monitoring, such as validation events, their focus becomes overly determined by external reference points, rather than foregrounding space for their own agora, or purposeful spaces for collective debate about curriculum futures and discipline pedagogy (Barnett & Coate, 2005). The issue here is as much concerned with problematising external monitoring

processes, as it is with how academics choose to think and deal with the purpose of quality enhancement. The process of course validation provides an opportunity to reconsider professional and curricula futures. Yet, it seems this practice is being subsumed by what is frequently becoming an obligatory, pedestrian process largely owned by evaluative agencies. If identity and ownership of subject interest and curriculum matter, then we argue for a critical reconsideration about how institutional environments influence the authenticity of validation as a meaningful activity within university life. It is no wonder, then, that students express a lack of intellectual challenge from their learning experience, if academics themselves lack commitment to actively defend their curriculum project.

Based on the findings from this study we claim that the activity of course validation cannot be identified with as being unproblematic or engaged with at a superficial level; there are implications for the nature of courses presented to students (and co-lecturers) connected with ways academics act, think and interact in course review and validation processes. These are large claims based on our immediate experiences as educationalists working in higher education and latterly this research. The act of curriculum authorship is a co-construction, and validation is not an activity completed in isolation. Consequently, the presence of different positional identities adopted by academics, and how the 'co-presence' of these positions may influence the ecology and outcomes of the approval process is of interest. Here, 'co-presence' is understood as the effect created by the presence of individuals holding different positional identities and how changes in this mix create impressions which in turn lead to implications for the nature of courses approved, if one or more should prevail.

To enhance understanding about the impact of external monitoring in HE and ways academics deal with processes such as course validation, four scenarios are now presented, and their implications discussed. Following the work of Snoek, scenario planning was used as a method to emplot futures; scenario planning is not used as a tool to present a definitive view, but instead promote an ongoing 'strategic conversation' about futures (Snoek, 2003). This use of scenarios resonated with the critical, social constructionist theoretical framework guiding this study, since story sharing supports sense-making of the approval process within wider socio-political contexts.

Informed by social theory, particularly those of Bernstein (2000), the scenarios are underpinned by a two-dimensional matrix, where the axes represent the forces of power and control shaping the process of course approval. In such circumstances, the academics involved appear located in a struggle between performative structures of governance and the creative, dynamic location as academics within a university. Four scenarios emerged as presented in Figure 1.
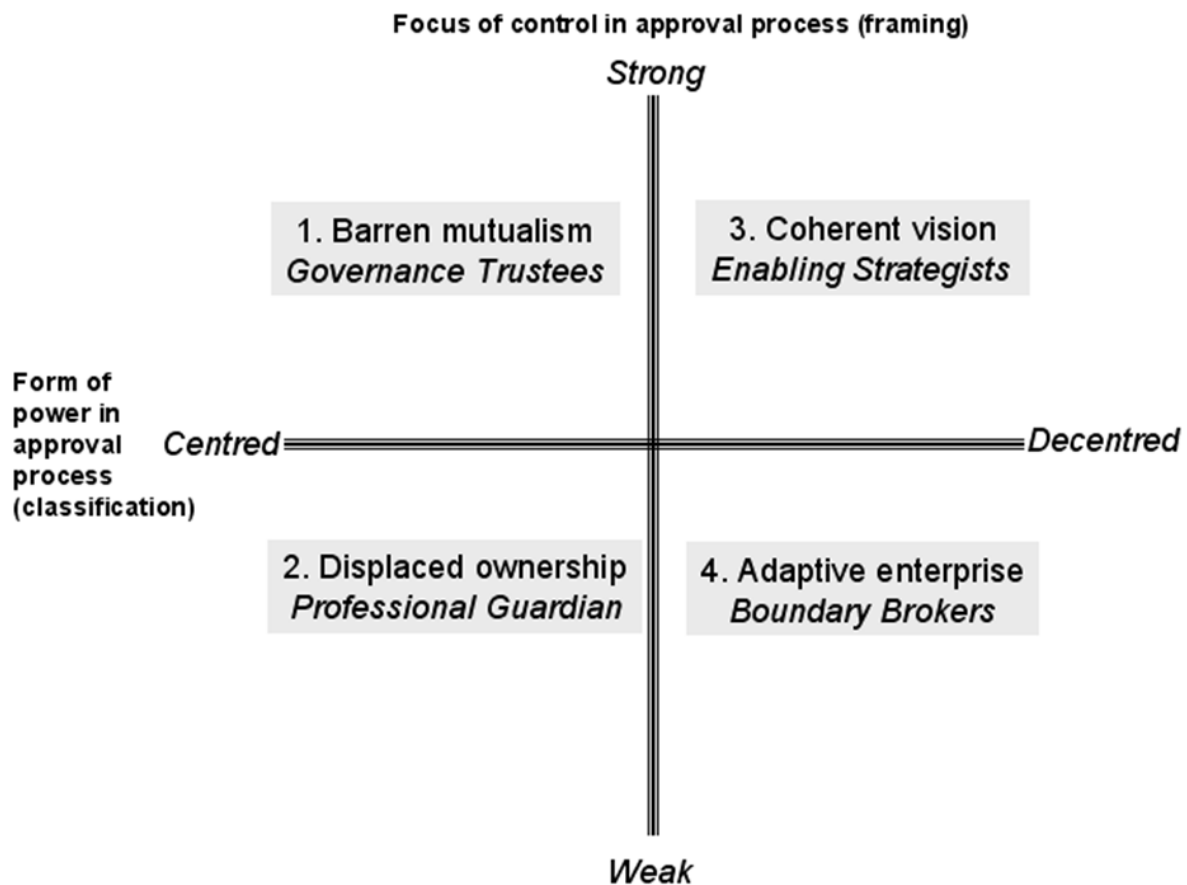
Focus of control in approval process (framing)

Strong

1. Barren mutualism	3. Coherent vision
Governance Trustees	*Enabling Strategists*

Form of power in approval process (classification) *Centred* ═════════════ *Decentred*

2. Displaced ownership	4. Adaptive enterprise
Professional Guardian	*Boundary Brokers*

Weak

Figure 1: Four scenarios

The scenarios illustrated in Figure 1 present the extremes for each of the dimensions of power (classification) and control (framing) (Bernstein, 2000). To enable each of the scenarios to be comparable, the following questions informed each one: What are the characteristics of those who dominate the scenario? As a consequence, how is the process of approval approached and organised? What impact does the scenario have on professional degree courses, curriculum and academic academics?

Scenario 1: Barren mutualism (strong control /centred power)

Within these circumstances, the Governance Trustee presides over others. The locus of 'control' within the process is strong, reflected in the formality of the interactions assuring the compliance of academics. Meeting the demands of regulatory principles and standardised presentation underwrites this scenario. The dialogue of Governance Trustees' with others is typified by what Bernstein (2000: 157) terms vertical discourse taking the form of 'explicit, systematically principled structure, hierarchically organised'. Our difficulty with this scenario is that those involved have relegated validation to be nothing more than 'a ritualised performance' (after McLaren, 1999).

Within this space, curricula and the intended student experience are subsumed by narrow, compartmentalised learning structures, which divide and alienate learners rather

than enable flexible, collaborative learning. These conditions promote a reliance on the prescription of competence in a current worldview perspective, which stand to ill-equip graduates to manage the uncertainties of practice.

Scenario 2: Displaced ownership (weak control /centred power)

'Displaced ownership' presents the positional identity of the Professional Guardian as most common. In a scenario of Displaced ownership, reasoned debate about the nature of subject-pedagogy becomes passive. Instead, activities of course review are given over to approval panel requirements because those involved are unable to translate what is important and seem unprepared to challenge the grand narratives around them. Whilst there is a place for clarity about expectations in using common principles or standards, reference to these does not equal the subjugation of academic responsibility in voicing signature pedagogies or professional futures. Additionally, presentation of curricula and their approval is not the sole domain of statutory bodies. This view endorses the point that preparations prior to approval events are opportunities for questions, debate, and redirection, and not more of the same because the task (of defence) is difficult.

Scenario 3: Coherent vision (strong control /decentred power)

Within approval preparations and events where Enabling Strategists predominate, success is likely. Academics portraying this positional identity are proficient in managing the dialogue of approval, not least through engaging in discourse with approval panels in the 'receivable' or required form. Whilst the 'coherent scenario' may commonly lead to a positive approval outcome, the risk here is that curricula authored in these circumstances compromise on vision, returning instead to a stable, inert offer. Any debate connected to envisioning professional futures and how these may be addressed by curriculum change and pedagogic innovation are doubtfully entertained due to the level of managed task-based activity.

Scenario 4: Adaptive Enterprise (weak control /decentred power)

In this scenario, the presence of the Boundary Broker is most common. Those portraying this positional identity are adept at satisfying the external demands of stakeholders, alongside addressing the values and pedagogic concerns of both academics and practice academics. This form of interaction encourages specialised narratives to be developed and does not dissuade flexibility in course structures, such that teaching, and learning is offered in discrete packages. A key attribute of the Boundary Broker is the critical lens this position possesses; recognising that the approval process was a co-construction achieved between various stakeholders. Course review and approval shifts to become more about mindfulness towards different interests, rather than being overly concerned with procedural issues. Consequently, in these circumstances, courses presented to students are not closed entities. Instead, signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005) as promoted here consistently problematise practice, so that what counts as learning is constantly on the move and course identity is established.

Reflection and key message

Based on these scenarios, a fundamental message for academics is that whilst pedagogic practices may be believed as negotiable, current approaches to course review and approval, influenced by managerialism in HE, stand to limit or frame academic intent. Such circumstances cast doubt over the authenticity and purpose of course validation, alongside questions about the role of academic academics. Indeed, there are new questions raised about what exactly is being assured: the systems in place to deliver a course, or the quality of the educative proposal on which it lies. The caveat to these circumstances is that educational futures will always be influenced by policy directives; it is, therefore, the responsibility of academic academics to participate actively in the change that the approval journey offers, by reconsidering the positional identities they adopt in order to better manage these relations and outcomes. Perhaps what is needed is a focus on Barnett's (2014) conditions of flexibility, which he believes will promote a reconsideration of flexible provision in higher education:

> Flexible provision has the potential to enhance student learning, widen opportunities for participation in higher education, and develop graduates who are well-equipped to contribute to a fast-changing world. (Barnett, 2014:10)

Though the notion of conditions of flexibility is an interesting idea, Ingleby (2015) argues that a neoliberal agenda still pervades the UK educational context, resulting in competitive individualism and the maximisation of the market. Critics of neoliberalism (for example, Giroux, 2005) suggest the focus on economic outcomes results in unhelpful social, political, and cultural biases for educational activities. As Fuller (2010) asks: what difference does university make – if everything produces knowledge or is in the business of knowledge production? Within this study it seems that the focus on consumerism and competencies is resulting not only in the erosion of critical pedagogy, but also the marketisation of values and the oppression of freedom (Mayo, 2013; Williams, 2013). Academics are being located as pawns in games of chess, whilst becoming complicit in their own downfall as academic teams focus on affirmation as educational providers, rather than standing up for their values and beliefs about education.

Although some universities are moving away from strongly bounded modular systems, it would seem from this study that many systems within institutions remain inflexibly predicated by individualistic practices. Trowler (2014) argues that previous research has employed a strong essentialist approach, which has exaggerated the homogeneity of specific disciplinary features. He argues instead for a more sophisticated conceptualisation of disciplines that applies Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances to the task of depicting disciplines. Disciplines comprise bodies of knowledge, traditions, values and discourses, yet these transcend and change and overlap with other disciplines and discourses.

Recommendations for the future

One of the central difficulties in higher education is that academics are provided with templates, criteria and guidelines about what curricula should be and should look like. These restrictions result in highly defined and delineated curricula which prevent the creation of new forms of curricula. Assembling curricula should not be 'templated' but instead consider

- Which knowledge is of most worth?
- What might a flexible curriculum look like?

Perhaps we should be asking with Deng (2018b):

> What does it mean to be an active individual—an intellectual and moral agent—who is actively participating in and interacting with the current social, cultural and physical world characterised by globalisation, rapid techno-logical advancement, an ever-increasing rate of information exchange, and mobility? What are the intellectual, moral, social, civic, aesthetic, technological and (even) physical powers such an educated person needs to possess? … In addition to academic, disciplinary knowledge, what are the other forms of knowledge that could contribute to the cultivation of human powers for all students? How would all these knowledge forms be conceived or reconceived in ways that are productive of the cultivation? ... How would various kinds of knowledge be selected, translated and organised into the content of the curriculum geared towards cultivating human powers for all students? How would content be analysed and unpacked in ways that open up manifold opportunities for self-formation and the cultivation of human powers? (Deng, 2018b: 346–347).

From this study the key messages are:

- If ownership of subject-discipline knowledge embodied through curriculum proposals is important, then academic academics must take the responsibility to participate proactively in validation activities and not, instead, avoid the task of critical debate amongst colleagues because it seems too time-consuming or difficult.
- Academics should be encouraged to be mindful about differences in stakeholder interests (including their own) and reconsider ways to address these, rather than 'gaming' external monitoring processes as a means to navigate through them. Preparations for validation should be informed through understanding the different terms of reference for those present. This will result in course teams being well prepared to address external priorities, whilst also foregrounding subject-discipline imperatives.
- Engaging University academic leadership to underpin the process of course validation, or similar external monitoring activity, is pivotal. Leading a course planning team is not a role to be attained by default, nor realised through a lacklustre, siloed approach

based on stale ideas. Despite validation activities being routine with universities, academics are commonly unclear about what is expected of them and have minimal protected time to complete such work. Academics who are course planning leaders need to be able to deal confidently with such challenges and would do so more effectively if deans provided strategically planned development activities, mentorship and pre-emptive succession planning.

A positive future would envisage validation as a process of creation and a composition, a thinking space that is complex and multi-layered. Perhaps the development of curricula demands the ability to live and learn liminally, to work in the gaps, and to think of spaces as being creative, complex, multidirectional and multilayered rather than narrow and linear.

Conclusion

Through examining academics' experiences within validation events this study has made visible the ways participants deal with a process in HE that is commonplace and assumed as unproblematic. From this research, it is evident that validation activities are complex, particularly for courses situated in a professional regulatory environment. To cope with the procedurally saturated nature of validation, those involved in this study adopt different positional identities. Successful validation events are those in which academics are prepared to reconcile hitting targets whilst recognising the creative opportunities course review and validation activities can provide. Finally, we suggest that rather than course validation being an individualistic perfunctory experience, activities should be characterised by conditions of academic generosity, in which to envision curriculum futures, where academics privilege dialectic differences in order to realise the value of curriculum review over the process itself.

Authors' Biographies

Rebecca Khanna is Assistant Dean, Academic Development within the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, Sheffield Hallam University, UK. She has extensive experience working in the statutory sectors of health and higher education as a senior manager and service evaluator. She works at national level as a Health and Care Professions Council Visitor and Accreditor of Occupational Therapy programmes, alongside serving on several national committees. She is also reviewer for the *British Journal of Occupational Therapy* and works as an External Examiner and invited panel member.

Maggi Savin-Baden, Professor of Education at the University of Worcester, UK, has researched and evaluated staff and student experiences of learning for over 20 years and gained funding in this area (Leverhulme Trust, JISC, Higher Education Academy, MoD). She has a publication record of over 50 research publications and 17 books which reflect her research interests on the impact of innovative learning, digital fluency, cyber-influence,

pedagogical agents, qualitative research methods and problem-based learning. In her spare time, she runs, bakes, climbs, and attempts triathlons.

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