

**THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL**

**Examining tame and wicked views on epistemology and assessment in three  
stakeholder groups in a new university.**

**being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctorate in Education**

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**by**

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## **Chapter 1: Professional context**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This thesis uses the concepts of wicked and tame, (Rittel and Webber, 1973) as a lens through which to evaluate the epistemological positions adopted by three stakeholder groups: Quality Officers, Teaching Staff, and Students; with respect to assessment within Higher Education (HE). This is something that is relevant to me in my professional role. I am currently Principal Lecturer in Education though during the period from October 2014 – June 2015 I was on a 0.5 secondment to the Deputy Vice Chancellors Office in the position of Assessment and Feedback Lead. The aims of this role were to enhance assessment and feedback across the university by working primarily to support Heads of Programme. In addition to being Head of Programme I am also a Senior Teaching Fellow (STF) within my Faculty. As STF I have previously been tasked with enhancing practices relating to assessment across the Faculty. As such, issues relating to assessment have played a key role within my work. The Faculty within which I work constitutes one of four faculties within a new university in the north of England, UK. The thesis reflects both my STF project and my secondment but has also been shaped by other experiences as will be shown.

I have held numerous positions related to HE since 1993, with previous experience of teaching in FE since 1988. My initial work on HE courses was within a Further Education College (FEC). A range of posts led to increasing responsibility for managing and developing HE within this FEC. This involved not only teaching and assessing HE courses but developing them and achieving validation. It also involved recruiting and developing staff to teach HE programmes. This role often meant that I was required to articulate an epistemological position with respect to the difference between HE and Further Education (FE). This is something that I have addressed elsewhere, (Creasy, 2013).

An early involvement with Foundation Degrees (FD) contributed significantly to my interest in how assessment within HE is carried out. I had become responsible for managing an FD that had been written and validated within another FEC. On this FD the assessment workload was far in excess of the BA (Hons) courses which I usually managed and taught. My thoughts about this were that the staff that had written the FD had also considered the

difference between FE and HE but had come to the conclusion that HE meant that the student should do more. I reject this. Assessment must be fit for purpose. Having a greater assessment workload is not a measure of working at a higher level. Encountering the work of Rittel and Webber (1973) on wicked and tame problems provided a framework within which I started to evaluate approaches to assessment. As will be argued later, the value of this conceptual framework is that Rittel and Webber articulate the problems faced by individuals who work with complex issues. This resonates with assessment of learning and development within HE.

This early experience demonstrated to me that practitioners within education as a whole adopt a particular epistemological perspective regarding their work which rests upon the idea that what a student has learnt can be known if an appropriate method of assessment is adopted. In turn this epistemological perspective, in conjunction with other drivers, shapes their practice and their understanding of what is possible with respect to assessment. This interest led to me formulating a broad research area which was focused upon the different epistemological positions adopted by three stakeholder groups within HE framed by the concept of wicked and tame. For this thesis of 50,000 words my interest in how this shapes assessment is condensed to the main research question of: How are tame and wicked views on assessment practices within HE represented within three stakeholder groups. How the thesis achieves this is detailed in the following section, which provides an outline of the structure.

## **1.2 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis explores the match, or fit, between the epistemological position held by three stakeholder groups with regards to how learning and development can be assessed. The groups are: Teaching Staff, Quality Officers, and Students. The thesis proposes that at the level of HE the learning involved is complex. Complexity however poses problems in respect of assessment because it is not simple. In addition to this, a key part of HE is that it seeks to develop new knowledge rather than just mastering what is already known. It seeks creativity and originality. The thesis adopts the position that if creativity and originality are valued as part of HE then an approach to assessment which is able to capture this is

required. This is presented as being wicked assessment as opposed to assessment which is tame. This concept will be explained fully in chapter 2.

The thesis investigates the extent to which contemporary assessment practices are wicked or tame based upon data generated through interviews held with three stakeholder groups. In considering whether or not assessment is wicked or tame the thesis will argue that tameness contributes to an impoverished experience of HE. In contrast to tame approaches I argue that effective assessment within HE would benefit from being a practice which can incorporate wickedity in a number of ways. In particular wicked assessment will be more able to reward creativity and originality but it may also contribute to greater levels of student engagement and provide benefits for Teaching Staff and for society as a whole in terms of how this contributes to economic activity. Evidence of this will be provided. This will lend itself to consider what is possible in terms of developing wicked assessment whilst enabling the University, Students and External stakeholders to have confidence in the quality and standards of our practices.

The thesis begins in chapter 2 by establishing the concept of wicked and tame. I argue that Rittel and Webber's (1973) concept of wicked problems is a useful framework for understanding how assessment is carried out. Wicked problems are problems whereby the intrinsic complexity of an issue means that what works in one situation may not work in another or that no consistent solution can be identified. A tame problem on the other hand reflects one where solutions are simple or straightforward and where they will apply in a uniform manner. For this thesis, assessment is seen as bound up with wickedity because of the complexity of learning within HE and because of the concerns to develop creativity and originality.

In chapter 3 it will be argued that the national context of HE is one that is influenced by a number of factors. In turn these influence assessment to a greater or lesser extent. I will argue that there are aspects of contemporary assessment practices which act to tame assessment within HE. Part of this is a move towards learning outcomes which can be seen as a consequence of a managerialist discourse which, as Lorenz (2012) argues, seeks control over the processes which are embedded within HE. Lorenz's argument is echoed by Reid (2009) who also argues that changes within HE have seen HEIs being increasingly

managed as though they were businesses. For Reid this means that academic activities are managed through strategic control. A major feature of this control involves the measurement of outputs. Within HE there are a range of outputs but an important one may be seen as the awards that students leave with. Such awards invariably rest upon a process of assessment of their learning and development. I will argue that assessing the extent of a student's learning and development does not sit easily with the managerial prerogative for control. As such the development of a learning outcomes approach to HE can be seen as facilitating control over the learning process.

The value of critically considering approaches to assessment is that tameness can be seen as having the potential to undermine aspects of HE. The argument for this reflects the work of Biesta (2013) who provides a critical account of developments within education in general based on both the individualisation of education and its repositioning as a duty within a market economy. Similarly, Hussey and Smith (2010), point to the way in which what is being assessed often ends up as representing only a part of what a student has learnt or only particular aspects of their overall development. The use of learning outcomes contributes to this problem by focusing attention upon predetermined aspects of learning and development. In this way originality may be unrewarded when it does not correspond to the stated learning outcomes. Such an approach also reduces the professional expertise of academic staff and acts against rewarding applied learning or of originality in students work.

The main argument of the thesis however, rests upon the argument that Rittel and Webber's concept of wicked problems can be used to understand how assessment in HE is practised by assessing the extent to which epistemology and assessment practices reflect the concepts of wicked and tame. In presenting this argument the original conception of wicked and tame as constituting a duality will be developed to present them as representing a continuum. Individuals within each of the three stakeholder groups may hold an epistemology which conceptualises assessment along a continuum from wicked to tame. If wicked and tame are perceived as a duality then four possible positions regarding epistemology and assessment are possible:

1. Tame epistemology & tame assessment practices;
2. Tame epistemology & wicked assessment practices;
3. Wicked epistemology & tame assessment practices;

#### 4. Wicked epistemology & wicked assessment practices;

Of these I consider that position 2 is unlikely and that position 4 is the ideal in the context of HE on the grounds that the context of HE is characterised by complexity. It is more likely that perceptions will be nuanced but the data will be used to establish the extent to which the four positions are reflected.

From this the main research question is established as: How are tame and wicked views on assessment practices within HE represented within three stakeholder groups. The MRQ will be answered by the sub-questions and it is these which will drive the literature reviews.

**MRQ** How are tame and wicked views on assessment practices within HE represented within three stakeholder groups

**SRQ1** What are the policy drivers in respect of assessment within HE

**SRQ2** Which research methods provide the best approach for this thesis

**SRQ3** What empirical data will be required to answer the MRQ

### 1.3 Conclusion

The thesis will consider the extent to which three stakeholder groups within HE view assessment practices with the intention of establishing the extent to which these reflect wickedity or tameness as per the work of Rittel and Webber. To achieve this, this introductory chapter is followed by chapters 2 and 3 which establish the academic debates concerning the concept of wicked problems and the drivers which shape the landscape of HE. Having done this chapter 4 establishes the warrantability of employing a case study method using semi-structured interviews followed by chapter 5, detailing how the work was carried out. Chapter 6 provides an analysis of the results with chapter 7 offering a discussion of the research. The final chapter provides concluding comments and recommendations for change with a view to promoting wickedity within HE assessment.



## **Chapter 2 Establishing the concept of wicked and tame.**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter sets out to demonstrate the value of employing the concept of wicked and tame to the issue of assessment within Higher Education (HE). As a conceptual approach this emerges from the work of Rittel & Webber (1973) who introduced the idea of wicked problems to reflect the complexity of some situations and the problems that this poses for practitioners engaged in roles that are not characterised by routine solutions being used to deal with routine problems. The argument presented in this thesis is that the process of assessment, as practiced within HE, may be either wicked or tame. As such, the concepts of wicked and tame will be established. It will be argued however, that although the concept of wicked and tame problems presents a useful framework for approaching assessment it falls into the trap of presenting a clear dichotomy which is not evident in practice.

What this means for Teaching Staff, and for the university, is then explored, as is the concern that assessment policies may be tame and, as such, fail to assess the full extent of learning. The implication of this is that HE becomes impoverished, to an extent, because assessment practices are limited. Having considered this, a discussion of learning outcomes is offered to demonstrate how contemporary assessment practices tend to adopt a reductionist position. This is presented as part of the process by which assessment becomes tame.

As such, a consideration of wicked and tame problems has value in respect of how this can underpin what is feasible when planning assessment. This can also be considered alongside national changes within HE in England. Although there is currently a renewed concern with the quality of teaching within HE, and an expectation that the student will focus upon the teaching experience, it is argued that students soon come to turn their attention to the outcomes of assessment. This may be because assessment practices provide empirical evidence regarding the student's ability to perform within HE, or even their credibility for being there. It may be because of the consequences for later employment. As such it is important that assessment practices are able to accommodate the extent of learning that takes place if organisations are to make informed judgements about their students.

## **2.2 The concept of Wicked and Tame**

The concept that is central to this thesis is that of problems being either wicked or tame. The focus is on how the development of a student's learning is judged and whether or not this reflects a wicked or tame approach. This is a problem that is pertinent to Teaching Staff, to the university, and to students, though each may understand the issue somewhat differently. This section will consider Rittel and Webber's (1973) concept of wicked and tame problems. It will then consider how this may be developed further.

The idea that problems can be defined as either wicked or tame originally emerged in the work of Rittel and Webber (1973) in response to issues related to urban planning. It has since been applied to diverse concerns such as Health (Blackman et al., 2006), Business strategy (Camillus, 2008), Marine policy (Jentoft and Chuenpagdee, 2009), Education (Bore and Wright, 2009, Knight and Page, 2007, Wright, 2011, Jordan et al., 2014) and Social Policy (Hayden and Jenkins, 2014). The growing use of this conceptual approach provides an indication of its value in understanding contemporary issues. At the heart of the concept is the idea that some problems have clear or obvious outcomes whilst others are far less straightforward. For Rittel & Webber, tame problems are found in the type of issues where outcomes are obviously right or wrong. Wicked problems however reflect complexity and relativity.

For example, in engineering, although a project may pose challenges it can be seen how the issue is a tame one in the approach taken by Rittel and Webber. This is because there is a certainty that can be known regarding the physical properties of materials. Issues to do with how we engage in the practice of education, such as assessment, are wicked because of the range of factors involved. An approach that may work effectively with one cohort, or in one subject, may not work as well with other cohorts or within other disciplines.

From Rittel and Webber's original conception we can see that they considered that a wicked problem has no obvious end-state, nor a solution that is intrinsically right or wrong. Importantly, there is no intrinsic quality to the problem by which it is characterised; rather, the problem is defined by the perspectives of the individuals who are engaged with it. As such, the problem itself, ideas about how to address it, and even what is accepted as a satisfactory outcome, can all be contested. For Rittel and Webber, most public policy issues address wicked problems. In sum, Rittel & Webber (1973) present the defining characteristics of wicked problems in a ten point model as thus:

1. Wicked problems have no definitive formulation;
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rules;
3. Solutions to wicked problems cannot be true or false, only good or bad;
4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem;
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one shot' operation, because there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error, every attempt counts significantly;
6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan;
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique;
8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem;
9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution;
10. The planner has no right to be wrong.

Rittel and Webber's ten characteristics of wicked problems may, however, be seen to imply that the concept of wicked and tame problems is embedded within a clear dichotomy as some, such as Wexler (2009), have suggested. Wexler presents the distinction between tame and wicked problems in tabular form as follows:

| <i>Tame problems</i>   | <i>Wicked problems</i>   |
|--|--|
| Relatively easy to define and can be treated as separate from other problems and the environment                         | Relatively difficult to define and cannot be easily separated from other problems and the environment              |
| Information needed to solve or make sense of the problem is readily available, well structured, and easy to put into use | Information needed to solve or make sense of the problem is ill-structured, changing and difficult to put into use |
| There is a consensus not only among problem solvers over what is the best  | There is neither a consensus among problem solvers over what is the best   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| method but also those with the problem accept and agree with the legitimate problem solvers   | method or a clear agreement over who is and is not a legitimate problem solver   |
| This class of problems has precedents from which one can learn or take advice from others in order to become a "bona fide" problem solver | These problems are unique and changeable; therefore attempts to solve them make learning difficult and progress toward a solution erratic                                    |
| Stakeholders to the problem defer to the expertise of the problem solver and seek little or no say in the process beyond that requested   | Stakeholders to the problem join the problem solvers in possessing conflicting views of the problem, its solution, and the degree of involvement of the problem stakeholders |

In respect of how these issues reflect assessment within HE this thesis argues that to see the issue as a dichotomy is unhelpful. A more useful model is provided if we see wicked and tame as two ends of a continuum. For example, if we take the first of Wexier's issues:

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Relatively easy to define and can be treated as separate from other problems and the environment | Relatively difficult to define and cannot be easily separated from other problems and the environment |
|--|---|

We might consider that assessment within HE could be viewed as tame in that it is relatively easy to define and it is often treated as being separate from other problems and, very often, the context in which it takes place. To adopt this position though would be to adopt a limited or superficial consideration, of what assessment seeks to do. Furthermore, as the student moves up through the levels within HE the task may be seen as becoming increasingly difficult to define.

### 2.3 The role of Teaching Staff in the assessment of student's work

The practice of conferring awards means that universities have to provide for some form of assessment of students' work and while students may opt out of some of the teaching they are unable to opt out of assessment if they are to continue with their studies and achieve an award from the university. The issue of assessment is essentially the concern to assure

ourselves as teachers, and others, that a student has been changed by the educational process. Within the department that is being studied, the assessment of students work is, more often than not, carried out by the member of teaching staff that has taught the module.

Assessment makes a judgement about the extent to which a student has learned something. As Knight and Page (2007) argue however, some types of learning, which they assert as being attributes that are valued within HE, such as creativity and critical thinking, are difficult to define and are constantly changing. Knight and Page (2007) refer to such attributes as wicked competencies. The concept of wickedity as detailed above may be seen as attractive to those who work in fields associated with social life because of the complexity that is involved in such situations. For example, Bore and Wright (2009) point to the importance of considering social complexity when assessing educational issues.

Assessment also has consequences for HE Institutions in a number of other ways, ranging from integrity concerning its practices, to the need to respond to national agendas. Yorke (2008) makes the point that because assessment is carried out for different purposes tensions inevitably arise, which may lead to compromises being arrived at. Some of these tensions may be understood as arising in part from what Barnett (2011) refers to when describing the university as being both bureaucratic and engaged in surveillance. Assessment may rest upon teaching and learning but it takes on greater significance when understood within agendas of accountability. As such, assessment is not something that simply takes place after a period of teaching and/or learning. Assessment is taken in to consideration from the planning stage of a module or programme and is pertinent throughout the lifetime of a module or programme.

Assessment within the HE sector is normally carried out by teaching staff but the responsibility for assessment is not theirs entirely in that they will invariably be working within a particular organisational and national framework, manifest as assessment policies. This is the case for the department within which this research is being undertaken. What influences the context of assessment within HE and the policies which relate to it will be explored in chapter 3 which follows.

Teaching staff may be constrained, and frustrated at times, by an assessment policy which appears too rigid or which places undue emphasis upon particular forms of assessment. They may find that the bureaucratic processes referred to by Barnett (2011) mean that

assessment becomes a pragmatic task which appears to serve the administration of the university rather than to assess learning. This may reflect the concerns of staff who recognise the complexity of the learning process within HE and who desire an approach to assessment that is able to capture the extent of this. It is the complexity of learning and development which moves us towards an appreciation of the value of the concept of wickedity if we consider that assessing something that is complex, especially where this involves creativity and originality, is rarely straightforward.

For some teaching staff however, the complexity of learning within HE may pose an essential problem with regards to how they are able to make judgements when assessing students. The staff member who sees complexity as challenging may be relieved if the organisation's policy removes, to a significant extent, the need for them to engage with what is a wicked problem. This does not remove the problem; it only serves to construct the illusion that the problem has been tamed. In addition to this it may restrict assessment so that only particular aspects of learning are considered, as will be shown. This is unlikely to be in the student's best interest.

The wicked nature of the problems faced by teaching staff in assessing student's abilities can be seen in calls from governments that concepts such as employability should be assessed. In considering the relationship between assessment and employability, Knight and Yorke (2003) demonstrate how a judgement made by teaching staff, of a student's achievements, are translated from a consideration of what they have done, to a judgement of what they are capable of doing. This rests upon assumptions being made about future situations being extrapolated from existing assessment practices. As assessment tasks are rarely carried out in real work situations with real problems there must be some question mark over a staff member's ability to assess future capabilities based only on hypothetical or simulated situations. This may be seen as raising issues relating to the fairness of such a requirement. It may also reflect a general belief that such abilities can be assessed by adopting certain procedures which simplify the task. Such an approach represents the taming of assessment.

For Flint and Johnson (2011) assessment must be seen to be fair so as to maintain the trust of students. In pointing to a concern for procedural justice they recognise how assessment practices may involve a guessing game which students are drawn into. It is also the case that the complexity of learning at HE level militates against the provision of overly detailed assessment briefs. The university needs to employ assessment tasks which provide fair and

equitable opportunities for all students to demonstrate what they are able to achieve and be marked accordingly but the extent to which we can fully know what a student has learned or is capable of is debateable.

## **2.4 Assessment as taming a wicked problem**

In setting out to assess students' learning we are faced with a wicked problem. The challenge of revealing what any student has learned is significant given the extent and complexity of learning. This is particularly pertinent for HE in respect of establishing what it is that makes HE, higher. I have argued elsewhere, (Creasy, 2013), that establishing just what HE is, is not easy, and Knight and Page (2007) demonstrate how the type of soft skills that employers value in graduates, such as critical and original thinking, are difficult to assess. It has already been suggested that the practice of assessment may be seen as a mechanism which serves to tame the wicked problem of assessing the nature of the learning that has taken place. For Edwards (2000), what this leads to is a situation whereby we "assess what we value, and value what we assess".

In taming the wicked problem of being able to make a judgement about the outcome of learning we face the risk that we simplify the process by which we do this, and in doing so, downplay the extent and complexity of learning. There can be some value then, in being aware of the possibility of wicked assessment. By this I mean assessment that can accommodate and reward creativity and originality. This is because it can serve to remind us that there are benefits to be gained from an assessment strategy and/or practices which is able to preserve the challenge of education and reflect the richness of the learning experience. As such, there are benefits to be gained from assessment within HE that is wicked rather than tame. The need to recognise wickedity in assessing learning requires a consideration of how it may be possible to capture and represent the richness and complexity of education and learning. In this way, to approach education from the perspective of wicked problems can be seen as legitimate given the interplay between HE, its goals and its practices.

The aim of assessment is to reveal the nature of the learning that has taken place. Put like this, the idea of assessment is a simple one. It is tame. Implicitly though it reflects a process which seeks to reveal what another individual both knows and understands. It rests upon an assumption that a change in knowledge and understanding, intrinsic to an individual, can be

directly known. This often leads to the mistaken idea that higher levels of cognitive and interpersonal abilities, qualities that are intrinsic to learning within HE can be accurately measured. This approach is bound up with the idea that the operationalization of abstract understanding to enable measurement to take place is possible. What starts off as a simple idea then, becomes the complex task of establishing a process to measure the development of knowledge and understanding, something which only ever exists in an intangible form. As such, rather than the tame problem that appears to underpin assessment the problem is best understood as being wicked.

As such it is pertinent to consider how certain approaches, adopted in relation to assessment, may give rise to the taming of assessment. One particular approach that has become endemic within education is the establishment, and subsequent assessment of, learning outcomes. The value of considering learning outcomes in this discussion is that within contemporary practice it is usually the learning outcomes that are being assessed. However, as Hussey & Smith (2008, 2010) point out, learning outcomes reflect a misunderstanding in respect of what can be known about the learning and development of students as will be considered.

## **2.5 How learning outcomes tame assessment within HE**

Hussey & Smith (ibid) do not deny that establishing the intended learning outcomes of a module or programme has some use to educators as part of the planning process. Indeed, it would be somewhat inconceivable to think that academics do not consider what it is that they expect and want students to learn when they plan both programmes and modules. They accept also, that establishing the intended learning outcomes can be used by educators as a tool in enhancing educational practices. At the same time though learning outcomes may be transformed into a mechanism or strategy that is used for the purposes of managing the educational process rather than for enhancing educational practice. This includes the way in which learning outcomes come to be used as a way of managing assessment within HE.

In demonstrating their argument Hussey and Smith (op cit) point to the role of the Quality Assurance Agency within the UK (QAA) in establishing the place of learning outcomes within HE. This argument is echoed by Daugherty et al (2008) who argue that the QAA has been driven by an instrumentalist view of accountability, and in particular, by political concerns.



For Hussey and Smith (2008, 2010), learning outcomes are used to achieve and demonstrate very specific outcomes. A fuller consideration of the factors that have driven HE over recent decades is offered in chapter 3 for the purpose of demonstrating the forces which shape both the landscape and the practices within HE, as such this discussion will be limited to considering particular aspects of this.

For Daugherty et al (2008), the use of learning outcomes is confused to an extent by the ways in which varying stakeholders all manage to exert some influence over them for differing purposes. This reflects the different ways in which learning outcomes are understood and the different uses to which they may be put. This distinction is reflected in the work of Prøitz (2010), who argues that learning outcomes come to be used for two different purposes depending upon the conceptual understanding and objectives that are held: "learning outcomes are either perceived as a tool for educational and instructional planning, and curriculum development, or as a tool for measuring effectiveness and accountability" (p123). In associating effectiveness with accountability however it may be argued that Prøitz is accepting a managerialist discourse (this will be discussed further in chapter 3). Similarly, Prøitz suggests that this is an either/or situation, failing to recognise that it may be possible to accept them in tandem. These may both be ways of using assessment but there are significant differences. It does mean however that learning outcomes are a contested concept. In turn this may be seen as influencing the forms of assessment that are adopted which, in turn, reflects the learning outcomes that are specified.

Further to the ways with which learning outcomes can be understood though is the nature of HE, as was considered earlier. Learning outcomes may be relatively straightforward where the subject matter or skill is similarly straightforward but this becomes less clear when we engage with more complex forms of learning such as is often found within HE (Bahous and Nabhani, 2011). It becomes more complicated when the aim is to support creativity and originality.

In considering the complexity of learning, Biggs and Collis (1982) point to the actual outcomes of learning and argue that a distinction can be made between surface learning and deep learning. The outcomes of learning are then seen as being related to the student's orientation to their studies with two different approaches towards work being identified and similarly characterised as "deep" or "surface" approaches (Light and Cox, 2001, Biggs, 2003, Ramsden, 2003). Surface learning and surface approaches to assessment are recognised as

being preoccupied with rote learning and repeating information rather than with the development of knowledge and understanding. As such, it is knowledge and understanding that reflects “deep” learning and which is presented as being desirable.

Biggs (1999) argues that the nature of assessment practices contributes to the student’s orientation to learning and is credited with developing this into an approach to planning learning which he calls constructive alignment. For Biggs, constructive alignment is concerned with how teaching and assessment take heed of what is explicitly stated within the intended learning outcomes of any module or programme. In practice the guiding principle is more likely to focus on whether or not assessment allows a student to demonstrate that the learning outcomes have been met. This makes the writing of intended learning outcomes very important. Hussey and Smith (2008) point to two aspects of this which give them cause for concern. Both relate to the argument that assessment is a practice which has the potential consequence of taming assessment.

The first point made by Hussey and Smith (ibid) is that learning outcomes establish a threshold approach and that this can lead to a situation where the quality of a response is overlooked. Knight and Page (2007), raise a similar concern. In respect of practical learning outcomes this may be considered in terms of how well or how effectively an outcome has been demonstrated, though Knight and Page’s concerns with wicked competencies demonstrates that this is not as straightforward as it may first appear. In respect of abstract learning outcomes however we are returned to a point made above in that assessment rests upon knowing what another person understands about any particular issue. Biggs presents a laudable case for developing deep understanding but his approach may be weakened by appearing to treat learning outcomes as being unproblematic as will be discussed.

The second concern for Hussey & Smith however, is that learning outcomes inevitably carry with them a certain degree of reductionism. The consequence of this is that the establishment of learning outcomes can therefore act to constrain learning. This may serve to undermine HE. In developing this point Hussey & Smith argue that alongside intended learning outcomes, those outcomes that have been predetermined or defined, there are also a range of other learning outcomes which they define as: contiguous; related; incidental and emergent. These are those learning outcomes that are less predictable or unpredictable and which are rooted in the students’ own engagement with the process of education. For Cowan and Cherry (2012) these fall under the umbrella term of actual learning outcomes, a term that is also used by Biggs and Collis (1982), albeit in a somewhat different way. For

Cowan and Cherry actual learning outcomes may go beyond what was intended. Although there are predictable and intended learning outcomes which may guide the work of teachers it is the existence of other learning outcomes which distinguishes education from training. These are at the heart of education. Graham (2008) points to this distinction as being rooted in the origins of universities and distinguishes between learning for a practical end and learning for its own sake, though he recognises that these two concepts may overlap.

For example, Brown (2007) considers how cultural heritage institutions have adopted the use of generic learning outcomes as a proxy measure of what visitors to museums, gain from the experience. This is based upon the idea that it can be known what will be learnt and that this can be identified. For Brown however, it is not predetermined learning outcomes that are being identified, it is emergent learning outcomes that are revealed. This is because it is not possible to predetermine how visitors to a cultural heritage institution, such as museum exhibitions for example, will engage with the environment.

What should also be evident then is that there are, to all intents and purposes, implicit learning outcomes. These are those learning outcomes which are not made explicit. These implicit learning outcomes are rarely made explicit by contemporary practices of assessment that are driven by a learning outcomes approach. Indeed, a student who submits work which is not focused on the stated, intended, learning outcomes may very well demonstrate what he or she has learned but could end up "failing" because they have not demonstrated that they have achieved the stated learning outcomes. It is this which underpins the argument put forward within this thesis that tame assessment can impoverish HE. Wicked assessment would be able to accommodate the contiguous; related; incidental and emergent learning outcomes which are the consequence of the student's engagement with HE.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to establish the relevance of the concept of wicked and tame in understanding assessment practices within education. It has set out to argue that the complexity and richness of learning makes assessment of it a wicked problem but that this is often overlooked. In this way assessment practices may be seen as taming the wicked problem of assessing learning by focusing upon intended learning outcomes. The concern is

that the taming of assessment is counter-productive to the potential of HE in developing creativity and originality.

What is required is an assessment strategy which is able to preserve the potential wickedity of learning. This will help to ensure that assessment is a system for evaluating learning rather than a system for ensuring accountability. To achieve this it is necessary to consider what our assessment practices do and why they do it. Chapter 3, which follows, considers the question of why by considering what drives HE.

When planning the assessment of modules and programmes there is a need to ensure that the methods and criteria that are adopted are compatible with outcomes which will be valued. This should not however be restricted to the intended learning outcomes but should accommodate contiguous, related, incidental and emergent learning outcomes also as these will reflect the actual learning outcomes. An assessment task which is able to demonstrate and reward these types of learning outcome will be more able to accommodate the complexity and richness of HE learning. Achieving this may mean that there is a need for a reorientation of the approach towards assessment.

For Teaching Staff the benefits of such an approach are that assessment practices will draw upon the exercising of professional judgement and may contribute to their own learning as contiguous, related, incidental and emergent learning outcomes are revealed. For the student the benefits are that the full range of their learning can contribute to their assessment and ultimately to their awards. Alongside this it is more likely that wicked assessment will provide a better student experience by being able to accommodate their interests to a much greater extent. For HEIs the benefit is the reinvigoration of the practice of HE and the establishment of a counter to bureaucratic forces. But there are also benefits to be gained for society in that modern economies rely increasingly upon intellectual capital and this rests upon creativity and originality.

Having established the conceptual basis of wicked and tame problems, the next chapter considers the forces which drive HE and which have contributed to the contemporary landscape of HE. It will argue that HE does not exist within a vacuum and that a range of different forces have shaped the landscape of HE over recent years. Some of these may be seen as pertinent to particular groups, such as teaching staff or students. Others however, such as rationalisation and internationalisation are more abstract and exist as forms of

discourse which shape how HE is structured. The aim of chapter 3 is to illustrate that how HE is practised, is rooted within social and political conditions.

## **Chapter 3. The drivers of contemporary HE in England**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a discussion of six drivers which are seen as being pertinent to the ways in which assessment within HE is carried out. This is in order to contextualise the practices of assessment within one department within a relatively new university. The aim of the chapter is to address sub-research question 1, namely: What are the policy drivers in respect of assessment within HE. In response to this question, six key drivers are identified as shaping the context of HE in England, as it is within this context that assessment is carried out. That said, the university is not just influenced by drivers within England. The university exists within a HE sector that is becoming increasingly competitive at the global level and, as such, some discussion of this will be considered later. This is not to say that no other issues have the ability to drive HE rather that these six are presented as the most influential and most relevant at this time and in respect of this thesis. For example the Research Assessment Framework is undeniably important within HE as a sector but it was not considered to have any real impact upon assessment practices and for this reason it has not been considered. The six drivers that are discussed are:

1. The actions of academics which are concerned with controlling the scope of their work. This involves the definition of disciplines and curricula and may be seen as both epistemological and practical;
2. Actions by the State. Government actions which may be seen as having the aim of weakening the control that academics have. The concern to weaken the power of academics may be seen as a means to an end, in that within a global economy the role of HE becomes more important. As such there is a concern on the part of the Government that HE produces outputs which reflect political concerns;
3. Economic concerns. A further impetus for the Government to secure control over HE relates to economic drivers. HE is expensive and Governments have many demands put upon them. At the same time political ideologies will shape the views of Governments regarding how to organise services;

4. New Public Management is presented here as both a strategy employed by Governments to wrest control from professional groups and as constituting an ideological driver in itself in the way that it privileges the role and scope of management;
5. The general trends towards increasing standardisation as is typified by Weber's arguments relating to rationalisation and Ritzer's contemporary reworking of this into the concept of McDonaldisation;
6. The place of internationalisation within HE in England.

Although these are presented as discrete drivers of social change, each of which impacts upon HE, this is to simplify the issues. They are presented as such to make the argument accessible. Some may be more influential in relation to particular aspects of HE. Similarly, and as will be shown, there are ways in which the drivers overlap. Connections can be made between them. It must also be recognised that each of the drivers detailed above are, in themselves, dynamic and all exist as part of wider social, cultural and political relationships. As such, general trends can be discerned.

### **3.2 Academic control over HE**

The first driver can be seen as both epistemological and practical, namely, the ways in which teaching staff engage in practices which define disciplines of study and secure control over them. In securing control over disciplines it will be argued that this also involves determining what students should know and how they can be assessed. Although the boundaries between disciplines may be seen as well established and quite strong in some cases there may also be times when there is a degree of ambiguity in relation to the boundaries of disciplines. It is always the case however that academic disciplines may be seen as constructed by, and existing within, the actions of those academics engaged within them. The boundaries of such disciplines then may be seen as subject to change if they exist as an outcome of social activities.

Although the primary concern is with how teaching staff approach disciplines this is also affected to an extent by the actions of professional bodies, (Barnett, 1990, Becher, 1999,

Becher and Trowler, 2001). The concerns of professional bodies will often overlap with the concerns of academics in respect of the boundaries and validity of knowledge. As such disciplines are shaped by what academics or practitioners see as important. This feeds into ideas about how students should be assessed and what they should be assessed on.

Barnett (2003) offers the view that all forms of knowledge existing within the university are in some form ideological as they are shaped by competing discourses, though academic concerns dominate. He refers to this as representing producer capture. By this he means the way in which academics within universities, as producers of new knowledge maintain power over it. The epistemological position adopted in this process is itself academic in that knowledge is prized in itself as is the matter of what to research with a view to developing new knowledge. This is often referred to as academic freedom (2005). Such freedom is generally associated with ideas about professionalism when applied to academics. Barnett is clear to point out though that such an idealised position is waning. Although academics may seek to retain control over knowledge it is a position that is less secure than it once was. The discussion of managerialism in section 3.5 will demonstrate why this is the case.

In general, teaching within HE has been subject to what Rochford (2008) refers to as doctrinalism. This reflects the concept of producer capture, as introduced above, in that what is taught is shaped by those staff involved in producing the knowledge. For Rochford doctrinalism is the focus on transferring what the academic knows, and what texts contain, to the student. Although he notes that more recent approaches may challenge this approach it is important to acknowledge that very often, this approach is what students expect. As such we can argue that establishing academics as experts leads to expectations that such experts will impart their knowledge. (It is important to note that although teaching staff are academics, not all academics teach. This will be dealt with more fully in chapter 5 where the three groups are defined). In turn this invests them with the power to determine what is important, and, with respect to assessment, whether or not students have understood the subject that they are studying. At the same time though the expectations on the part of students, that teaching staff will be experts, reinforces the power that teaching staff have to establish what is valid. As all teaching rests upon relationships it should be seen that the relationship is not an equal one. This is relevant to the matter of both assessment and the curriculum.

If the nature of any academic discipline is shaped by those who are working within that discipline it can be argued that what these practitioners deem to be important does, in turn,



become largely what students learn about. In the case of teaching staff though this can be taken further in that they will be concerned not only with what students should learn about but they will also have opinions as to how the students learning can be assessed and, importantly, what should be assessed. Raelin (2007) demonstrates this in arguing for an epistemology of practice so as to demonstrate the usefulness of theory rather than just knowing about it. In doing so he implicitly supports the idea that learning within HE should be wicked. This returns to the idea presented in the introduction to the thesis, that staff within HE will adopt a position towards disciplines which may vary from being tame to wicked. It is also a reminder of the point made in chapter 2 regarding the complexity of HE.

Tierny and Rhoads (1995) take this idea further pointing to the complexity of learning and the difficulties in establishing just what can be learned or even what can be assessed. They recognise that “educational institutions are cultural sites where knowledge gets defined” (106) noting also that there is a political aspect to this when it comes to establishing what might be assessed. The value of the argument is not in respect of identifying how academic control has been lost but rather that such control is contested for this demonstrates competing interests.

For Halsey (1982), control by academics, rather than control by university structures of governance, was at its peak during the early part of the twentieth century but more recent developments have seen the decline of what he calls donnish dominance. As Bottery (2008) notes, traditionally, professionals were seen as socially benign. As such, professional educators have exerted control over the curriculum. Their control was accepted because of two factors; firstly because of their perceived expertise vis-à-vis the discipline or subject matter; and secondly because they were seen as acting in ways that are socially good rather than in their own interests. For Raelin (2007) though this is indicative of a positivist view typical of modernity wherein the academic is the expert. The emergence of post-modernist and constructivist positions however provide the basis for a critique of this position as will be illustrated in the following section.

The idea that professionals act in ways that are to the benefit of society rather than because of their own vested interests underpins and explains the trust and status that professionals have traditionally been afforded. Although professionalism is a contested concept it is one which is often used with respect to individuals engaged in education.

In considering academic professionalism it is not being argued that this has always developed in a planned way. There are accidental or unintended outcomes of processes which arise whereby power has been exercised. However, such power always reflects vested interests to some degree. It is certainly not surprising then that other vested interests may see professional power and control very differently. Groups who have been able to achieve professional status have generally secured autonomy. In itself autonomy can be seen as associated with control. In part, such control may be seen as being rooted within a certain mystique which exists alongside the possession of specialist knowledge. This can, however, be subject to change.

In recent decades the autonomy afforded to professional groups has come to be viewed as less desirable as a consequence of general social changes relating to trust (Bottery, 2004). Bottery argues that over time trust in professionals has declined and, in turn, this has led to actions being taken by, or on behalf of, governments so as to move power away from professionals. Becher (1999) notes that since the early 1980s, although governments have espoused policies of deregulation, public sector professional groups in particular have experienced the opposite as regulatory powers have been introduced which curtail their power. In one sense the increase in regulation may be seen as a proxy measure of a lack of trust. If trust in professionals was high there would be no need, or will, to increase regulation. That regulation has increased illustrates the decline, or erosion, of trust.

In part, one consequence of the shift regarding who controls academic work is in respect of changes to the way in which learning and development within HE is assessed. Traditionally, as has been indicated, academics controlled how students were assessed. This rested upon individual academics making judgements on students work. Importantly, individual academics determined the assignment tasks. Professional autonomy privileged such judgements and ensured that such decision making was a matter for academics. Importantly though the status of universities as individual institutions, responsible for their own standards, could be seen as contributing to a somewhat insular approach. The development of the external examiner system provides some check to this but there is no wide scale moderation between HEIs and in practice terms of reference with respect to how assessments are made are rare or brief.

Traditionally, the end of term exam, often referred to as finals, determined the award made to students. Within contemporary HE, although exams are now accompanied by other forms of assessment, the written form is still dominant. Typically, academics have constructed

assessment tasks in accordance with what they have deemed to be important. It is only recently that this process has been subject to non-academic controls. The later section on managerialism however, is also relevant to the ways in which academics have been compelled to follow particular processes when assessing student work.

### **3.3 State control over HE**

The previous section dealt with the way in which academics have established the boundaries and concerns of particular disciplines. In doing this it was argued that this involved the establishment of control over their own work. This, in turn, shaped the way in which assessment was carried out. This section deals with ways in which the State has sought to influence HE. Although in recent decades it appears as though this is because of economic issues, as will be considered in the next section, a consideration of state involvement during the 1960s demonstrates that although governments may seek control for economic reasons they also have other concerns such as national security or values relating to citizenship.

For example, the political concerns which drove the expansion of HE during the 1960s were not detached from economic concerns but they were also underpinned by egalitarian ideas which were also driving the move towards comprehensivisation within schools (Graham, 2008). This reflected the idea that talent was being wasted as a consequence of the educational system that had been established in the late 1940s, (Jones, 2003 ). As Hussey and Smith (2010) argue, up until the 1960s entry to HE was somewhat limited. The Robbins Committee Report in 1963 (Ainley, 1994) can be seen as being the impetus behind the shift from HE being an elitist system to it becoming a mass system. Although it could be argued that the State saw some economic value in expanding HE activities there was recognition that access to HE reflected the way in which social class in particular restricted opportunities for some. The Robbins report addressed this concern. The expansion of polytechnics accompanied more general changes with regards to HE such as the establishment of new universities. Along with the development of new universities the Robbins report promoted the idea that HE should be available for all, though as Ainley points out, this was qualified by selective intakes. The idea that HE should be open to all who can benefit from it however was important in changing the landscape of HE in England and led to significant expansion.

From the 1980s however the State started to demonstrate a concern with the role and work of academics. Exworthy and Halford (1999) illustrate how, prior to the 1980s, different

professional groups working within the public sector had been able to use professionalism as a basis for resistance to challenges to their autonomy. During the 1980s however, political pressures brought to bear upon professional groups increased significantly. Similarly, Brown (2013) points to a general trend in recent decades wherein academic control over HE has declined, corresponding with an increased level of state control reflecting the point made previously by Halsey (1982) regarding the decline of Donnish dominion.

Part of the increased pressure on professional groups, emanating from the State, has been the concern of successive governments since 1979 to prioritise demand rather than supply with respect to services. As Copnell (2010) notes, one consequence of seeking to emphasise demand-led services is that employers gain more power to define the types of skills and services that are both valid and desirable. Copnell is concerned with changes to Allied Health Professionals resulting from a competence-based framework, but this has resonance with HE, as parallels can be drawn with the Professional Standards Framework as introduced by the Higher Education Academy. Importantly, the impetus for this was the White Paper "The future of Higher Education" (2003). Along with the development of the Institute for Learning & Teaching in Higher Education, which emerged out of the Dearing report (1997), these two developments are indicative of how UK Governments have taken an active interest in exerting control over the work of academics and the nature of HE in recent decades. In particular though, this reflects a move towards codifying professional skills in a way that makes the tacit knowledge claimed by professional groups explicit, in a manner that supports arguments relating to such groups being accountable.

### **3.4 Economisation**

Although there may be political concerns which impact upon the landscape of HE, and which have seen the State seek to reduce the power of academics, a general concern with the role that HE can play in respect of national economic performance is also important. Such a trend has not been rooted in any particular UK political party, rather, all parties have adopted the position that HE would not contribute as much to the needs of the economy as much as it might were it left to its own devices.

In part, these developments rest on ideas about how global and national economies have developed over time. Gudanescu & Cristea (2009) point to the importance of knowledge in both society and the economy arguing that this leads to a much greater level of importance

being placed upon human capital because of the changed conditions of economic activity that follow from both globalisation and post-industrialism. In doing so they refer to both a knowledge society and a knowledge economy. For Bottery (2004) and Hargreaves (2003), in such an economy economic advantage now tends to rest with innovation which means that generating and controlling ideas becomes more important than controlling physical property. Consequently, Governments are drawn into taking more control over HE because of a concern for more general economic issues.

That said, how they intervene is subject to ideological beliefs about how modern economies are best organised. It is pertinent to note that although HE exists within England as a national system it is also subject to wider, pan-European and global forces. In considering global forces Peters (2004) points to the global influence of neo-liberalism. She argues that economic forces shape politics because a concern with economics is embedded within the neo-liberal agenda. As such, Peters argues that neo-liberalism provides a framework for future developments within HE.

Writers such as Amable (2011) and Turner (2008) however, make the point that there is a great deal of confusion concerning just what neo-liberalism is. Although the term neo-liberalism is in common use, it is not the case that it is unproblematic and there is no unambiguous definition that can be offered for it. The various positions which contribute to the neo-liberal canon make confusion an almost inevitable outcome. In particular neo-liberalism may be seen as having an overarching concern with the efficacy of free markets (Clarke, 2010) but in the UK, political parties which would not consider themselves to be neo-liberal have also promoted markets. As such, it may be argued that economic forces exist independently of any political approach.

What can be argued is that since 1979 UK Governments have tended to support the process of marketization, or what Marginson (2009) refers to as economisation, this being actions which seek to replicate or establish a market. For this reason, it is economisation, or marketization, that is presented in this thesis as underpinning the States attempts to increase control over HE, rather than neo-liberalism as the concept of economisation is useful in evaluating developments within HE. This is evident within the UK government report Higher Ambitions (Dept for Business, 2009). Higher Ambitions takes the existence of a knowledge economy as its starting point and positions HE within a consumer-oriented model linked to the development of skills and knowledge relevant to employment.

Although "Higher Ambitions" specifically declares that HE is not seen by the Government as only mattering for its economic contribution (p41) the main thrust of the document demonstrates that there is an overriding concern with how the HE sector as a whole can contribute to the national economy. For example it is stated that "the creation of the new Department of Business, Innovation and Skills..... signals the central role that the Government envisages for Higher Education in contributing to our economic strength and competitive potential" (p41). Recent debates regarding the role that HE should play in terms of providing workers is encapsulated in ideas about employability. The concern that graduates should be employable is revealed in the comment "employers... report a lack of 'employability' skills in graduates such as business-awareness and self-management." (p42). Throughout the document there is a focus upon how HE can supply employers with skills and how students will become more employable. This is contextualised within the idea that the UK operates within a globally competitive market. If HE is to supply graduates with particular skills it can be seen that these are skills which the State, along with business, and the market, values. These will not necessarily be those which academics value. As such there is pressure on teaching staff to assess for things with which they have not traditionally been concerned with.

The developing discourse of markets which is evident within "Higher Ambitions" in relation to HE is also important and can be seen in the partial adoption by the Government of the Browne report (2010) together with significant funding cuts as detailed in the comprehensive spending review of October 2010. This change reinforces the concept of the student as consumer by changing the funding of HE programmes so that students pay significantly more than previously. This does not imply that the costs have been shifted to the student *in toto* but costs have been imposed upon them. The intention was that HEIs would charge varying fees and so students would choose a programme in a manner that was analogous to making any other purchase.

This reflects the general approach as taken by governments in the UK which have aimed to create, or replicate markets, within sectors where a market was seen to be absent (Brown and Carasson, 2013). This is not the same as arguing that a free market must exist. Although there are doubts as to the extent that a market has been created, Hughes (2007) demonstrates the extent to which the discourse of markets have become embedded within the sector when she writes:

*"Today's UK university students buy a degree. Some also buy a university education. We live in a consumer economy. Education purchases are no different. Those coming into higher education, and those who support them, are buying something. They are arguably little different from consumers walking into shops". (p12)*

Although Hughes may be overstating the case when she refers to students being analogous to customers within shops, for Marginson (2009), what is important is that individuals behave as though they exist within a free market. In both cases, the evidence that students behave as consumers with respect to HE is not convincing but the discourse of markets is present within the HE sector and this does have some effect. For example, HEIs are increasingly being organised in ways which reflect both markets and business interests.

In turn economisation can have consequences with regards to assessment. If HE is to be recast along market lines then some semblance of a market transaction must be established. If, as Hughes argues, students buy a degree, we must consider the process that enables them to buy it. Unlike a conventional customer i.e. Hughes' shop customer, students do not simply buy the award. They are compelled to enter into a process which leads to the award being made. In general, this involves the submission of work for judgement and the assessment of that work. This is not new and this thesis does not claim that it is, such a practice has long been a feature of HE and may be seen as constituting the traditional practices of HE. Indeed, it may be seen as evidence that a market transaction is not present within HE and that HE continues to be shaped by the development of knowledge within disciplines which is then assessed according to what is valued by particular disciplines and which rests upon professional judgements being made.

However, the establishment by the State of the Quality Assurance Agency for HE (QAA) has impacted upon the ways in which professional judgements are made. The discussion in chapter 2 regarding the emergence and adoption of learning outcomes goes some way to making the assessment of student work a tamer process in the way that it predetermines what is expected. This overlaps to some extent with the concerns of the fifth driver, that of standardisation. The next section in this chapter however will consider how work within HE is being subjected to increased forms of managerial control.

### **3.5 The consequences of New Public Management**

A theme that has run throughout this chapter is that of control. In terms of control it has been argued that in recent decades the State has demonstrated an increasing concern with the extent to which academics have, or had, control over HE. It has been suggested that governments have increasingly sought to increase their control which in turn reduces the control held by academics. This is not necessarily a specific intention. It is more plausible to see the control of academics as part of a strategy by which the output of HE is controlled and that this is driven by a combination of political and economic concerns. In considering the tensions that exist between academic control and the increasing levels of state control over HE, the previous two sections have identified drivers within HE. However, a further question arises; how has the State been able to appropriate control over HE. What strategy or mechanism has seen the decline of Donnish dominion as Halsey put it?

This section considers the development of an approach to control which has been referred to as New Public Management (NPM) or Managerialism. The central aspect of this approach involves increasing the control that managers exert. Although it will be evident as to how NPM overlaps with both aspects of State control, as have been introduced, and aspects of standardisation, as will follow, NPM will be discussed as exerting a force upon HE in a way which sees it as being more than just a strategy to be adopted. Importantly then, NPM is presented as a driver in its own right. Consequently, this section will give an overview of what NPM is and illustrate how aspects of NPM are relevant to understanding issues relating to assessment practices. What will be argued is that particular practices which relate to NPM have changed assessment practice in ways which reduce the professional elements of assessment.

Hood (1991) charts the development of NPM since the mid-1970s and presents seven doctrinal components of the approach as follows:

1. Greater 'hands-on management';
2. Explicit standards and measures of performance;
3. Greater emphasis on output controls;
4. 'Disaggregation' of units in the public sector;
5. Greater competition in the public sector;



6. Stress on private-sector styles of management practice;
7. Stress on greater discipline and parsimony in resource use (pp4-5)

He does stress though that NPM is not a unified approach and that variations do exist, both nationally and globally (Hood, 2000, Dunleavy and Hood, 1994). What is also important however is that in the move towards NPM it is not suggested that organisations will necessarily adopt each doctrine in equal measures. Hood is referring to a general trend. As NPM brings pressure to bear upon how any HEI is organised some of these doctrines will have a greater influence than others. Hood (2000) explains this as the consequences of path-dependency combined with the way that working practices become cultural forms which, in turn, mediate developments. By path-dependency, Hood is referring to the ways in which historical patterns of organisational form are difficult to change not only because individuals working within them develop particular approaches to their work but also because of the ways in which others also have expectations as to what they are expected to do. It may also be considered as a consequence of how some professional groups are able to resist change. So, the historical concerns of HE which have their origins in academic freedom and a concern with learning for its own sake may prove resistant to competing ideas regarding HE, and academics, as operating within a market.

It would be difficult to say that NPM has not influenced developments within HE. Clarke (Clarke et al., 2000, Clarke and Newman, 1997) focuses attention upon changes within public services such as HE which have seen a decline in the role of traditional bureaucratic and professional models of governance and the emergence of a managerial perspective. Hood (2000) however notes that it would be erroneous to think that previous models of organisation and control were unambiguous arguing that the ways in which "cultural, institutional and power-distribution characteristics" (p8) within different societies lead to a diverse range of organisational forms. In addition, managerialism also has different forms (Becher and Trowler, 2001). As such, although NPM may be influential within contemporary society, particular aspects, have greater or lesser influence as will be seen.

It may be better to consider NPM as a politicised form of the management of what Barnett (2011) refers to as the Bureaucratic University. Barnett argues that bureaucratic procedures within HE are generally developed by non-academic staff but are used to manage academic work. In this way administrative and management staff usurp control over academic activities. In doing so, academic freedom is reduced as a consequence of being required to

engage with systems and procedures designed for managerial rather than academic purposes. Furedi (2002) similarly, sees the university as bureaucratic. For him, this is allied to concerns regarding economisation. In practice it sees increasing levels of control coming to be held by non-academics both within and outside of the university. It is the ideological impetus behind such control which is at the heart of NPM.

Similarly, Clarke et al (2000), are cautious in asserting that although NPM has come to be recognised as a descriptive term it is not unproblematic. They argue that there is no unitary version of such managerialism and that variations exist. They are also careful to note that management itself should be recognised as a political form. As such it is pertinent to note that although NPM is referred to within this thesis this should be taken as a general movement rather than a specified form. What is important though is the way in which NPM acts upon the formation and practice of HE. HE has been subject to forms of NPM in similar ways to other public services. In this way NPM can be seen to act in practical and discursive ways as has been suggested.

As such, Clarke's argument that managerialism is a cultural formation which carries with it both ideological meanings and practices can be seen as relevant in respect of the impact that it has upon academic work including assessment practices. It is bound up not only with an approach to a given situation, as well as some notion of how this must be addressed, it also acts in a manner which is self-serving. Management itself is seen as a desirable outcome albeit within a context that reflects the move towards a market society as has been supported by successive governments in recent decades. This reflects Clarke & Newman's (1997) argument that management is underpinning an emergent political settlement. It also reflects the point made above that managerialism is not only the strategy adopted by government to achieve its aim of increasing control over public services, it also operates independently of government on an ideological and discursive basis.

To illustrate this, McGuigan (2005) points to the way in which managerialism shapes language. For example, learning outcomes reflects a process of production rather than of learning. In a similar vein arguments about quality assurance processes within HE draw upon ideas about 'value for money' in a manner that reflects the economisation argument discussed previously (Singh 2010). In this way McGuigan points to the discourse of managerialism as shaping the way in which forms of organisational structure and management are understood. In turn this feeds into the working practices of academics by exerting a normative force upon them. Alongside the abstract influence of discourse is the

reality of a new landscape of HE wherein students paying significant fees are competed for and seen as customers reflecting the argument presented by Hughes (2007).

For HE, aspects of NPM may be seen in the adoption of semesterised programmes built up of modules of equal standing. Such approaches are not restricted to England. The Bologna approach to HE within the EU seeks to rationalise HE in a manner that facilitates a European market within HE (Hussey and Smith, 2010). Hussey and Smith also note that the Bologna agreement itself did not emerge out of academic concerns but was a political agreement between member states of the EU. To achieve the harmonisation required by the Bologna agreement however requires the type of bureaucratic rationalisation that Barnett (2011) refers to and which is then subject to political control.

In terms of assessment the adoption of practices which reflect NPM can be seen in an increasingly rationalised approach that is characterised by the establishment of learning outcomes together with the formalisation of modes of assessment such as how learning is to be assessed and the restrictions placed on, for example, word counts. Teaching staff are not free to assess students on an *ad hoc* basis nor are they free to change how they assess in accordance with professional concerns without entering into managed systems for change. As a consequence of this the assessment of student learning may be seen as being tamed by a variety of bureaucratic processes that are accommodated within NPM. In turn this highlights the relevance of the next section on standardisation; NPM may be one way in which HE comes to be organised but it can be seen as overlapping to an extent with a more widespread general trend that is presented as standardisation.

### **3.6 Standardisation**

Standardisation is a process that is concerned with the ordering of goods or services in ways that make them more homogenous. In turn this affords a degree of interchangeability and eases comparisons. Such a process has had an impact upon HE. For example, the Bologna process referred to above is often presented as a process of harmonising HE across the EU but it can also be seen as a process of standardisation. It will enable more accurate comparisons to be made regarding HE within the EU and facilitate student mobility between HEIs. As Furedi (2002) argues, this fits well with the move towards economising HE and introducing a market, but it is not sufficient to explain it. Standardisation may be seen as a

key component of rationalisation and is most clearly articulated within the work of Weber (Gerth and Wright-Mills, 1948), Habermas (1984) and Ritzer (2011).

Rationality as a process or driver is closely bound up with ideas about efficiency and outcomes. The value in considering this alongside economisation lies in the way that concerns regarding how to organise social and economic activities can be seen to rest upon the idea that private sector businesses are inevitably more efficient than providers of services who are not subject to the pressures of the market place. As such organisations, such as those engaged in the provision of education, are exhorted to be more business-like.

This can be seen as reflecting the political imperatives of the State in recent decades and can also be seen as fitting comfortably with the practices that are bound up with NPM. This reiterates the point made earlier that each of these drivers does not operate independently at all times. Although, as will be seen, standardisation has a long history, recent developments means that there is greater pressure to apply it within HE.

For Weber, (1948) rationality as found within modern, western societies represents a feature of enlightenment thinking wherein the drive to exert control over the natural world is applied to control over social activities, especially with regards to economic and administrative activities. For Weber, this represents formal rationality and is to be distinguished from other forms of rationality as found in other societies and other historical periods.

Habermas (1984) develops Weber's concern with rationality referring to "cognitive-instrumental" rationality as being concerned with the efficient means of achieving ends or goals. Given that a period of study for educational purposes can be seen as having a particular end or goal his concern with how that should be organised has some resonance. In particular he emphasises the relationship between rationality, knowledge and behaviour. In doing so Habermas draws attention to the way in which forms of social organisation shape the knowledge which individuals hold about the world, which in turn may shape behaviour. This returns us to the epistemological issue raised when discussing the ways in which staff approach their work. In establishing this relationship Habermas recognises, and emphasises, the extent to which knowledge may be unreliable. As such it can be argued that this promotes the development of rational systems and procedures where the aim is to formalise the subject.

A further development of Weber's concept of rationality is found within Ritzer's concept of McDonaldisation (2011). This can be criticised as a simple repackaging of Weber's theory of rationality but the focus on consumption and consumers gives it resonance with the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In presenting McDonaldisation as the contemporary iteration of Weber's work Ritzer draws out four aspects of rationality which form the drivers of the process: efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. All these may be said to have some relevance in the way that HE is organised within contemporary society.

Weber (1948) is particularly important however in focusing attention upon the ways in which rationality influences the organisation or provision of education. His argument is that "a rational bureaucratic structure of domination, as such, develops quite independently of the areas in which it takes hold" (p240). This underpins the discussion of how other aspects of the social world come to exert influence over practices within HE. For Weber, centres of education such as universities become drawn into providing particular types of education and, increasingly, in particular rationalised ways. In doing so, the organisers of educational systems turn their focus onto producing what Weber classes as a 'specialist type of man' rather than a 'cultivated' man. In arguing this it is clear that he regards the 'specialist' as inferior, or restricted, when compared to the 'cultured man' but this is hidden, he says, under the conditions of bureaucracy and rationality that drives it. Weber is suggesting here that a rationally structured education in some way impoverishes the potential that education has to transform and develop individuals. This idea resonates with the claim that tame assessment may impoverish the experience and outcomes of education.

It is pertinent to note that Weber may be over-stating the driving force of rationality when he makes such a claim but this is an issue where different drivers overlap. It was stated above that for differing reasons the State, as the Government, may seek to take control from professional academics. The individuals who constitute those engaged in governing however, also are subject to the forces and principles of rationality in the same way that teaching staff are but it may be that the State, in the form of the government is more amenable to promoting rationality within HE. As such the introduction of the QAA can be seen as the creation of a body which not only has power over HE, it articulates this power through rational principles in a way that promotes standardisation.

As such, semesterised patterns of teaching with guidelines relating to how assessment is to be carried out such as word restrictions for written work or timings for presentations and exams alongside learning outcomes at both programme and module level with a credit value

being assigned in both cases have become standard practice within HEIs. Over time forms of assessment have gradually become formalised in a way that has become remarkably similar across the HE sector.

In turn, teaching staff do not exist outside of society. Their professional concerns may provide a basis from which they approach the activities of HE but this is not from a starting point that is divorced from wider society. As such, although some aspects of the QAA may be resisted by staff this may well rest on a feeling of a loss of control rather than a deep antipathy towards the rational principles which underpin what the QAA presents as codes of practice.

The point that I am making here reflects Ritzer's argument regarding the attractiveness of rationality. The massification of HE, combined with reduced funding has generally seen class sizes increase. As such, this increases workload and a major aspect of workload for teaching staff is the assessment of students. A rational approach to assessment could be welcomed. At the same time many teaching staff will have only worked under the type of rationalised and standardised system described above. For them, this is simply how HE is organised.

### **3.7 Internationalisation**

Although the argument up to now has been to establish the drivers that shape HE it is possible to consider that these are particular to England. However, the form and character of educational provision within England does not exist in a vacuum and it is pertinent to consider the consequences for HE of developments in respect of internationalisation.

It should be noted at this point that internationalisation is not synonymous with globalisation. This thesis adopts the position that it is internationalisation, rather than globalisation, which is of greater concern. Maringe (2009) offers a useful account of why this is and summarises by noting that "while globalisation focuses on competition between nations, internationalisation tends to seek the strengthening of international cooperation." (p557). In doing so, though, he reflects the general view of internationalisation which sees it optimistically. Within this view, internationalisation is seen as being bound up with collaborative work which promotes understanding. This is echoed by Robson (2011) who sees the internationalisation agenda as providing the possibility for a transforming of HE,

which for him would be a positive change. As such, although forces related to globalisation may be seen as similar to internationalisation they are not the same.

In respect of globalisation, Bottery (2000) argues that it is economic and political forms which have the potential to affect education the most. Indeed, Held and McGrew (2000) note that globalisation as an idea may be seen as a necessary myth within which the preconditions for economic and political change is made possible. For Peters (2004) globalisation is often seen as being synonymous with economic forces and she argues that in this sense politics means the neo-liberal agenda. That the neo-liberal agenda is sometimes referred to as the "Washington consensus" illustrates the strong link between economic and political globalisation (Peters, 2004, Wolf, 2005, Held and McGrew, 2000, Held, 2002).

At the supra-national level various organisations act to reinforce the basic tenets of the Washington Consensus of free-trade and deregulated markets. However, although this thesis does acknowledge that neo-liberalism places some pressure upon HE it has already been established that this in itself is not sufficient to account for how HE has developed as a whole. This is one reason for seeing internationalisation as more important than globalisation. Even then it would be wrong to see internationalisation purely as the consequence of recent developments. Both Humfrey (2011) and Maringe (2009) refer to the manner within which universities originated as international, but became national, institutions. As such, the internationalisation agenda sees a re-emergence of themes that have a long history. Humfrey makes a strong case to argue that internationalisation is not a recent development within England. Geo-political ties, such as the British Commonwealth, have had a long impact upon HE in England and the development of the European Union illustrates how more recent international drivers have had some impact upon how universities within the UK operate.

By the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century internationalisation had become a major aspect of the way that HE is managed, planned and delivered within the UK, (Jiang and Carpenter, 2013). In turn, the internationalisation agenda demonstrates the way in which the drivers referred to within this thesis overlap. For example, The Sorbonne Declaration (1998) aimed to facilitate the movement of students between European universities through a process of harmonisation in respect of the value and lengths of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (King, 2004). This was followed by the Bologna Declaration (1999). Although the Bologna Declaration does not seek to establish a European system of standardisation *per se* its aims

do reflect this in how it seeks to establish a European arena for HE by establishing systems which facilitate the movement of students throughout Europe. This can only be possible though by establishing agreed standards. In turn the Bologna Declaration reflects economic concerns in that it inevitably undermines national policies in establishing a supra-national approach which is amenable to the idea of a market within education.

Internationalisation is not restricted to European issues though as has been suggested and the economic drivers which impact upon the HE sector can be seen as driving HEIs to both seek international students, and to establish a presence outside of the UK. This reflects the impact of marketisation as was considered above. As such, although internationalisation is presented as a key strategy within the HE sector (Maringe, 2009) it may be argued that this is as a consequence of economic factors (Robson, 2011).

### **3.8 Conclusion**

This chapter addresses sub-research question SRQ2, What are the policy drivers in respect of assessment within HE? It has presented six key drivers which have shaped the context of HE and argued that in reality these overlap to varying extents in how they exert pressure on what happens within HE. In turn, assessment within HE is also influenced and is subject to different forces. In considering this there have been times when the main research question, relating to wicked and tame problems with respect to assessment has been referred to. Chapter 4 will consider the methodological issues that are relevant to this thesis and set out a justification for a case study approach.



## **Chapter 4: Establishing the validity of a case study**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter explains the research methodology used within the thesis and explains the relevant methodological issues. It also establishes the relevance in using a case study which is focused on assessment practices in HE. Assessment practices purport to reveal the extent to which a student has learnt about issues being studied. However, learning is a complex matter. The complexity of learning and the fact that it always refers to the development of knowledge and understanding that are in the mind of the individual raises questions as to how it is that educators are able to know the extent to which it has taken place. I argue that we cannot directly know the extent to which a student has learnt something. The quality of the claims that we make in respect of what a student has learnt rests upon the quality and suitability of our assessment practices. As such the research is concerned with exploring understandings of assessment practices and of the possibilities for assessment in general. It is accepted that staff operate within organisational structures and that these structures may determine how assessment is carried out but this does not mean that such practices should not be subject to critical evaluation.

The focus of the thesis is to investigate the assessment of learning through the use of the concepts of tame and wicked. It does so through investigating the views of three stakeholder groups. However, to explore the position adopted by these groups it is necessary to establish a method which can reveal and appreciate the perspectives that they hold on the process of assessment. This reflects the epistemological issues relating to research. In turn, the issue of what can be known as a consequence of the research lies at the heart of methodological debates. This is the ontological issue relating to research as will be shown. However, both ontological and epistemological assertions can be contested and, as such, consideration of the development of the opposing philosophical positions in relation to educational research will be followed by a discussion of the tensions that exist between quantitative and qualitative methods. This will be followed with further discussion of the case study as a valid and viable method.

## **4.2 Philosophy and research**

Educational research is a contested practice (Bassey, 2007, Carr, 2003). This is a consequence of wider debates relating to what researchers consider to be possible within research. This raises the question of ontology in respect of how it applies to conceptions of reality, as will be shown. In sum, ontology is the name given to a concern with what exists (Hindess, 1977). As such, ontology can be understood as the basis of research in that the basic understanding of what exists shapes the possibilities of what the researcher can know. In turn this is the philosophical starting point of all research (Sarantakos, 2013). Sarantakos draws attention to two basic ontological positions, one reflecting realism, and one reflecting constructivism. The realist position is embedded within positivist approaches to understanding the world, the importance of which will be discussed below. These differing ontological positions reflect the assertions made by different disciplines as to what it is possible to know or how the nature of reality is viewed by each (Hennink et al., 2011).

If ontology can be understood as appertaining to what can be known, based as it is on an understanding of what exists, epistemology can be seen as how something can be known. Whereas ontology is understood as a theory of being, epistemology is understood as the theory of knowledge (Goldman, 2009) though it is also concerned with what constitutes knowledge and how knowledge can be obtained (Cole, 2002).

## **4.3 The influence of positivism on educational and social research**

Early forms of both educational and social science research were dominated by a positivist ontology, reflecting the work of the early sociologist, Comte (Audi, 1999, Flick, 2009). Comte's epistemological position also gives rise to a positivist approach. For positivists genuine knowledge can only be achieved through observation and experiment (Urmson and Ree, 1989). Positivism reflects the idea that there are aspects of the world that can be known, reflecting ontology, and that only certain methods can be used to reveal such knowledge. This latter point reflects the concept of empiricism which is an epistemological issue concerning how we can know things. Such an approach is commonly understood as reflecting the scientific method as it emerged within the Enlightenment (Audi, 1999).

As Audi (1999) notes, during the period that has come to be referred to as the Enlightenment the belief developed that there was an objective truth which existed about

the world and that this truth could be discovered. In itself this rests on the idea that this truth, or reality, exists independently of the social world, or of social actions, but that there are particular actions that will provide access to such truth and reveal it to us. These actions can be seen as the methods of research that are adopted. In considering methods of research it can be argued that some are accepted as valid in their capacity to reveal this independent reality, and others are not. For Potter (2000) the success of early scientific endeavours increased the belief that reliable forms of knowledge could be ascertained, supporting this emerging position. One of the consequences of this was that it established the practice of science as a universal discipline in a form whereby the scope and concerns of practice were obvious. Within this approach there is a strong tendency to argue for cumulative knowledge. Engaging with the practice of science means accepting the findings of those researchers, or scientists, whose work forms the extent of knowledge at any given time and accepting the empirical methods which had generated those preceding findings. What this also demonstrates is that both ontology and epistemology are bound together within practice. To adopt any method of research means an acceptance of a particular epistemological and ontological position (Hay, 2007, Sarantakos, 2013).

This raises the question of what constitutes a viable and valid approach to scientific endeavours and strengthens a positivist approach. Positivism reflects an epistemological concern and is to be found in the methodological approach to investigation known as the hypothetico-deductive or experimental method. However, although natural science adopts the hypothetico-deductive or experimental method it is not the case that social science is, or should be, restricted to the same approach. For Blaikie (2007) the question of whether social science is possible is "the primal problem of the philosophy of social science." It raises the question as to whether natural science and social science can share the same ontological foundations. As such it questions the idea that there is an objective reality that can be discovered about the social world that is analogous to the way that natural scientists assert that reality exists within the natural or material world.

In arguing that the ontological foundations of the natural world do not correspond to those of the social world, Cohen et al (2007), note that positivist science is not as successful when it is being used to study human behaviour as it is when applied to the material world. The reason for this is that compared to the material world the social world is intrinsically dynamic. It reflects the cumulative and ongoing consequences of the myriad ways in which individuals perceive and understand the world. Although patterns of understanding and

behaviour may be observed within the social world this does not demonstrate that homogeneity exists between individuals. Furthermore, as Law (2004) argues, there is a fluidity and ambiguity within the social world which, by its very nature, means that adopting a rigid methodological approach almost inevitably means that such research will be impoverished. For Law, there is a need to recognise that research itself is a social practice and that methods are inextricably linked to the results that they produce.

That said, the practice of natural science has come to have power, and this has certainly been influential within social science. Positivist social science has often relied heavily upon the survey method and upon analysis of secondary data such as is provided by official statistics (Bryman, 1988). The survey method invariably involves the administering of questionnaires, preferably to large populations for the purpose of revealing patterns within the social world. Underpinning this is the ontological argument presented earlier which asserts that there is a truth which exists independently of the social world and that this truth can be revealed by the adoption of the scientific method. This reflects a realist argument in that it assumes that there is a reality that can be revealed through appropriate research (Potter, 2000, Blaikie, 2007). As such this positivist approach privileges objective observation and sees the scientific method as being the only way of identifying real knowledge (Smith, 1998). In respect of social science however, this concern with detached objectivity moves the researcher further away from approaches concerning gaining access to the way in which people understand and construct the world. As this thesis is directly concerned with how individuals understand the social practice of assessment within HE it will become apparent that the methods adopted to investigate this will not be determined by positivism.

#### **4.4 In support of an interpretivist approach**

The question as to whether or not the social world shares the same qualities with the natural world, and can therefore be investigated by adopting the same or similar methods, becomes important when critical consideration is given to the qualitative nature of each (Plowright, 2011). Although it has been established that positivism has had a significant influence upon social science, another influential ontological perspective, that of interpretivism, can be seen as providing a challenge to the claims of positivism within social science research. For Cohen et al (2007) the interpretivist perspective (sometimes referred to as anti-positivism) may be seen as being in a dichotomous relationship to positivism. It

adopts the position that the social world is qualitatively different to the natural world. Whereas the natural scientist can purport to know the material world this is not the case for the social world (Gage, 2007, Benton and Craib, 2001). This fundamental ontological difference rests on the idea that what can be known about the material world is not true of the social world and, as such, this determines that a different epistemological approach be taken. For interpretivists we are unable to identify or establish a fundamental knowledge of the social world, all we can hope to do is to interpret it. Because of this a different epistemological approach is required which leads to the adoption of a methodology which differs from that taken by positivists (Dressman, 2008).

This reflects the point made earlier that a set of interrelationships can be identified within the practice of research whereby the ontological position adopted influences and shapes the epistemological position of the researcher and, subsequently, the methods of research adopted (Sarantakos, 2013). Typically, this leads to a distinction being drawn between two types of method: quantitative and qualitative. Although the emergence of a mixed-methods approach deconstructs the hypothetical barrier that separates the two methods it is worth offering a short of summary to illustrate what each refers to.

As has been indicated above, quantitative methods ultimately rest upon the hypothetico-deductive method epitomised by the scientific method. Within the social sciences this has led to a focus upon quantifying, or measuring differences between populations, especially where statistical significance can be established. Large-scale surveys have often been seen as valid ways of investigating social behaviour.

Qualitative methods have tended to eschew the large scale approach favoured by adherents of quantitative methods. The focus within qualitative studies has been to reveal and interpret practices and understandings through the researcher immersing themselves within a group, or by methods such as interviews and the analysis of texts. The aim is to interpret meanings by getting close to those being studied. This rejects the detached objectivity of positivism and recognises that the researcher is qualitatively similar to the subject. The interpretivist claim is that the adoption of this epistemological approach means that it is possible to offer a rich understanding of social life through qualitative methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008, Flick, 2009, Hennink et al., 2011). The focus of epistemological questions concern the ways in which the object of enquiry can be known and the extent to which we can generate valid knowledge about it. However, it would be misleading to see qualitative methods as homogenous. Rather than identifying a qualitative method that can be

juxtaposed with a quantitative method it is more accurate to comment upon qualitative methods each of which is influenced by a slightly different epistemological orientation.

In practice the tensions which exist between adherents of different methods of research, sees loose collective identities forming. Researchers in both the natural sciences and the social sciences tend to cluster around disciplines with sub-divisions creating groups that can be identified by methods. Further consideration of such tensions and their consequences will be considered later. This makes a consideration of communities of practice, as per Wenger (1999), relevant; for if a community of practice asserts the primacy of any particular research method it may be argued that such practices within that community may become taken for granted. In this way it may be seen that the consequences of this reflects what Kuhn (1996) has termed a paradigm.

#### **4.5 Paradigms**

For Kuhn a paradigm may be understood as an organising principle. This is used to make sense of what happens with respect to research in a way which establishes any particular method as valid (Plowright, 2011). In turn, the validity ascribed to one method then has the effect of invalidating alternative methods. This has implications both for how research is carried out and in respect of the validity of research findings. What is also evident is that paradigms may have the effect of restricting research (Plowright, 2011). Brew (2001) illustrates this. She recognises the importance of the relationship between communities of practice and the creation and/or acceptance of knowledge. She points out that not only have ideas about knowledge, and the methods used to generate knowledge, changed over time there may be on-going struggles which privilege some methods whilst reducing the impact of others. Such an idea is at the heart of what Gage (2007) has called "the paradigm wars". This refers to the tensions which exist between those engaged in quantitative and qualitative research wherein each constitutes a separate paradigm. Similarly, Pring (2000) argues that "researchers work within different paradigms". Both Gage and Pring are drawing on Kuhn's idea of a paradigm as an organising principle to make sense of what is happening in respect to educational research.

Kuhn is important because he demonstrates the social nature of scientific endeavours. Irrespective of the aims it can be argued that any social activity is underpinned by a belief in the validity of it. By this I mean that individuals must believe that an activity is essentially

worthwhile for them to pursue it. This translates into research and reiterates the ontological issues that were referred to earlier. Researchers will only seek to investigate something that they believe can be known. This is not necessarily something that can be known directly. For natural scientists there is the belief that the material world can be known, that there are physical realities which can be revealed. Similarly in considering the objects of this research it can be argued that there is a belief that assessment practices can reveal the extent of learning.

As has been established, what follows from an assertion that something can be known is the epistemological question of how. This entails a consideration of methods. Methods of research however do not exist separately from the social world for they are themselves socially constructed by researchers. It is acceptance of the results which methods produce which may lead to some approaches being adopted more readily than others. As a consequence it is possible to see how political discourse may favour particular epistemologies. Where this is associated with social power particular types of research will be privileged. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) illustrate this argument by focusing on the scientifically-based research movement in the USA with Hammersley (2007) pointing to the rise of evidence-based practice within the UK. In both cases, this has been used to support criticism that is aimed at qualitative methods on the grounds that the evidence produced by qualitative research does not hold up to scrutiny.

The logical inference of this argument regarding paradigms is that there is no cross-over between the quantitative and qualitative paradigms. Such an idea is attacked by proponents of a mixed-method approach such as Plowright (2011). Plowright draws upon the philosophical approach of pragmatism to argue that the goal of any research activities are findings that work. As such he establishes the argument that what researchers need to assess is not their underlying philosophical beliefs but rather a consideration of what they want to investigate and what they wish to know. From this perspective the idea that different methods of research constitute two separate paradigms is rejected in favour of a model of research methods which constitutes a continuum with different methods being adopted for different purposes. Within such a model each method has validity if it is capable of being fit for purpose.

Having set out the basic issues that are relevant to the philosophy of research it is now pertinent to establish how these translate into methods of educational research before considering how the mixed methods approach overcomes the problem. Following from Kuhn

it will be argued that educational researchers may share a broad focus in terms of their overall object but that they do not share a philosophical orientation. In particular there are some clear tensions emerging from methodological approaches.

#### **4.6 Educational research methods**

It has been argued that the tension between quantitative and qualitative methods is underpinned by a philosophical distinction relating to the ontological question of what can be known. Pring (2000, 2004) demonstrates how this philosophical distinction has often been used in a manner which artificially distances the two approaches. Such tensions will be explored before a consideration of developments in what is referred to as the mixed methods approach will be considered. For Plowright (2011) the mixed methods approach rejects the nomenclature of quantitative and qualitative methods as constituting a false dichotomy. For him, research methods can be established as occupying a place upon a continuum. Although the distinction may at first appear subtle, it is meaningful for it grants a freedom to researchers to use methods in a pragmatic way. This reflects what Pring (2000, 2004) is referring to when arguing that the dualism that appears to exist between the two methods is false.

In establishing that the dualism between quantitative and qualitative methods is false Pring identifies philosophical propositions as being the root cause, arguing that adherents of each method have traditionally pointed to irreconcilable differences in both ontology and epistemology. In respect of educational research, Pring (2000) offers a simplified version of the situation wherein quantitative researchers adopt forms of positivism, so constituting one position and qualitative researchers adopt interpretivist approaches to constitute an opposing position. As has been discussed earlier, positivism reflects a realist philosophy based upon the idea that the truth, in this case about educational issues, can be ascertained. Qualitative research rests upon an approach which sees education as qualitatively different from the material world because it is inextricably linked to social meanings. This gives rise to the idea that qualitative research gives access to the true meanings held by people in a way that quantitative research can never do. That said, this is not necessarily what quantitative researchers would be seeking to do. This reiterates the idea of a dichotomy as introduced earlier. It also returns us to Plowright's (2011) use of pragmatism in deciding what type of method to adopt.



Although quantitative research has played a significant part within social research, the work of Weber provides the impetus for the basis for the interpretive turn within social science. This may be seen as concerned with identifying meanings so as to understand how these shape behaviours. For Weber social research should be guided by an attempt to achieve 'verstehen' or empathetic understanding (Hughes et al., 1995). This has seen the ongoing development of qualitative methods of research, underpinned by the claim made by adherents of the interpretivist tradition that quantitative methods are not appropriate for studying social behaviour. Instead, they have used a variety of methods, from interviews and documentary analysis to ethnographical approaches affording direct observation of human behaviour. The aim for qualitative researchers is to facilitate an understanding of meanings which quantitative approaches are unable to provide.

This establishes an anti-positivist or interpretivist position. This can be seen as a reaction to the claims made by positivist researchers adopting a quantitative approach who argue that social science (educational research is presented here as a form of social science) should adopt the scientific method as found in natural science. Such an approach can be traced back to Durkheim's "Rules of Scientific Method" (Hughes et al., 1995) which can be seen as reifying positivist philosophy.

As such, Durkheim can be seen to be accepting the claims made by proponents of natural science. Natural scientists tend to present both ontology and epistemology as unproblematic. This is not to assert homogeneity within natural science in either its practice or philosophy but rather to establish an accommodation within natural science of procedural differences which does not exist within social science, as is demonstrated by Blaikie (2007). There is a general understanding that natural science uses the hypothetico-deductive method to establish a line of enquiry, which seeks to build up knowledge, but as Blaikie points out, though this is true of natural scientists adopting a deductivist approach it does not accurately reflect the inductivist origins of natural science.

Having sketched out the issues surrounding qualitative and quantitative approaches the chapter will now assess the validity of each approach before considering questions regarding the ability of a qualitative approach to provide generalizable theories. This will then be developed by considering the validity of using a case study as a method.

#### **4.7 Making generalisations from research**

In respect of research the issues of validity and generalizability are generally seen as being of significant importance. Because natural science begins with the argument that reality exists in so far as it is revealed by "laws" relating to the material world, both validity and generalizability are accepted as strong. This in turn, supports the concept of replicability and can be seen as underpinning confidence in generalising from research.

When adopting quantitative approaches within social research there is a generally held recognition that claims about validity will be based upon results drawn from a sample rather than the total population of any setting being studied. As such, significant efforts have been put into ways of sampling to ensure that the results from quantitative studies can be generalised, (Bryman, 1988). It is generally accepted that any researcher is unable to include an entire population within their research but this creates a paradox if they are seeking to generate universal knowledge which is based upon a manageable study that can only include a small proportion of any population. Sophisticated sampling techniques then become very important to this approach as weaknesses in generalisability would undermine the knowledge generated. It is worth considering however that when research is aimed at drawing out the meanings held by groups and individuals the experimental approach faces particular problems in that this method is rarely able to generate the same richness of data as is found in qualitative methods. Blaikie (2007) notes that this can be seen to lie within the dichotomy which exists between researchers who are observers of an investigation and those who are embedded within their research.

The strength of the experimental approach as used within natural science however lies in its apparent ability to generate cumulative, causal knowledge that is universal in its application. The idea of a body of knowledge which has universal validity is also very appealing to some within the Education community. This is evident in the calls made by Hargreaves (2007) for the refocusing of educational research so as to replicate the role of research within the medical profession. Hargreaves' calls for evidence-based practice though can be seen to rest upon a technical orientation which aims to reveal what works in teaching. This reflects the general moves towards evidence-based policy that has become ubiquitous since the late 1990's as was mentioned earlier.

#### 4.8 The Method adopted within this thesis: Case Study

It has been seen that differing theoretical and philosophical positions shape the method being adopted. Where studies are firmly discipline based this can be seen as unproblematic but Schofield (2007) argues that a growth in interdisciplinary research has muddled the research waters to the extent that much contemporary research is now rightfully considered as post-disciplinary. This is illustrated by the development of mixed-methods as an approach and in Plowright's (2011) call for an integrated methodology. So, whereas previously it was understood that theoretical orientation determined the choice of method it is now being argued that the choice of methodological approach is more accurately seen as being shaped by ontological questions regarding what can be known about any particular subject.

To illustrate further, this research is concerned with the meanings held by different stakeholders regarding assessment practices employed within HE. Assessment is a central part of educational practice and it can be argued that there is a reality, to an extent, in respect of learning. Drawing on Bhaskar, however, Plowright (2011) demonstrates how this reality is a transitive reality. It does not exist independently of the mind. The process of studying and/or learning will lead to some change but this is mind-dependant. Indeed, it may be argued that it is learning which makes changes in meanings as held by individuals possible. In arguing this I am defining learning as both a re-ordering of existing knowledge and understanding together with the development of new forms of knowledge and understanding. This fits with a constructivist view of reality (Plowright, 2011).

This thesis however is not concerned with assessing this learning *per se* but rather with assessment practices within an organisation and their relationship, or fit, with the epistemological position taken by different stakeholder groups within HE. As *practices* these are social in nature. Assessment practices within HE can be seen to rest upon positivist ideas regarding the reality of development but they constitute a social practice. Because the research is concerned with social practices arising out of meanings the choice of method must reflect an approach which will adequately reveal these meanings. This underpins the adoption of a qualitative method within this research.

Over time, teaching staff within HE have established assessment practices which they consider to be able to demonstrate learning. As such the perspectives of teaching staff within a Faculty are important because what they believe can be known about learning will shape how they assess it. It should be acknowledged though that the drivers that were

introduced in chapter 3 of the thesis have an influence upon assessment practices as they impact upon both what is considered to be appropriate and possible, and upon the context within which staff work. My argument is that learning within HE is complex. This makes the assessment of it a wicked problem (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Assessment practices may act to tame this problem but in doing so they may impoverish HE. In other words the task of assessing learning at the level of HE is inevitably complex; as a consequence of this assessment practices have developed in ways that tame the problem by reducing it to something that is manageable. In taming the problem though there is a possibility that significant aspects of the learning that has taken place are not recognised or rewarded. In turn this may fail to provide credit for original thinking on the part of students, something which HE as a sector purports to value.

In terms of its overall approach this thesis reflects a qualitative epistemology and adopts the case study method. This links to Weber's notion of 'verstehen' (Hughes et al., 1995) and reflects the attempt to understand things from the actors perspective in respect of the researchers stance. However, achieving this rests upon the possibility of having access to, and recognising, the reality that is constructed from shared meanings within the social world. Though researchers within this tradition typically acknowledge the need for value neutrality they may still experience difficulty in respect of objective observation. Such an issue is raised by Eisner (1992) who questions the possibility of establishing objective knowledge. Although the qualitative researcher aims to reveal social structures in respect of any social relationship we must recognise that the findings of such research may be contested, (Gage, 2007).

This concern may be overcome however by seeking to establish warrantable claims rather than purporting to have identified an objective truth (Plowright, 2011). Such an approach reflects arguments put forward by Bassey (2001, 1999) who considers that the validity of case studies within educational research do not rest upon the possibility of objective replicability. Instead, Bassey refers to the development of what he calls "fuzzy" generalisations. This means that the outcome of research based upon a case study is not the production of statistically assured predictions but rather an understanding that the particular circumstances of different situations, which deal with the same general concerns, are likely to reflect similar issues. As such, for Bassey (2001, 1999) "fuzzy" generalisations can contribute to cumulative knowledge.

#### **4.9 The validity of a case study**

This thesis recognises that criticisms of educational research, such as those offered by Hargreaves (2007), undermine the case study approach. Hargreaves argues that the adoption of qualitative methods within educational research has not been of practical use because of the inevitable nature of such research being small-scale and having problems in respect of generalisation. In adopting this position Hargreaves takes a rather narrow view of education that appears to be process driven and which ignores the wide range of factors which contribute to it. He does however raise the question of validity.

The concept of establishing validity can be seen as being of greater importance to qualitative research within the social sciences than is the case for scientific studies in the natural sciences. This is because qualitative research relies upon the ability of the researcher to interpret social data. For natural scientists the matter of validity in respect of their research is assured because the scientific method facilitates the replication of the research itself (Schofield, 2007). Replicability, however, is rarely possible in qualitative studies, especially those adopting a case study approach. This may be seen as underpinning the criticisms offered by Hargreaves as discussed above. Where replicability may be attempted in the analyses of field notes or other documentary materials it becomes evident that interpretation of such evidence reveals inconsistencies which may throw doubt on the claims being made. That said, for Dressman (2008) generalisation is present by implication as a consequence of descriptive terms which refer to social categories used by the researcher. This has relevance for this thesis.

This thesis is a study of assessment within one faculty within one university. However, the practice of assessment is common to all universities, and for various reasons, as have been introduced earlier, how assessment is practiced has many similarities. The thesis does not adopt the position that the findings from this case study will apply to all universities precisely, or even to all faculties within this university but it can be accepted that the issues which are revealed will be subject to broadly similar forces and follow broadly similar patterns as happens in other institutions. Although variations may exist between institutions and staff the central focus is applicable to all. In addressing assessment within one faculty it is conceivable that the findings will be of use in all institutions either as a tool to confirm practices or to support change. As such, this thesis can be seen as exploring the basis of such practices through the generating of fuzzy generalisations as per Bassey and warrantable claims as per Plowright, as introduced above.

Plowright (2011) draws attention to the advantages of the idea of warrantability over validity in respect of the claims that are made about data. In adopting this approach a number of caveats are pertinent. The research method must be justified as being appropriate for answering the research question. The inferences that are drawn from the data gathered must be evidenced. The theoretical basis of the research must be explicit. The policy conditions pertaining to the research should be made clear. Under these conditions the claims that are being made can be seen as warrantable to other similar settings. Similarly the research is not viewed as independent of social situations but is seen as existing within particular social contexts and conditions.

#### **4.10 Conclusion: Justifications for a case study:**

The major concern of this thesis is to establish the value of wicked and tame as per Rittel & Webber (1973) in relation to assessment practices. The conceptual framework of wicked and tame was introduced and explained in chapter 2. A problem that does not have a clear and unambiguous solution is wicked, compared to a tame problem where solutions are clear and unambiguous. My argument is that the process of assessment within HE is an epistemological practice which seeks to establish what students have learnt. Assessment is the method by which we assure ourselves that learning has taken place. This rests upon an ontological proposition which asserts that we can know what a student has learnt or the extent of their understanding. However, a major premise of HE is to promote understanding which is critical, creative and original. This indicates that HE is complex and accommodates the idea also that learning may be unexpected. As such, there is a need for an approach to assessment which can capture this.

Chapter 3 argued that the context of HE within contemporary society is one which is subject to a number of forces, some of which can be seen to promote practices which determine what is valid learning and which, in the case of learning outcomes, can have the effect of determining what will be learnt. If this is the case then it may be argued that this works against the qualities that are prized within HE such as creativity and originality and in doing so, has the effect of impoverishing HE. The thesis aims to consider the extent to which three stakeholder groups understand assessment practices on the basis that the epistemological positions held will influence how assessment is carried out.

As such the research is a case-study within one faculty. A set of questions will be established against which the epistemological positions of three stakeholder groups will be evaluated in respect of Rittel & Webber's (1973) concept of wicked and tame. Yin (2009) argues that there is value in case studies being an investigation into contemporary events which facilitate exploration, description and explanation. This will provide each of the three stakeholder groups' opportunities to explore, describe and explain how the ideas that are held about the role and purpose of assessment combine with understandings about the possibility of assessment.

## **Chapter 5: Carrying out the research**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Chapters 1 – 4 provide the basis for the main research question and the sub-research questions that were to be answered in completing the thesis. This includes a consideration of the theoretical framework which underpins the thesis and a consideration of the drivers which have been presented as shaping the landscape of HE, along with a justification for adopting a qualitative case study.

Having established in chapter 4 that the research would generate qualitative data through the use of individual interviews and a focus group this chapter provides an account of how the research was carried out. It begins with a discussion about the interview questions. The chapter then provides an explanation of how the three stakeholder groups were established by distinguishing the salient features of each before offering a discussion of how the data that were generated was handled. This includes a discussion of some of the practical issues involved in the research such as the use of audio recordings and the use of specialised software used in assisting with the analysis of qualitative data. The chapter ends by providing a discussion of the ethical issues that were relevant to the study.

### **5.2 The interviews**

The previous chapter discussed the methodological issues involved in carrying out this piece of research and provided justification for a case study employing interviews with three stakeholder groups. As part of this discussion the question of what can be known was considered. This relates to the usefulness of using interview questions in respect of generating data. It means that some thought must be given to the questions that will be asked so that the responses will provide data which are useful to the thesis. There is another aspect to carrying out research though which relates to ethics regarding the experience of the respondents and consent to use the data within the research. This ethical consideration will be discussed further in section 5.9 below.

As interviews were to be used, along with a focus group, a consideration of how I approach interviewing was seen as being necessary. An interview is not a natural situation and although the aim is to engage in conversation this is, to some extent, artificial. Both parties will be aware of that and have an awareness of certain expectations. Importantly the



interviewee will be aware that what they say will be used by the interviewer and this may impact upon what is said. As such, there are advantages to making the interview as natural as is possible. To assess the usefulness of the questions, and to assess my style as an interviewer, a role play was carried out with the supervisor cast in the position of interviewee. This was not recorded. The outcomes of this exercise were positive. I was able to demonstrate the ability to adopt a good style of interview technique, avoiding a mechanistic reading of the questions. This was accompanied by engaging the interviewee and maintaining eye-contact during the interview. I was aware of the importance of providing a positive interview experience recognising that the thesis would rest upon the value of the data that was to be gathered. As such, creating an environment wherein the respondent will talk freely and honestly can be seen as resting upon their comfort. As being interviewed is not a common experience for many people the process can create some pressure. This could inhibit their responses. Because of this it is important to put the respondent at ease and seek to establish a conversation about the issues.

Although my approach to interviewing was good, a couple of weaknesses were evident. Space had not been made at the beginning of the interview to establish the interviewees name and role. In the final version of the interview questions, this was added. In the role play interview the questions worked well and although there were only five questions, these did focus on the issues that are relevant to the thesis. It was noted that a typical mistake is to ask too much, or at least, to ask questions that are not really necessary for the thesis. I was aware of this and had set out to avoid such a situation arising.

However, it was also decided however that I should ask those academic staff that have quality responsibilities about any conflict that they experience within their role. This was added to the list to provide six main questions to be used within a pilot interview with the intention that it be reviewed after that. The interview questions take the form of open questions which address the thesis research questions but with scope for further questioning as appropriate as per the response. They are shown below with the main open questions in bold with sub-questions or prompts below these to be used where appropriate.

Interview questions as agreed.

Thank the interviewee for agreeing to be interviewed, inform them of confidentiality and their ability to withdraw their data. Ask them their name and job role.

- **What is assessment for?**  
is it to assess what has been learnt, or what can be done. Can we assess what can be done.  
how can we assess creativity, critical thinking or originality  
are the means by which we assess appropriate, what are the strengths and weaknesses of typical approaches.
- **What is the relationship between assessment and learning?**  
Does the assessment task foster deep understanding or surface learning  
Should the student have the capacity to shape the assessment task;
- **What is the use of Learning Outcomes?**  
Are Learning Outcomes used to guide planning and learning or facilitate accountability  
Do they focus on narrow or specific issues rather than broader conceptual issues  
can they assess the quality of a student's work
- **Who should determine what is appropriate as a form of assessment**  
should academic staff have flexibility in assessment  
should the university determine assessment  
should the State through bodies such as the QAA determine what is valid re assessment  
Does learning or accountability drive assessment;
- **How would you change assessment and why?**
- **Ask academics with quality responsibilities about any conflict with their role.**

### 5.3 Establishing the three stakeholder groups

The thesis is concerned with the understanding of assessment with respect to three stakeholder groups. These groups have been introduced previously as Teaching Staff, Quality Officers and Students. In determining these three groups the issue of semantics is evident as each designation carries with it particular meanings. There appears to be an obvious demarcation between teaching staff and students but the composition of each group is not unambiguous. For example, students are not homogenous. Although many

students within the department being studied are school leavers, a significant number are not. Many of these students are older and the experience detailed below, in the discussion of the pilot interview led to the selection of a focus group of six students ranging in age from early 20s to mid-40s.

Similarly, one might assume that a clear distinction can be drawn between Teaching Staff and Quality Officers but this is not as straight forward as it seems. Teaching Staff were designated as such to distinguish them in terms of their role as relevant to assessment. It also distinguishes them from academic staff who may not teach. It is possible, within universities, for academic staff to be focused on research or to engage in management and not to carry out any teaching. Similarly it is possible for staff with significant quality assurance responsibilities to have started as academics. All individuals designated as Teaching Staff within this research were primarily involved in undergraduate teaching. By the end of the research one did have a small teaching load but had previously been equivalent to other teaching staff during the writing of this thesis. Only one of the individuals designated as Quality Officers taught, but this was a very limited part of their role within the Faculty and "quality" features prominently in their title illustrating their responsibilities. All others were either wholly focused on matters relating to quality, for example, being employed within a Registry position rather than holding a faculty post, or held a senior position within the faculty wherein much of their work is concerned with quality matters across the faculty. One Quality Officer raised questions about how I had designated them pointing out that they considered that they were an academic. There is no suggestion that this is not the case but this designation was not considered accurate with respect to the research. As such, some Quality Officers included within this research may consider themselves to be academics and may, in previous years, have been engaged in substantial teaching. Whilst carrying out these interviews however their role has been one where matters relating to quality are prominent within their role.

#### **5. 4 Pilot interview**

Having established the composition of the three stakeholder groups a pilot interview was undertaken with a small number of students in a focus group format. Students were chosen for the pilot as a focus group was to be used and I wanted to make sure that this would work in respect of recording the data as well as using this to evaluate the questions. In this

focus group all of the students were recent school leavers. It did not work well for two reasons. The first reason was technical in that I videoed the activity but the sound recording was poor. My intention was that a video would be better in making sense of the proceedings when it came to transcribe the focus group. However, the sound was quite muffled and this led to a decision to carry out a further focus group which I would record using a voice recorder, placed on the table in meeting mode (designed for recording meetings with multiple respondents) in addition to the sound recording that would accompany the video recording. When I did this with a second focus group the video did prove useful in determining different speakers.

The second problem however was with respect to the responses provided. Although I cannot say that it was the ages of the students present within the focus group they were very limited in their responses. My initial concern was that students would not be able to provide useful data but I was also concerned as to the nature of the questions. In response to this I carried out another focus group made up from students on a course generally populated by older students. The second focus group comprising students whose age ranged from early 20s to mid-40s proved to be much more successful. The voice recorder captured their responses clearly and as a group they were much more forthcoming.

## **5.5 Generating the data**

The initial data was in the form of audio files (Windows Media Audio). These were produced by the use of a digital voice recorder (Olympus VN-711PC). Each interview was assigned a file number at the point of recording with each file then being stored in one of five folders on the recording device. They were then transferred to a PC and given a code number. A note was made of who the interviewee was for my own records.

Having decided that the research would employ an interview and focus group method it was recognised that this would provide significant amounts of qualitative data. With this in mind it was decided to use Nvivo software to aid the sorting and analysis of the data.

As a starting point I attended an introductory class (May 2014) which aimed to introduce new users to the use of Nvivo. I recognised the benefits of this software whilst taking part in the training class and determined that this would enable me to approach the data more efficiently. Typically, researchers using qualitative data have manually coded the transcripts

generated from taped interviews by annotating and manipulating physical texts. The use of computer software for this purpose provides a number of benefits, particularly in terms of flexibility. Although I only used Nvivo at quite a basic level I am of the opinion that it made the task of working with the data much easier and very much more organised.

As such the process followed was that interviews were held with teaching staff and quality officers at a location that was convenient for them and which was relatively free from outside interference. I say relatively as during two interviews interference did result from incoming telephone calls. Interviews were recorded as has been detailed, with each lasting around 40 – 50 minutes. The interviews were then transcribed in a simple form. As the aim was to investigate the epistemological position taken by each of the three stakeholder groups it was not felt necessary to adopt the level of transcription typically employed in research which has a socio-linguistic base. Freebody (2003) draws attention to the distinction that can be drawn between studies which are focused upon “talk” as the analytical focus and on studies wherein “talk” represents meanings, arguing that this distinction tends to reflect studies which are driven by linguistics compared to studies that are sociological. This study is not concerned with linguistics and therefore only a simple level of transcription was adopted.

So, whilst the first stage was in obtaining an audio recording of the interview the second stage was to convert this into text with which to work. As has been detailed, the audio files were transcribed to produce Microsoft Word files. This format was compatible with the computer systems which I employed and with Nvivo. The next step was to import the transcriptions, as Word documents, into Nvivo. It is from this point that the real analysis took place.

## **5.6 Analysis of the data**

Numerous texts on qualitative research promote the use of software within the analysis of qualitative data but invariably they all make it very clear that this is computer-aided analysis. It is not analysis by the computer. The different software available for the analysis of qualitative data can only aid the process; it does not carry out analysis *per se*. So, where Nvivo can make the organisation of data easier, the software itself cannot determine which elements of the data are selected or what is done with the data. This falls to the researcher.

The first task was to read the transcripts and identify parts of the text which corresponded to the research questions. From this a number of categories were established within which to organise those parts of the transcripts that were deemed to provide evidence which corresponded to the research questions. In Nvivo, the term given to these categories is nodes. The easiest way of creating a new node was found to be holding down the left mouse button and scrolling across a selection of text so as to highlight it and then clicking the right mouse button. This brings up a menu in a way that is analogous to the commands available when using Microsoft Word. On the menu is the opportunity to code the selected text. Choosing this option provides two further choices, to code the selected text at an existing node or to code it at a new node. Selecting code at a new node provides a pop-up box where the researcher can name a new node and provide a description of this node if desired.

By the end of the analysis 10 nodes had been designated: accountability, creativity, external influence, internationalisation, learning outcomes, marketization, multiple purposes of assessment, student's approach, and tame, or wicked epistemology. How this looks on screen when viewing nodes is shown below as image 1.

Image 1: Nvivo showing nodes

| Nodes                          | Sources | References | Created On       | Created By | Modified On      | Modified By |
|--------------------------------|---------|------------|------------------|------------|------------------|-------------|
| accountability                 | 0       | 0          | 16/09/2014 17:38 | R          | 16/11/2014 12:27 | R           |
| creativity                     | 2       | 2          | 03/10/2014 13:29 | R          | 07/11/2014 11:08 | R           |
| external influence             | 2       | 4          | 03/09/2014 10:37 | R          | 16/11/2014 11:18 | R           |
| internationalisation           | 0       | 0          | 16/11/2014 11:14 | R          | 16/11/2014 11:14 | R           |
| Learning Outcomes              | 5       | 5          | 03/05/2014 11:18 | R          | 16/11/2014 11:18 | R           |
| Marketisation                  | 1       | 2          | 08/09/2014 14:55 | R          | 07/11/2014 14:52 | R           |
| Multiple purpose of assessment | 9       | 12         | 03/09/2014 10:42 | R          | 19/11/2014 17:14 | R           |
| Student's approach             | 2       | 3          | 07/11/2014 17:40 | R          | 07/11/2014 19:06 | R           |
| tame                           | 0       | 0          | 17/10/2014 09:59 | R          | 17/10/2014 10:00 | R           |
| wicked epistemology            | 0       | 0          | 10/08/2014 17:01 | R          | 17/10/2014 09:50 | R           |

A feature of Nvivo that proved useful in this research is the ability to create sub-nodes. As the number of nodes started to increase and the data contained within them also increased

I started to think more about how the data was organised in total. If the intention is to make some comparisons between the three stakeholder groups it made sense to me to create new sub-nodes within which to store data from each of the three stakeholder groups. This would enable me to identify more quickly the evidence from each group when I was writing up the results and it would also enable me to see if one of the groups was saying more about any particular topic.

As this research aimed to evaluate the positions taken by three stakeholder groups it was these sub-nodes that were used as repositories for the text that had been selected to act as evidence in building up the argument. In each node a sub-node was created for Quality Officers, Teaching Staff and Students. Once selections are assigned to a node or sub-node Nvivo provides a tally of both the number of sources assigned to each and the number of “bits” of evidence, which Nvivo reports as references. This can be seen below as image 2.

Image 2: Nvivo showing nodes with sub-nodes

The screenshot shows the Nvivo software interface. On the left, a tree view displays the hierarchy of nodes: 'Nodes' (expanded), 'Relationships', and 'Node Hierarchy'. The main area shows a table with columns: Name, Sources, References, Created On, Created By, Modified On, and Modified By. The table lists various nodes and their associated sources and references.

| Name                           | Sources | References | Created On       | Created By | Modified On      | Modified By |
|--------------------------------|---------|------------|------------------|------------|------------------|-------------|
| Accountability                 | 0       | 0          | 10/09/2014 17:38 | R          | 16/11/2014 12:27 | R           |
| academic staff                 | 3       | 4          | 16/11/2014 12:26 | R          | 16/11/2014 12:27 | R           |
| quality officers               | 3       | 5          | 16/11/2014 12:26 | R          | 01/12/2014 09:08 | R           |
| students                       | 0       | 0          | 16/11/2014 12:26 | R          | 16/11/2014 12:26 | R           |
| creativity                     | 2       | 2          | 09/10/2014 13:29 | R          | 07/11/2014 11:08 | R           |
| academic staff                 | 0       | 0          | 18/11/2014 17:19 | R          | 18/11/2014 17:19 | R           |
| quality officers               | 1       | 1          | 18/11/2014 17:19 | R          | 25/11/2014 16:29 | R           |
| students                       | 0       | 0          | 18/11/2014 17:19 | R          | 18/11/2014 17:19 | R           |
| external influence             | 2       | 4          | 09/09/2014 10:37 | R          | 16/11/2014 11:18 | R           |
| quality officers               | 2       | 5          | 18/11/2014 17:38 | R          | 01/12/2014 09:30 | R           |
| students                       | 0       | 0          | 18/11/2014 17:38 | R          | 18/11/2014 17:38 | R           |
| teaching staff                 | 3       | 10         | 17/10/2014 12:13 | R          | 01/12/2014 10:31 | R           |
| internationalisation           | 0       | 10         | 16/11/2014 11:14 | R          | 16/11/2014 11:14 | R           |
| academic staff                 | 0       | 0          | 16/11/2014 11:14 | R          | 16/11/2014 11:14 | R           |
| quality officers               | 1       | 1          | 16/11/2014 11:15 | R          | 16/11/2014 11:33 | R           |
| students                       | 0       | 0          | 16/11/2014 11:15 | R          | 16/11/2014 11:15 | R           |
| Learning Outcomes              | 5       | 5          | 09/09/2014 11:18 | R          | 16/11/2014 11:18 | R           |
| quality officers               | 1       | 1          | 18/10/2014 09:36 | R          | 23/11/2014 13:44 | R           |
| students                       | 0       | 0          | 18/10/2014 09:36 | R          | 18/10/2014 09:36 | R           |
| teaching staff                 | 4       | 4          | 18/10/2014 09:37 | R          | 23/11/2014 13:44 | R           |
| Marketing                      | 1       | 2          | 08/09/2014 14:55 | R          | 07/11/2014 14:52 | R           |
| quality officers               | 1       | 1          | 17/10/2014 09:51 | R          | 26/11/2014 16:33 | R           |
| students                       | 0       | 0          | 17/10/2014 09:51 | R          | 17/10/2014 09:51 | R           |
| teaching staff                 | 4       | 6          | 17/10/2014 09:51 | R          | 07/11/2014 15:18 | R           |
| Multiple purpose of assessment | 9       | 12         | 09/09/2014 10:42 | R          | 19/11/2014 17:14 | R           |
| academic staff                 | 7       | 10         | 18/11/2014 17:15 | R          | 18/11/2014 17:17 | R           |
| quality officers               | 2       | 2          | 18/11/2014 17:15 | R          | 18/11/2014 17:16 | R           |
| students                       | 1       | 1          | 18/11/2014 17:15 | R          | 22/01/2015 08:30 | R           |
| Students approach              | 2       | 3          | 07/11/2014 17:40 | R          | 07/11/2014 16:06 | R           |
| time                           | 0       | 0          | 17/10/2014 09:59 | R          | 17/10/2014 10:00 | R           |
| teaching staff                 | 2       | 4          | 17/10/2014 10:00 | R          | 07/11/2014 14:48 | R           |
| linked epistemology            | 0       | 0          | 10/09/2014 17:01 | R          | 17/10/2014 09:50 | R           |
| quality officers               | 2       | 7          | 18/11/2014 17:23 | R          | 01/12/2014 09:20 | R           |
| students                       | 1       | 5          | 18/11/2014 17:23 | R          | 22/01/2015 17:29 | R           |
| teaching staff                 | 5       | 10         | 17/10/2014 09:49 | R          | 07/11/2014 14:48 | R           |

## 5.7 First steps with the raw data

Using Nvivo made it easier to organise and manipulate the data but it was my responsibility to provide the analysis. From teaching research methods to students over a number of years I am well aware that there is an easy, yet naive, approach which sees the students, in this

case me, thinking that the data will provide the evidence which supports the thesis. Reading the first transcript made it quite clear that this only happens as a consequence of some significant work on the part of the researcher. Although the interview questions had been agreed as sufficient for the thesis it soon became apparent that the researcher has little control over the responses that are provided and, ergo, the data. As I read the first few transcripts I did wonder if I had asked the right questions but the process of reading and rereading provided evidence that I had as is demonstrated below.

In my first attempt at making some sense of the data I had four transcripts. I read each whilst listening to the recording of the interview and corrected any errors. In doing this I got a feel for how the interviews had gone. In my second reading however, I started to make notes about what the respondent was saying and at this stage, started to appreciate that responses did address the issues that were related to the thesis, albeit not always explicitly. As such my early readings, taken from the first few transcripts in particular, demonstrated that there some emerging themes. These were listed as follows:

- Multiple purposes of assessment
- Control or influence over the process
- Learning Outcomes
- Accountability
- Possibility of assessment
- Techno-rationality
- Marketisation
- Wicked
- Tame
- Impoverishment

That there were a good number of themes evident within the data highlighted the complexity of organising the analysis. Bazely & Jackson (2013) make a pertinent point in noting that the first steps in analysis of the data sensitises the researcher. As the reader becomes sensitised to how respondents have answered the interview questions this influences, to an extent, what is being looked for. For example, based upon the preliminary work for the thesis I expected that learning outcomes would play a part in the overall discussion. The data from transcript 4 however, reveals, not only how staff recognise this, but also how concepts or themes exist as part of meta-concepts. So, the respondent in



transcript 4, as part of a discussion about learning outcomes, states "*They are reductionist.*" In turn this can be seen as influenced by more general aspects of the contemporary social world in that the learning outcome is the manifestation of a need to establish something that can be measured, which subsequently reflects the legacy or influence of positivism.

Upon determining that it would be beneficial to create sub-nodes for further, and more accurate, organisation of the data new sub-nodes were created for Quality Officers, Teaching Staff and Students. Following this sub-nodes were created under each of these for the purpose of collating data that appeared to be relevant. These were the sub-nodes that can be seen on image 3 below as Not meeting LOs, Problem with LOs, Use of LOs and value of LOs where LO represents learning outcomes. This led to the structure as illustrated below in image 3.

Image 3: levels of sub-nodes

The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface. The left sidebar shows the 'Nodes' pane with a hierarchical tree structure. The 'Learning Outcomes' node is expanded, revealing sub-nodes: 'Not meeting LOs', 'problem with LOs', 'use of LOs', and 'value of LOs'. The 'problem with LOs' node is selected. The bottom pane shows a search result for 'problem with LOs' with a coverage of 1.19%. The search results are displayed in a table with columns for 'Reference', 'Coverage', and 'Text'. The first reference is 'Reference 1 - 0.43% Coverage' and the second is 'Reference 2 - 0.75% Coverage'. The text for Reference 1 is 'you can have a piece of work that is very very good critical interesting yet because it doesn't meet a learning outcome it might get failed.'

| Name                           | Sources | References | Created On       | Created By | Modified On      | Modified By |
|--------------------------------|---------|------------|------------------|------------|------------------|-------------|
| Accountability                 | 2       | 2          | 10/09/2014 17:38 | R          | 09/10/2014 15:33 | R           |
| creativity                     | 1       | 1          | 03/10/2014 13:29 | R          | 03/10/2014 13:29 | R           |
| external influence             | 2       | 3          | 03/09/2014 10:37 | R          | 08/09/2014 15:22 | R           |
| Learning Outcomes              | 5       | 5          | 03/09/2014 11:18 | R          | 10/10/2014 09:16 | R           |
| quality officers               | 0       | 0          | 10/10/2014 09:36 | R          | 10/10/2014 09:36 | R           |
| Not meeting LOs                | 3       | 4          | 08/09/2014 14:57 | R          | 08/09/2014 15:39 | R           |
| problem with LOs               | 3       | 3          | 10/10/2014 09:17 | R          | 10/10/2014 09:21 | R           |
| use of LOs                     | 2       | 3          | 08/09/2014 14:56 | R          | 10/10/2014 09:20 | R           |
| value of LOs                   | 0       | 0          | 10/10/2014 09:16 | R          | 10/10/2014 09:16 | R           |
| students                       | 0       | 0          | 10/10/2014 09:38 | R          | 10/10/2014 09:38 | R           |
| Not meeting LOs                | 3       | 4          | 10/10/2014 09:55 | R          | 08/09/2014 15:39 | R           |
| problem with LOs               | 3       | 3          | 10/10/2014 09:56 | R          | 10/10/2014 09:21 | R           |
| use of LOs                     | 2       | 3          | 10/10/2014 09:56 | R          | 10/10/2014 09:20 | R           |
| value of LOs                   | 0       | 0          | 10/10/2014 09:56 | R          | 10/10/2014 09:16 | R           |
| teaching staff                 | 0       | 0          | 10/10/2014 09:37 | R          | 10/10/2014 09:37 | R           |
| Marketisation                  | 1       | 2          | 08/09/2014 14:55 | R          | 08/09/2014 15:24 | R           |
| Multiple purpose of assessment | 4       | 4          | 03/09/2014 10:42 | R          | 03/10/2014 13:11 | R           |
| Wicked epistemology            | 3       | 4          | 10/09/2014 17:01 | R          | 03/10/2014 13:26 | R           |

## **5.8 Some problems with computer-aided software**

It would be misleading to present the idea that using Nvivo was only ever something that was positive. It wasn't. Some issues caused concern and some mishaps were experienced. Early on in my use of Nvivo I had experienced difficulties in deleting data from a node and some of the steps involved, such as editing text were not as straight forward or as intuitive as I would have hoped. In spite of my initial difficulties in respect of deleting a reference within a code, this proved to be very easy. Finding out how to do this entailed a quick internet search for "how to delete a reference in Nvivo" which in turn provided a link to the Nvivo help site. The instructions were clear but the exercise emphasised how linguistics impact upon the carrying out of such work. My intention was to delete the reference. By that I meant to remove the reference in a manner that is analogous to deleting text within a Word document. For Nvivo, the correct term that applied to my intention was to uncode. Although the terms may share an outcome in respect of my aims the use of different terms created a degree of confusion on my part as they appeared to me to be different things.

In general though the use of Nvivo was found to be very useful in allowing the data to be manipulated and organised effectively. Problems were experienced but these were never insurmountable. What Nvivo did do was to provide a method of making sense of the raw data that had been generated and to put me in a good position from which to analyse this data to develop the argument that is presented within this thesis. As such chapter 6, which follows presents the results of the exercise described here together with an analysis of them.

## **5.9 Ethical considerations**

In carrying out research the question of ethics is also pertinent. Any researcher must adhere to ethical principles and as this research involved interviewing respondents ethical clearance was attained. This involved completing the ethical checklist presented at appendix A. Completion of this indicated that detailed clearance was not necessary but it was still necessary to be sensitive to ethics. As such, each respondent was provided with a consent form which outlined the scope of the research as well as their rights to withdraw at any time and to withdraw their responses at any time. This is provided at appendix B. All respondents being interviewed were asked to sign this form so as to give consent.

In respect of consent a further dimension to the question of what can be known was made explicit. Not simply what can be known, but what might any researcher be able to know. For example, one interviewee readily agreed to be interviewed but with two provisos: one, that they have the right to see the transcript of their interview and secondly, to read the completed thesis. Their concern in making this request was that they would be able to assess how the data had been used, and following from this, to give, or withhold, permission for its use, including the ability to request that any amendments be made to the data.

In itself, this may not have been unexpected. The data were to be used as a representation of the thoughts and feelings of respondents and there is little scope within an interview situation for any respondent to carefully consider what they say. As such, respondents may say things spontaneously which they would not have said, or would have said differently in a more measured situation wherein they had more time to choose their words. In addition this falls within the concerns of ethical issues. Some interviewees may say things that they could regret and which they might feel could cause embarrassment. This request emphasises the extent to which ontological and epistemological issues impact upon any research. What can be known, and how it can be known, rests upon the willingness of respondents to share information. Furthermore, it demonstrates that there may be aspects of any individuals lived world which remain inaccessible or inadmissible.

## Chapter 6: Results and Analysis

### 6.1 Introduction

As was stated within the introduction, my experience of working within academic and managerial roles within HE has demonstrated to me that teaching staff within HE adopt a particular epistemological perspective regarding their work. This rests upon the idea that what a student has learnt can be known if an appropriate method of assessment is adopted. As such, this epistemological perspective, in conjunction with other social drivers, shapes their practice, though there is recognition that, in making this claim, teaching staff are not free to assess as they please. They are often constrained by the policies and regulations of the institution that they work for. However, many teaching staff are involved in validations and revalidations of programmes, together with making modifications to programmes, and these processes provide opportunities for them to shape how assessment is carried out on any particular programme and in any particular institution. This interest led to me formulating a broad research area which was focused upon the different epistemological positions adopted by stakeholder groups within HE.

In respect of making a contribution to knowledge about HE, and so fulfilling the requirements of an Ed.D, the thesis applies the concept of wicked and tame as formulated by Rittel & Webber (1973). This conceptual approach has been detailed in chapter 2. The concept of wicked and tame emerged in the discipline of town planning and refers to the way in which the complexity of some situations means that what works in one situation may not necessarily work in another. For me this resonated with the work of HE. This is because throughout my working life I have encountered the argument that the distinction between HE and other levels of education is the concern to be original and creative. HE is concerned with generating new knowledge's and new understandings. As such I have had concerns about the use of assessment within HE. My concerns were that assessment within HE could be seen as failing to capture originality or creativity because, in essence, this reflected what Rittel & Webber would see as wickedity. Alongside this my concerns reflected my own understanding of how the consequence of developments within HE was an increasing tameness with respect to assessment practices.

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews carried out with three stakeholder groups: Teaching Staff, Quality Officers, and Students. It aims to illustrate how they understand assessment within HE and the practices that shape what happens within the

process of assessment with a view to revealing whether or not they take a position that we might see as wicked, or one that can be seen as tame.

Throughout the chapter respondents are referred to as T $n$  where T = transcript and  $n$  = numerical designation. This is then followed by TS for teaching staff, QO for Quality Officer and S for student. As students were interviewed using a focus group approach their responses are presented on the basis of individual students but they are not given an identifier.

## 6.2 Purpose of assessment

In opening the interviews the question “what is assessment for?” was asked. The aim of this was to get respondents to consider something which Garfinkel (1984) establishes as being reflexive. By this he refers to the ways within which some aspects of the social world are not questioned. Assessment can be seen as potentially reflexive because it is embedded in the practice of HE. In this way it is axiomatic in that no-one, engaged in HE in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, would be surprised to find assessment of student’s work is carried out. This refers to HE staff and students, who encounter assessment directly, but it also refers to outside agencies and other bodies such as parents, employers and governments. As such we may consider that the term, assessment, is mundane but this does not mean that how we understand assessment is shared.

For students the question “what is assessment for?” did initially, seem mundane. Their opening responses were that assessment was

*For you to know what that we’ve read or...*

*Like a learning curve for us really*

*Check that we’ve learnt what we’ve been talking about in lectures*

*Identify our strengths and our weaknesses as well so we know where to improve later on.*

*To show we’ve attained stages in the learning process.*

One of the advantages of holding a focus group is that the participants can be stimulated by the responses of others within the group and the format provides time for most to listen and

reflect upon the responses given by others. This provides a different experience when compared to individual interviews. This was evident within the student focus group as a follow-up response to those listed above noted that assessment:

*Is for you as well. I think it is to highlight the areas that maybe you, for you, know your teaching side as well. I think it is a two way, assessment is a two way thing.*

Although this student appeared to struggle to articulate their ideas it was clear that s/he understood that assessment does not just exist as something that is done to students. S/he was recognising, albeit not explicitly stating, that assessment can have multiple roles. The issue of multiple roles was also evident within other responses. T9 (QO) opened his/her response by defining types of assessment in relation to roles. In doing so s/he referred to the ways in which students, as peers, may be engaged in assessment but argued that this represents an informal form of assessment. When someone who has the duty of assessment within their job description carries out assessment then this can be seen as being more formal. This led T9 to note that:

*The set of things called assessment, which is a hierarchically embedded system by which particular forms of student work, or work by people called students, are assessed by people who, professionally, have assessment within their job description. So if students assess each other they do peer assessment which is a casual sort of thing or part of teaching that might not be counted as assessment.*

The idea that a process which includes what many within HE would see as the practice of formative assessment may not actually constitute assessment *per se* appears to be contradictory but the semantic basis of such a claim is revealed in what other respondents say when they refer to types of assessment as will be shown later. In summary, T9 is seeing assessment as the process which leads to the recording of a mark by the university which in turn has a real consequence for the student. S/he is not seeing practices which are often referred to as formative assessment as being assessment. For T9 such practices are teaching practices.

The matter of making judgements, which are then recorded, is also evident in responses provided by T11 (QO). In asking "What is assessment for?" T11 (QO) offers a focused view in stating that:

*We use assessment to judge or assess whether the students have met the module learning outcomes.*

However, other respondents consistently refer to assessment as having different purposes, though this can be seen within some of the interviews as being understood in a dual sense, and in others as assessment having multiple purposes.

T6 (TS) offers a somewhat blunt response by saying that:

*In a sense you are assessing them for two reasons.*

This is a response that is echoed, and given more meaning by T1 (QO):

*It will check if the students know or understand something or actually can do something to demonstrate it as well.*

In providing this response T1 merges three different possible outcomes: knowing, understanding, and being able to do something. In turn, a consideration of which of these is to be assessed, or which is privileged, will shape the assessment practice used. That each is different though was not lost on the students with one student noting:

*Some people are just very good at taking in information in aren't they and it can be like a memory thing can't it? You can do something but do you actually understand why you are doing it, there's a difference isn't there.*

T1 (QO) reflects the response given by T6 (TS) as offered above in talking about a dual role and also incorporates the comment from T9 (QO) regarding the recording of a formal judgement:

*I see assessment as being as having two purposes. Firstly as part of the learning process and then secondly going to some form of calculation that comes up with whether a student has passed and how well they have done and then that comes back to the first part.*

There is a degree of simplicity to these responses which is not consistent throughout the interviews. It may be considered that T1 reflects tameness within their response and in doing so also reflects the concerns of the thesis. Not all respondents offered such basic responses. Some of the answers are evidently shaped by the fact that staff within the case

study are working within an Education department and have academic backgrounds within the study of education. This is illustrated by T5 (TS) who notes:

*The problem is that if you've lectured on assessment you tend to end up with a taxonomy of reasons for assessment and that's at the heart of it really. You've got assessment for discrimination between students, you've got right to practice, you've got indicators to members of staff to what has been learnt and therefore what needs to be compensated for, it's for the formal recognition of qualifications, you know there is a long list of reasons for assessment.*

T5 appears to be drawing upon Bloom's taxonomy. Bloom's taxonomy was first presented in the 1950s as a ranking of intellectual or academic activities which range from knowledge to evaluation. When ranked they reflect how we may want students at different levels to be able to perform. So, gaining knowledge of a subject can be seen as a basic activity whereas being able to evaluate represents a higher level ability. This is a concept that is quite well known within education and is a concept which T8 (TS) explicitly refers to.

For teaching staff the idea of summative and formative assessment is a major feature of how assessment is used and what it is for. As such although T2 (TS) may be seen as reflecting a similarly narrow position, in identifying assessment as being for two purposes, s/he also raises the concept of summative and formative purposes:

*...that's the summative aspect of it if you like, we are making a judgement, we are summing up where they are, what they have done and then the second point about it is the formative aspect which is where we're sort of showing them how to improve the things they need to do to make it better, to improve their learning if you like. So I see it as a two pronged thing.*

A more nuanced understanding of the purpose of assessment is put forward by T3 (TS) who begins by stating that:

*Assessment can be for a lot of things. I think we can, at a rather mechanistic level, assess students in terms of competencies whether they are demonstrating certain competencies if we are working within an environment which has certain skills which students need to demonstrate, and by skills I'm really thinking of the more competency end of things.*



Again we see an understanding of the different abilities which students develop, as is reflected with Bloom's taxonomy, underpinning these comments. This is further evidenced as T3 goes on to say that:

*I might be assessing to see whether or not a student is able to demonstrate an ability to evaluate, to analyse, to synthesise, and that might be to evaluate two different perspectives on a given philosophical argument, it might be about synthesising a number of different theoretical frameworks and bringing them together and applying them to a given problem so there I feel I am moving beyond just the testing of knowledge, of understanding a given concept but then being able to apply my understanding of that knowledge perhaps to a new context*

T3 raises the idea that as part of the educational process we seek to develop new skills or refine existing skills. In doing so s/he recognises the fact that within HE there is often an understanding that we will go beyond just providing students with opportunities to acquire new knowledge but that we will be seeking to develop their abilities to do things with that knowledge. In one sense the developing of the ability to do something with knowledge reflects the creative aspects of HE because once students have this ability they become capable of generating insights into things in ways that cannot be predetermined or predicted.

It could be considered that this opens a range of possibilities in respect of what students do as a consequence of their education and suggests that if we are to foster such skills there must be the conditions in place within which students are able to explore their developing abilities in an environment where failures do not carry sanctions. This returns us to the concept of formative assessment that was considered previously. Typically, assessment, at all levels of education, has been dominated by summative assessment. Recent decades however have seen a significant growth in the use of formative assessment, often referred to as assessment for learning.

Such a concern has become important within HE and the university within which this research has been carried out has done much to encourage the development, and adoption, of formative assessment. This was considered briefly by T2 (TS), above, who noted that:

*The formative aspect which is where we're sort of showing them how to improve the things they need to do to make it better, to improve their learning if you like.*

The idea that assessment provides information to both the student and to staff though was highlighted earlier in this discussion as being obvious to students as well. This is evident within a number of the responses to the question “what is assessment for” and is illustrated in the response offered by T7 (TS). T7 begins by reiterating the multiple nature of assessment:

*For me assessment is about moving learning but that is in an environment where assessment is viewed quite differently by different parties...*

S/he develops the response though by referring explicitly to assessment as having a formative element:

*Although I recognise assessment as a summative activity for me as a practitioner it is a very formative process and I use formative assessment a lot in my practice.*

Although, from the interview data there is evidence to suggest that assessment is seen as having different purposes, there is also a subtle shift in some responses in that when asked “what is assessment for” respondents include, as part of their response, a comment upon who assessment is for as well. The concern that assessment is for teaching staff in that it provides them with guidance with respect to the progress of their students is encapsulated within the comments about formative assessment. This may not necessarily be explicit but a familiarity with the concept of formative assessment will be bound up with an understanding of how teaching staff can or should use this and an emphasis upon using formative assessment has been a feature of this university for a good few years.

What some respondents did though, was to offer a response which demonstrated an understanding of how parties that are external to the university, to a lesser or greater degree, have concerns with what happens within HE. This moves away from the role that assessment plays in respect of driving, or contributing to learning, and does more to rest upon the process whereby assessment leads to a judgement being made. This approach is evident where assessment is summative and where the assessment process provides a mark that is formally recorded by the university. This was elaborated upon by T4 (TS) who explored the use that employers make of the outcomes of summative assessment to some depth and contrasted the importance of the outcomes of summative assessment, the mark or classification, with a concern within academia with formative assessment:

*It seems to me that there is an element of conflict in thinking regarding assessment in HE. We are all mindful that assessment has a purpose to play in the minds of students and their parents and in terms of employers in terms of assessment for a job.*

As such T4 recognises that what we do within HE does not take place within a vacuum. Contemporary concerns such as the concept of employability do have an impact upon what we do and how students experience HE. For T4:

*We have a problem with it because in the background is all this business of the mark is what counts and as we know it's the first thing that the student looks for and they don't often or don't bother with the feedback results and the formative feedback that we give them.*

Whilst not necessarily accepting his/her comments regarding the argument that many students do not look at feedback, the importance of the mark is something that most teaching staff, and students, would recognise. Recent developments within undergraduate HE in particular may be seen as contributing to this. If students are effectively investing in their own education, as a consequence of the introduction of fees of up to £9000 each year alongside maintenance loans, it may not be surprising that the concept of returns enters considerations about the value of HE.

To say that students have only recently considered where a degree will get them in respect of the labour market is somewhat misleading though. It has long been seen that getting a degree enhances the possibility of securing a "good" job and so it can be argued that HE has always operated as a mechanism for enhancing employability. In doing so this raises the issue of the extent to which external influences do impact upon assessment within HE and as such, this will be explored in the following sections.

### **6.3 External influences**

Chapter 3 presented an argument to establish the various external influences upon HE, and in turn, on assessment within HE to a greater or lesser degree. These were presented as drivers within the dynamic landscape of HE. Within this thesis the six key drivers have been established as constituting:

1. The actions of academics aimed at controlling the scope of their work. This involves the definition of disciplines and curricula and may be seen as both epistemological and practical;
2. Actions by the State. Government actions which may be seen as having the aim of weakening the control that academics have. The concern to weaken the power of academics may be seen as a means to an end, in that within a global economy the role of HE becomes more important. As such there is a concern on the part of the Government that HE produces outputs which reflect political concerns;
3. Economic concerns. A further impetus for the Government to secure control over HE relates to economic drivers. HE is expensive and Governments have many demands put upon them. At the same time political ideologies will shape the views of Governments regarding how best to organise services;
4. New Public Management (NPM) is presented here as both a strategy employed by Governments to wrest control from professional groups and as constituting an ideological driver in itself in the way that it privileges the role and scope of management;
5. The general trends towards increasing standardisation as is typified by Weber's arguments relating to rationalisation and Ritzer's contemporary reworking of this into the concept of McDonaldization;
6. The place of internationalisation within UK HE.

This chapter considers the extent to which these drivers can be recognised within the data generated within interviews before concluding by considering the extent to which issues relating to wickedity can be seen. Most respondents recognised that HE does not exist within a vacuum and that there are varying influences upon it. They rarely identified the key drivers explicitly but recognition of change being caused by external forces was evident in most interviews. An understanding of change arising from internal power struggles was not referred to.

## **6.4 The State**

To illustrate the ways in which change, arising out of external forces, is recognised, comments from students are useful. The comments themselves arose out of a discussion of learning outcomes but although these will be discussed later, these comments are pertinent

to the idea that HE is shaped by external forces. In some ways the discussion regarding where learning outcomes come from proved a little challenging for students with the initial response being quite simple:

*you.*

Further probing though revealed that this didn't necessarily mean that students saw academic staff as writing or developing the learning outcomes themselves, as is illustrated in the following exchange:

*RC: But in terms of where they actually come from, you think they come from me?*

*S: Yeah but you'll probably get them from higher up won't you and then you write it in there every time you do that module.*

A little more probing led to me attempting to summarise their view on this matter:

*RC: So in one sense you feel that somebody in authority almost imposes them and says if this is the module you are learning these are the things, are the areas to look at.*

*S: Who told you what to teach because whoever told you what to teach is probably what wrote it.*

*S: It's like schools with the curriculum.*

*S: Its government then isn't it that has the say.*

This is not suggesting that Students are unambiguous about seeing the State shaping what happens within HE but it does indicate an understanding on their part that HE is not wholly independent and that things which shape the experience of HE may originate with external bodies who have power over HE in some way. In general the discussion with students tended not to consider the role of the State. They did not raise the sorts of concerns regarding the landscape of HE that was evident within the interviews carried out with either teaching staff or quality officers. This may not be surprising as students approach HE from a different position. This leads to them having different concerns.

T10 (QO) presented a general argument which rested upon the idea that as HE student numbers have grown, to the extent that HE now constitutes a mass system, the nature of students has changed:

*When we were at university we were 10% of the population, we were highly motivated, we worked damned hard to get there..... with 50% of the population coming through I cannot see how some students who struggle with higher education and bumble along the bottom would be enabled to succeed.*

What is important is that for T10, the changing nature of students has necessitated a different approach being taken by HEIs. His/her argument made an explicit juxtaposition between their own experiences as part of a minority entering HE alongside experiences within the University of Cambridge which was presented as taking a very relaxed approach to what students learnt, with contemporary experiences of mass HE participation which s/he sees as requiring a more structured, some might say rigid, approach.

This rested on the idea that a degree of homogeneity existed amongst the minority that participated in HE up to the early 1980s. For T10, students entering HE prior to the expansion of HE in the 1980s were seen as sharing a collective passion for learning. The argument evident within T10s response is that this collective passion for learning is not typical within the contemporary student body.

*...when I was working in Cambridge, ....what I felt in terms of that environment was there was a creativity, a drive, a thirst for knowledge and aspiration. A real student driven endeavour and commitment to learning and people I know who graduated from Cambridge with PhDs are the people who have that real drive to want to know more, they are always asking the next question they are never content to sit back and there is something about that environment where the culture was: we will we just want to do this because it has got intrinsic value to us; and for me the big difference between that culture and a standard HE culture with the variety of students that we get is that students don't come in with that motivation and drive and that instinct.*

At first reading T10s argument comes across as somewhat simplistic and potentially elitist in that there is the basis for an argument against mass participation based upon student orientation towards learning. This is an argument that overlooks the Dearing expansion of HE in the early 1960s also. Further reading however demonstrates that T10 also considers that part of this change arises out of other, external, factors in respect of how students experience education before entering HE and how this impacts upon what type of orientation they have to their studies. T10 is not just saying that orientation to study is

solely a personal attribute. What is evident from T10's response is that how students experience education prior to HE can shape how they approach education as a whole. This is extrinsic to the student. This idea was reflected in a student response as part of a discussion about the importance of marks and the concern that some students only check the mark and ignore the feedback:

*All through your education it's been based on what marks you get isn't it so you don't know any different really.*

For this student the attitude of students in general towards their education is being attributed to external forces which shape the context of their educational experiences. This mirrors the concerns raised by T10. In this way, an intrinsic motivation to do well is undermined by a focus on the mark. As such it could be argued that for some students the outcomes of the learning process overshadow learning itself. T10 makes it very clear that much of the reason for a lack of passion for learning within contemporary students (this is not to accept that this claim has any validity) has been a consequence of changes that resulted from politically motivated policies within the UK education system as a whole which were instigated by the 1988 Education Reform Act:

*The motivation isn't intrinsic, the motivation, we are having to put that in and that says a lot about our education system right through the system that that creativity you see in the foundation stage and certainly in the 1980s very creative curriculum..... we've lost that ability to inspire and engage and really enthuse and get people motivated so that they have got their intrinsic drive to keep it going.*

In saying that "we've lost that ability to inspire and engage" T10 is referring to society and the educational system experienced before entering HE shapes students. This is seen in his/her comments regarding how the creative curriculum of the 1980s was lost, replaced as it was by a focus upon testing as encapsulated within the Educational Reform Act, 1988:

*The whole context of education has changed and the whole, the drive from, in the 80s primary education was going down such an exciting route... that real exciting engagement with children that inspired them, it was creative with the best teachers it was the sort of environment where they learnt to thrive and they learnt to learn and by the implementation of the national curriculum in 1988 we stopped teaching them how to learn, we stopped them working in groups, by the 90s they were all sitting in rows, they weren't working collaboratively. That generation is working its*

*way through and so what happens when they are 4 therefore is going to affect what happens when they are 18.*

This then contributes to the experiences that students have within contemporary HE as HEIs respond to both increased student numbers and a different type of student entering HE. In turn this necessitates a different approach being taken. For T10 contemporary HEIs have to approach students differently if they are going to see students being successful:

*...we end up almost going to the bottom line of, in order to get them through we end up with these stages of little hoops that they have to jump through or bars that they have to jump over and we have constrained the curriculum almost because we're having to.*

As such T10 demonstrates support for the argument that political drivers impact upon the experience of HE. In this case a change of focus within education prior to HE has reified an approach whereby acquiring the means to pass forms of assessment have come to dominate the student experience of education. This then becomes manifest as the belief that there is an answer and that success is bound up with providing the right answer. Such an idea is evident within comments provided by T2 (TS):

*T2: I think in that sense we still have that freedom and we still have the openness and the ability to do things but you are getting students who come through a culture of feed me and if you don't feed them...*

*RC: And I'm sure you have had students who in a way want you to tell them what the answer is that they will come up with*

*T2: Oh yeah, just tell me what I need to put*

This reflects anecdotal evidence that I hear a lot, and recognise personally. The changes that T10 (QO) referred to regarding what happens within education prior to HE can be seen as shaping the ways in which students have come to understand education. The target culture that has emerged since the Educational Reform Act, 1988 and which can be seen as manifest within FE Colleges, where student failure can result in a reduction in funding, can be said to have contributed to an educational system which privileges achievement as measured by successful completion of programmes or awards rather than in terms of development. The consequence of this is a student body wherein each individual student has had around 15 years of focusing upon providing correct answers. To be faced with a HE



system that can accommodate flexibility and which requires students to take ownership of their work can be daunting for some. As such, when considering how the State impacts upon HE it is pertinent to consider that it may do directly by imposing regulatory bodies such as the QAA for HE, or changing funding mechanisms; but it can also do so indirectly by changing the institutions which feed into HE. T2 (TS) said a lot about how the State had changed the ways in which schools work arguing:

*So the State, you have State defined teachers and you have State defined knowledge so if you think about it teachers are trained within a certain rhetoric a certain rubric, they have to meet standards, standards that are defined by the State, the State defines what it is they will learn and how they will learn it. So all of that is a, you know a pre-determined teacher, I can't remember the phrase they use but they are set like that, you then have pre-determined knowledge because the State defines what it is you are going to learn.*

Because his/her focus was on schools I asked "And is that coming into HE?" the response from T2 was somewhat pessimistic:

*Well it looks like it doesn't it? I mean you know the way things are going that you know when you think about what we do everything it's on Moodle (the virtual learning environment used within the university where the research was carried out), you transfer Moodle year after year you may be revising it a little bit possibly not who knows and it then becomes set down. That's a set pattern and each week we will all learn this, this is what we are going to do and we are getting into that pattern.*

T2s comments about how the VLE is used are interesting as s/he had also talked about the spread of surveillance. His/her concerns about the VLE being used as a system for surveillance is not an isolated claim within the university but it demonstrates the ways in which respondents could shift from a concern with the actions of the State to a concern about the actions of the university. Although different the common thread is that each is demonstrating action which is seen to be diluting the power which academics have over their work. The concerns about surveillance were echoed somewhat in the comments from T6 (TS) who associated increased surveillance with a decreased level of trust in academic staff:

*I think it's accountability and I think it's surveillance, I think it's people who use what I would call the pseudo-science of quality assurance who want to produce everything into uniformed boxes.*

The issue of accountability will be discussed in the following section. In respect of the aims of such actions T6 sees control as a driving force, something which s/he went on to discuss in further detail:

*I think it's about not trusting the profession and I think it's about not trusting the academic body and I think it's about State control and it's about control of how they would like knowledge to be delivered and what they would like to be assessed and I think it's about control but I don't think it's a conscious conspiratorial thing that the State wants to control revolutionary thought I think it's the natural tendency of the State to try and interfere in people's lives.*

Although T6 does not elaborate as to why the State would naturally try to interfere in people's lives it would not be wrong to recognise that the State, particularly the Government, does have certain agendas and aims. Such an idea was reflected in comments that T5 (TS) made:

*If we had a State driven system I think that would be absolutely diabolical, absolutely disastrous. You could imagine a government hooked on employability and 20% of the marks would have to be on employability for example.*

In T5s comments we see recognition of the tensions that exist between the State and HE. By considering T5 with T6 though we also see that the State is not necessarily driven to seek to acquire greater power over academics work for a solitary or even a simple reason. The State may have different concerns each of which contributes something to an overall action aimed at increasing power. How the State may achieve that is considered in the section which follows.

## **6.5 New Public Management**

Chapter 3 introduced the concept that is generally referred to as New Public Management (NPM) although with the proviso that this is not, in itself, an uncontested concept and that it is not a consistent or unitary approach or strategy. NPM then, incorporates a range of

approaches and strategies which have the aim of exerting levels of control over individuals who work within public services. Within the range of responses gathered NPM may be seen within concerns that were explored in respect of accountability as this often shapes how teaching staff perceive what they do in respect of assessment. For students however, accountability was not an issue.

Although I tried to develop a discussion on accountability it was evident that students did not really understand the concept as it applies to HE. For them, issues of accountability led to discussions about whether or not limits on the length of assignments were necessary with most thinking that they were.

As with other issues the idea of accountability is not in itself unambiguous. Accountability is not just some abstract concept, it exists as part of a relationship with one or more parties as demonstrated in responses. To who or what we are accountable is a relevant point. T11 (QO) makes this clear when s/he asks the question of me:

*accountability to whom to students or to our funding?*

before also acknowledging that the QAA also has a part to play:

*the QAA and HEFCE... because we have to be accountable don't we, that we are doing things in a quality way that we get that kind of stamp of approval.*

From a Quality Officer perspective the recognition of accountability to multiple parties is not something which is unusual. Accountability to multiple parties is part of HE in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and recognises that our relationships with other parties takes different forms. In being questioned as to the role of quality though and whether or not accountability or planning is more important T11 (QO) is clear:

*accountability, because we've got to kind of make sure that the students programmes are written to appropriate levels so that the level of learning is appropriate.*

Talking about accountability generated some concerns for other respondents. T5 (TS) had expressed some concerns over the term accountability arguing that:

*When I think of accountability I think of having to answer for something whereas I think if we said measurement rather than learning...*

to which I prompted ...*or standards?* T5's initial response to the introduction of the term standards was positive:

*Yes, I can if we said standards or measurement I will be a lot happier than if we said accountability.*

However, although T5 expressed that this was a more appropriate term, and one which s/he would be happy to accept within their professional responsibilities his/her reasoning for this returned to what amounted to a reluctance to recognise that a process of accountability was evident and that it did mean that in some way s/he could be held accountable for the work that s/he undertook with students. This was evident in how s/he added:

*Because it almost seems like I'm being held to account for my students for what I've done and you know and so on, which of course we are.*

It may be that T5 was recognising that a tension existed with respect to control over his/her work and that s/he was acknowledging that s/he did not have freedom in respect of his/her work and that successful execution of his/her work entailed a degree of self-discipline but where someone or some office could, in some way, challenge his/her work and hold him/her accountable.

Part of the general approach to establishing NPM within public sector bodies has been the setting of targets. One of the Quality Officers (T10), in responding to the first question, what is assessment for, responded in a way that does reflect an element of NPM in how certain agendas come to establish standards or benchmarks. As such s/he noted that the outcomes of undertaking HE is the development of particular skills or attributes:

*Which I suppose is reflected in what used to be the key skills agenda which is looking like it is moving into graduate attributes.*

From a NPM perspective establishing identifiable and measurable outcomes is a precursor to setting targets and although T10 never explicitly refers to NPM it can be seen that s/he recognises issues that may be associated with it. Similarly T11 (QO) recognised that there are external influences upon HE. In a discussion about how students understood learning outcomes I noted that students saw learning outcomes as coming from the Government. My response was to comment that they did not see that it is academics that write learning outcomes. In considering that academics, when writing modules and programmes, specify what the learning outcomes will be, T11 pointed out that this is not done in a vacuum and

that teaching staff are minded to refer back to benchmarks and that these benchmarks originate from external sources:

*The person writing the programme has to take into account the subject's benchmarks so he should be aligning to those, the subject benchmarks are imposed on the academic by the QAA.*

## **6.6 Standardisation: learning outcomes**

There have been some strong arguments presented towards the end of the twentieth century which draw upon the validity of Weber's claims that social developments will increasingly involve elements of standardisation. In HE this can be seen in forms of organisation with respect to semesterisation, and in the use of learning outcomes. A discussion of learning outcomes was incorporated in all interviews and provides an insight into a varied response from respondents.

Learning outcomes appear to be ubiquitous within HE and, as has been discussed in chapter 3, have some bearing upon ideas relating to assessment when we approach it through the lens of wicked and tame. For many of us working within HE it may be hard to remember a time before learning outcomes or to be able to pin a date upon the time when they were first introduced. Their origins have a long history but by the 21<sup>st</sup> century they were in common use within the UK. Their use can be seen to facilitate global developments such as the Bologna agreement within Europe, which aimed to facilitate the movement of European students through the standardisation of different national approaches to HE (Adam, 2004). From the perspective of the Bologna agreement learning outcomes have value if they contribute to the movement of students across national borders. This aim, however, inevitably impacts upon teaching within HE and, as has been argued, has an impact upon assessment practices.

As with responses to questions about the purposes of assessment, where respondents recognised that there are multiple purposes, so questions about learning outcomes reveal that they are not seen in a uniform manner. As such, it can be suggested that there are two basic understandings of learning outcomes, a soft understanding wherein they are seen as guiding practice and development, and a hard understanding, where they are seen as constraining and possibly counter-productive. The latter view reflects the work of Hussey

and Smith (2008, 2010) who express concerns about the ways in which learning outcomes impact upon academic work and learning. The soft view, the idea that learning outcomes exist as a guide, is reflected within each stakeholder group. As one quality officer (T1) said:

*They are making explicit what everyone assumes was kind of in the ether and has generally been absorbed by osmosis before.*

This is reflected in comments from T11 (QO) who also commented about the use of learning outcomes in providing a guide for students in a manner that aids them in demonstrating what they can do or what they have learnt:

*Learning outcomes presumably give them a framework within, a kind of a basic idea of what they are being asked to demonstrate and where they are being asked to sort of direct the learning.*

T2, a member of teaching staff is much more explicit in respect of how s/he uses learning outcomes:

*When I'm marking I use them as guides*

The idea that learning outcomes operate as a guide was also reflected in responses from students, two of which noted:

*Yeah, I think look at it as a guide as to what has to be in the assignment. You use your assignment to show things in the outcomes, and I suppose without them how would you even know where to begin to start because I probably wouldn't have done. Like you say it gives you a; it could possibly be all over if you didn't have some sort of guideline.*

However, although one student appeared to be supporting this view when I suggested that, as students, they were seeing learning outcomes as guides rather than something which must be demonstrated as having been met within an assignment the same student corrected themselves:

*I use them as like pointers so I will write like maybe a paragraph on each learning outcome and then fit everything else in around it. Maybe not each of them because they don't all apply or they do but not all to what my assignment is going to be on...  
...Well no, maybe I worded that wrong; it has to be, you have to show that you know what's in the outcomes in your assignment.*

There is also an understanding revealed in the responses from one member of teaching staff (T3) that in using learning outcomes as part of the planning process, we provide a degree of protection to students by reducing the scope of individual members of teaching staff to restrict the focus of their teaching, and the assessment of student's learning to issues that are of interest to them:

*In some sense it provides a framework. It provides an argument which I heard given years ago about learning outcomes in that it moves away from the tendency that there had been, perhaps still is, in Higher Education, for learning to be determined by the individual professors own little discreet and rather bizarre area of research into something that is more coherent... ... and there is something to be said for that.*

It is noticeable that T3 sees restricting the autonomy of individual academics so as to provide a better student experience with regards to their overall learning and development as legitimate and understandable. This comment provides a link to one of the drivers outlined within chapter 3, and detailed above, in that this reflects a shift in control over what happens within the university. T3s response recognises that without a planning process, typically understood as validation within HE, individual members of staff could restrict what they teach to what they were interested in at any particular time. However, presenting the use of learning outcomes as a consequence of struggles over power suggests an element of determination which may not be as simple as it sounds. There is a danger that we see this as indicative of power being shifted away from the academic and towards the managers of the university but, as T4 (TS) demonstrates; the process may also serve to shift power towards the student.

*T4 we shoot ourselves in the foot in terms of having learning outcomes*

*RC Why? How do you mean we shoot ourselves in the foot*

*T4 Well we set ourselves up to be asked well if you've said there is a learning outcome then it's your job (it's my job) to make sure I understand how and know what I have to do to achieve that learning outcome therefore have I got it right*

T4 was talking in general about the perception that students tend to adopt a rather utilitarian and/or positivist view towards assessment tasks. It is not unusual for teaching staff to see students as perceiving that there is a perfect answer or response corresponding to any assignment task. This is something that I have encountered as students question me

to ascertain the extent to which their assessed work represents the correct thing to do and is something that was commented upon previously. This will be explored further below in respect of how previous experiences of education have moulded students into a particular approach to their studies. As part of this there is the corresponding idea that marks or grades exist within the markers gift rather than being a judgement of what the student has achieved or done. In addition to this though T4 demonstrates an understanding of how learning outcomes exist within a particular framework within which assessment takes place. S/he comments that:

*The learning outcomes fit, seems to me, quite tightly within the concepts of summative assessment and I suppose there are justifiable requirements that if we are in the business of, and the summative trumps everything else despite all the rhetoric, if we are in the business of engaging in summative assessment and the students are primarily interested in summative assessment then there has to be transparency about the basis on which the judgement is made, hence the learning outcomes.*

This claim rests upon the idea that learning outcomes do provide transparency but this is a claim that is not as straight forward in practice as it seems. T11 (QO) recognises this. At the beginning of this chapter it was noted that T11 claimed that assessment exists to make a judgement about the learning outcomes. As such this suggests that T11 is accepting of learning outcomes in an uncritical way. S/he does not. Consider how T11 responds to the question posed below regarding knowing what a student has learnt.

*RC: Can we accurately know what the student has learnt?*

*T11: Not accurately no because again it's what the student chooses to share of their learning and doesn't it depend on, it shouldn't depend on who marks but there is an element of, you just said if someone gives, I'm sure, gives kind of a 60 and someone gives a 50 if ever that happens the perception of what that student is demonstrating in their learning is different isn't it.*

For T11, learning outcomes are subject to interpretation and it is the matter of interpretation which may give rise to discrepancies:

*Is that about the tutor perception? I mean how can a tutor mark so differently when it's the same piece of work? Are they seeing different things in there?*



In spite of this, T11 is not rejecting the use of learning outcomes. S/he also recognises that in effect learning outcomes only really work as a threshold statement. They do not work to distinguish between levels of performance and that this is where assessment comes in:

*Learning outcomes, are the minimum of what the student needs to demonstrate, and it's whether we recognise that that's the minimum and what is over and above the learning outcomes, or are you just, is that where the banded mark comes in?*

T5 (TS) provides lots of evidence to demonstrate two issues relating to learning outcomes: on one hand there is a perceived value to them, and on the other is a recognition that their use may lead us into making decisions that in other circumstances, i.e. if learning outcomes were not being used, we would not make. S/he draws upon recent work that s/he has been engaged in whilst in Kenya and talks about the way in which Kenyan educationalists, having come to the use of learning outcomes only within the last decade, are very enthusiastic about them.

*I can see why they think it's wonderful because previously all their modules were just lists, like you know social inequality, fairness, equity, you know, as long as you covered those you had done it and actually specifying what you expect someone to do at what area at what level is superficially desirable.*

This may be seen as confirming the point made above by T1 (QO) that learning outcomes make "explicit what everyone assumes was kind of in the ether and has generally been absorbed by osmosis before". As such it would appear quite reasonable for their use to be recommended on the grounds that they provide an effective learning experience for students. Such an argument is reflected in what T5 is referring to when he talks about how some members of staff use them to provide an explicit framework when they are marking. As such he referred by name to another member of staff who he presents as:

*Very good when s/he is marking, I don't know whether you have seen the way s/he marks but; learning outcome 1 was very well met because, learning outcome 2 wasn't because...*

Indeed, it would be very hard to argue against learning outcomes if they did ensure that what was happening within teaching was effective. In the example just provided, giving feedback that specifically refers to how a student has met or addressed each learning outcome provides a framework for their performance overall and could be seen as a way in

which both summative and formative functions, as discussed above, are provided for. However, T5 also recognises that such an approach may be less effective than it first seems:

*There now seems to be a counter argument that atomising the learning into learning outcomes even if you have only got 3 or 4 actually militates against long term development in learning and actually has negative consequences... ..because it takes away a lot of the precision and the apparent ability of the current system to identify whether learning has taken place.*

My response to this was to question him/her further and to suggest perhaps that it was the opposite of what s/he was claiming. It is not that precision is being taken away by using this approach, rather, this approach becomes too precise and that the consequence is that the process becomes reductionist. His/her answer to this was to agree and to offer an example taken from a module that s/he had taught jointly with another member of staff where they:

*...failed about 10 people, 5 people because they hadn't met one of the learning outcomes. One of the learning outcomes was about marketization and globalization, it wasn't about they had done globalization and marketization very well but well it was about... ..satisfactorily meeting the outcomes. If they had missed that bit out they failed, which I don't have a problem with but you could see what I'm saying.*

In response to this example I suggested that in actuality the students who had failed could have done a very good paper but had been failed for omitting to cover a particular aspect of the task:

*Yes and one or two of them did actually, one or two of them wrote pretty well but they just missed that bit off, but it was a learning outcome.*

In this discussion T5 makes clear that because the module that is being assessed has specific learning outcomes that are to be assessed, the absence of a response to any learning outcome is grounds for failing, even when the assignment as a whole could be very good in all other respects. The possibility that a student can fail an assignment which is, in all other respects good, can be presented as a major failing with learning outcomes. This occurs when they are used in a way that determines what must be learnt in a very specific way rather than guiding learning and where the learning outcomes are unable to accommodate creativity. This situation reflects the uncritical adoption of a device that can be seen to be advantageous in the planning stage but which can have real consequences for

students learning. Failing students who had not demonstrated meeting a particular learning outcome was not a universally accepted practice. Other teaching staff were well aware of the limitations of learning outcomes with most making comments that could be seen as critical of either how they are used or what they do:

*They narrow and restrict if you slavishly follow them and if you put them at the forefront of everything then they restrict by the very nature as my history teacher used to say the more you define something the more you restrict it so by keeping it very narrow and assuming those particular things are what you are looking for by its very nature you are going to guide the students into some sort of common type thing and it doesn't allow them to move outside of that, T2 (TS).*

*Learning outcomes can be very restrictive, T3 (TS).*

*They are reductionist, they serve to be reductionist, T4 (TS).*

*I think for a teacher it's quite constraining, when you are constructing your lessons and you are making sure you are meeting the learning outcomes how you are measuring them ..... learning outcomes in a sense undermine creativity and in validations I think people are focused on learning outcomes rather than the content of modules ..... they are reductionist, T6 (TS).*

The consequence for students of not meeting one of the learning outcomes is a key area wherein individual approaches can provide different responses. Where T5 (TS) is very clear that not demonstrating that any particular learning outcome has been met is grounds for failure, T2 (TS) takes a different approach:

*I'm quite happy if someone produces something which is a really good piece of work which shows criticality, originality and all that and if they haven't managed to meet one of the learning outcomes personally that wouldn't bother me too much.*

It may be, as T2 claims, that s/he is not bothered when a student produces a good assignment but fails to demonstrate that all learning outcomes being assessed are met, but the extent to which s/he is able to accommodate such a sentiment within the constraints of what s/he has said is a quite constraining system is questionable. As quality assurance systems such as moderation and consideration of work by the External Examiner are in place, the extent to which T2 can overlook a learning outcome not being met and justify the mark that they have awarded is questionable. A further question may then be what does T2

do if two learning outcomes have not been met? At what point does T2 consider not meeting outcomes to be unsatisfactory?

Not meeting one or more learning outcomes clearly poses problems within a system where they are used. It is not the only problematic issue related to them. The extent to which learning outcomes are equally weighted can be seen to reflect the issue of when not meeting one learning outcome is evident. Should all learning outcomes be met equally by the student and do all learning outcomes carry equal weight? This is clearly something that some members of staff have given some consideration to with T5 (TS) commenting upon concerns that s/he has that learning outcomes may not be equal with respect to the opportunities for achieving high marks:

*Obviously I am alert to what they need to know and what they need to be able to do but I don't like the idea of being; will they be able to be score highly on learning outcome 1 or learning outcome 2.*

T5 demonstrates that how we plan assessment tasks is important because this can result in either a fragmented assessment experience or, on the contrary, a holistic and coherent experience:

*I think some of the best tasks anyway combine the learning outcomes.*

The comments above point to two things which are relevant to this thesis. Firstly, that it is possible for a student to produce a piece of work that is intrinsically good but which is awarded a fail mark on the grounds of not meeting a learning outcome. Secondly, that the use of learning outcomes may produce a fragmented assessment experience. A further issue is also pertinent. That the use of learning outcomes can act against the development, or at least of the reward, of creativity or originality. This is evident in responses from two Quality Officers. For example, T9 comments:

*I think setting out intended learning outcomes themselves tend to militate against assessing originality and creativity because one of the obvious ways of being original and creative is to go outside the remit of the intended learning outcomes or indeed the very intentions of the teacher or lecturer. So it's, intended learning outcomes in particular can, don't have to, but can militate against creativity.*

T9 appeared to be wrestling with the concept of learning outcomes. His/her responses clearly saw them being supportive of the use of learning outcomes whilst recognising that

this approach may have some unintended, negative, consequences. S/he went on to comment:

*Trying to judge things by stable, and I like intended learning outcomes for many reasons, but in terms of assessment it can be harder if you are judging entirely by that and if your comments are entirely restricted to comments on the meeting of intended learning outcomes.*

In this T9 reflected the concerns voiced by others that although learning outcomes can have value, they can also undermine the intentions of HE. In acknowledging that creativity can be measured, whilst also supporting systems such as assessing to learning outcomes, there is a reflection of the idea that assessment can be tamed. This is not to say that this is done on purpose but it does reflect the manner in which recent developments, such as the introduction of learning outcomes, can have unintended consequences.

Another Quality Officer demonstrated the tensions that the use of learning outcomes can generate. T10 also acknowledged that the situation can and does arise whereby a student submits a piece of work that is strong in many ways but which does not meet a learning outcome but in being questioned regarding the consequences of that, s/he never adequately answered the question. Instead they referred to what they felt would have happened in another university and in a different time:

*T10 we've had that before where somebody has done a stunning piece of work which should have been an 80 but they haven't addressed the question, haven't addressed the learning outcome*

*RC What do we do? What do we want to do?*

*T10 If you were at Cambridge in 1980 some tutor would have gone oh that was really interesting, what did you think about this?*

The value of this response is that T10 recognises that alternative actions are possible. They recognise that we can have a system whereby not meeting a learning outcome is permissible but then referred to why we are unlikely to adopt this approach because of the numbers involved and the fact that our student to staff ratios can be high. At no point does T10 state that not meeting a learning outcome will mean that the student fails. Instead, this is left unspoken but in a way that is accepted as what will happen.

## 6.7 Economisation

No respondents referred to economisation as either a process or a driver in terms of what goes on within the HE sector. As a proxy measure of economisation however, markets and the role of marketization was referred to by some teaching staff, though it is fair to say that this was not a concern for all. T7 (TS) made a very brief comment on marketization which also reflected an understanding of how HE is subject to the powers of the State:

*The government then tells HE what to do all under this marketization.*

This was presented as axiomatic by T7 but it is patently not unambiguous. In one sense though this comment acts as a bridge between understanding how the actions of the State influence HE and the vehicles by which the State achieves its aims. If marketization is taking place within HE and if it is being driven by the Government, then it can be assumed that it is because the Government sees some benefit to this.

The influence of economisation or of marketization did not arise within the interview with Quality Officers. T1 (QO) was well aware of issues surrounding accountability and the moves towards modularisation but the idea that changes such as these within HE may support increasing marketization were absent. Similarly T9 (QO) also kept responses very close to aspects of assessment *per se* and rarely commented upon how the wider forces that impact upon how HE is organised. S/he did however, make some general comments regarding the ways in which semesterisation or modularisation may shape assessment and the way in which transnational concerns regarding comparative awards are embedded within such as the Bologna agreement. T10 made a number of claims regarding how HE had changed since the period within which s/he was a student and also drew comparisons between types of institution but economisation did not feature significantly in his/her responses. This is not to say that no recognition of economic forces were evident. One pertinent comment from T10 (QO) linked the relationship between funding and research:

*In a sense the funding mechanism constrains creativity.*

This response however was based upon a question about the extent to which we can assess creativity. It was noticeable that s/he drew upon the experiences of a friend/peer who had undertaken Ph.D. work in Cambridge in the 1980s. That friend/peer had commented:

*I couldn't do what I did then now because nobody would let me, I couldn't be allowed to potter and play in a lab for 3 years seeing what happened.*

As such T10 is well aware of changed economic conditions within HE but his/her concerns are focused on funding rather than on how HE is organised in an economic sense. The issue of how we organise HE is more concerned with social consequences that reflect economics and were much more prevalent within teaching staff. For example, T2 (TS) drew upon wider forces when considering the ways in which HE has developed and how it may develop in future with explicit comments about consumerism and marketization.

*T2 that's the external pressure that we are under and I think as students they feel they are paying for their degree and this is one of the problems. I think they are not paying for their degree they are paying for access but they feel they are paying for their degree*

*RC And that's being promoted?*

*T2 Yes because it's a consumerism perspective its part of the marketization we are going through*

For T2 (TS) the consequences of increased consumerism within HE, embedded within marketization, changes the relationship between teaching staff and students in a way that creates pressure for staff. What that pressure is, was not voiced. There was an inference that it relates to the judgements we make about students work. Making judgements about students work has been a long-standing part of assessment within HE and is closely tied to the outcomes of HE in that students leave with a classification of their performance during their time studying. As such, the awarding of a mark, often in the form of a number, is not at all unusual within HE. What marketization does though is to elevate the role of such judgements as measures of quality which have currency within the labour market. Consider how T6 (TS) reflects upon the way in which universities themselves contribute to this:

*It's about corporatisation of and I think it's about marketization and league tables and all of that, that in a sense the message we give out from day one on the website are statistics and numbers, x numbers get graduate jobs, x numbers get 2:1s, the NSS says this, in a sense we socialise them into an expectation of looking for a number.*

Drawing from experience T6 reflected upon how this has shaped the student's approach or understanding of their HE experience and referred to the ways in which, for students, the marks take precedence with learning and development being seen as:

*A by-product in a sense for me. If you ask them what they have learnt I think they often say 'well if I remember this module I got 58 for Rob', and what does that mean?*

T6 was obviously disheartened by this sort of response from students but it may be a consequence of staff and students approaching and understanding HE differently. This is something that T2 (TS) refers to when s/he comments upon a:

*Romantic liberal view of self-development.*

When a preoccupation with the mark is taken alongside the idea that students are buying a degree it comes as little surprise that students want the highest number, the best outcome. The best return from their investment. Sometimes this is for real economic reasons. Students, who intend to progress to PGCE courses for example, find that with higher classifications comes a higher bursary. In this way a higher classification may mean that a PGCE is financially feasible for them, with a lower classification meaning that a PGCE is not possible. As the final classification is the outcome of all other marks achieved it puts pressure on students which in turn can be transferred to staff. T2 (TS) sums this up when noting that:

*Students at the other end are saying but I need to get this so we've got this pressure coming through.*

Here, the student need is for staff to award a particular mark. What students often assume though is that the mark is something which is gifted by the staff marking their work rather than a judgement based upon the quality of what they have done. That outcome is always the outcome of the assessment process wherein the student is judged as performing at a particular level of performance. For T2 this becomes problematic when the responsibility for that outcome is either seen as resting with the university, or becomes appropriated by it:

*...with the lifting of the cap [the limit on student numbers previously set by the Government but which is set to be lifted during 2015] you are really going to see bargain basement stuff come to us; we will guarantee you a degree, no one will leave without one; you know you can start to see, you are going to get the marketing rhetoric is going to come through and I just wonder how much longer we are going to hold onto this romantic liberal view of self-development.*



T2s reference to a romantic liberal view of self-development as referred to earlier may already have faded into the background. Most teaching staff are likely to have some understanding that the work of universities, and staff relationships with students, has changed over the previous few decades.

## 6.8 Internationalisation

At the time of writing I had doubts as to the extent to which respondents would recognise that international agendas impact upon the nature and experience of HE within the UK. This is not to deny that internationalisation has any effect, it was demonstrated that it does and that this is not a new phenomenon in chapter 3. However, only one of the respondents made explicit reference to it. T9 offered a fairly lengthy response to a question about where responsibilities lie. Having considered that it is always the case that in a teaching relationship one person, the tutor, has greater responsibility for assessing than do students, because of their particular role, and that they have greater powers with respect to what form the assessment should take, T9 was asked about who should determine what is an appropriate form of assessment. The question aimed to explore whether or not it should be teaching staff, the university or some other body who make judgments.

The response to this saw T9 considering that both academics and universities do not exist within a vacuum and that in each case wider forces will shape the university experience and, therefore, the context of assessment. This response explicitly recognises global issues in stating that:

*...there are systems across higher education, not just in this country, but certainly across Europe, under the current agreements across Europe and to a lesser extent, but still importantly, across the world that higher education has an equivalence in those ways and that forms of assessing student work be done in a way that can be translated from one institution to another, from one programme to another, from one nation to another, from continent to another so that there is some fairness and justice when people move countries and when people move around the world.*

In making this comment T9 also reveals how the work of different individuals within the university is shaped by external concerns. It may not be surprising that teaching staff have concerns about subject, or discipline, matters but this response shows that as individuals

adopt different roles within HE their roles and responsibilities see them engaging with other agendas. As such it may not be surprising that it is individuals with quality responsibilities who recognise that there is a wider context to HE and who recognise that there is sometimes a need to respond to forces which may be supra-national. T9 illustrates this when s/he goes on to comment about the responsibility that is associated with global forces but also in respect of the aims of such forces.

*...there is some global responsibility for what counts as understanding at this level, or knowledge at this level, or originality at this level so there is a global responsibility for that and indeed there are things like the national framework for qualifications in this country, fits in with, as I understand it, European guidance on qualification levels and indeed global guidance although the global guidance is a much weaker influence on policy, but it fits into those as well, but it fits in with the Bologna and all the other agreements.*

Overall, this summed up the ways in which internationalisation was evident within the interviews. This response does echo, though, to some respect, the comments made earlier regarding the shifting location of power in that T9, if no-one else, is recognising that what academics do is not something that they control wholly. As such, frameworks such as the ones referred to above provide the context within which academic staff work and which provides the context within which students experience HE. In turn, it is to be expected that Quality Officers are required to engage with such frameworks on behalf of the university.

## **6.9 Wickedity**

The aim of the investigation was to assess the level to which various stakeholders held an epistemological position towards assessment which was either wicked or tame. In chapter 1 it was argued that four positions may be ascertained which reflect the position that various stakeholders adopt towards assessment within HE. That said, few respondents actually referred to wicked or tame issues. This is not surprising. Although Rittel and Webber's concept of wicked problems appears to have gained significant ground within the past decade it is still not a concept that is in common use within academia. For that reason evidence of wicked and tame issues within the interviews tend to be inferred rather than explicit. Some interviewees did ask what the research was focused on, and where this

happened the concept was explained to them. Similarly, in some interviews it seemed appropriate to introduce the concept but I was always cautious not to direct respondents.

Even so, some respondents did make comments which reflected the concept of problems being either wicked or tame. As such, and given developments within HE in recent decades, it may not have been surprising to find that Quality Officers revealed a much tamer approach to assessment than Teaching Staff. This was not necessarily evident. T11 (QO) made an unusual statement very early on in the interview and repeated the view later also:

*You can only identify what they wish to share so it's how you use assessments to elicit the information you want from them and to give them the scope to demonstrate, that's showing off their knowledge isn't it? If you start being prescriptive with assessments students might go down a really narrow focus.*

T11 (QO) was the only respondent to recognise that students are not passive participants within the educational process and that there is a need to elicit, in his/her words, the information that we want from them so as to be able to make a judgement. T11 also demonstrated some understanding of wickedity when commenting upon students being safe within how they are assessed:

*Sometimes it's encouraging as well for students to fail on some things, if they are making an artefact or doing something and that process fails but then they are reflecting on why that has failed, learning on how it fails in itself is demonstrating some form of learning isn't it? You don't always want students to be safe in what they do, you want them to be, to experiment and take risks.*

In expressing these thoughts T11 not only revealed a good understanding of the learning process s/he also recognised the challenging nature of learning. In stating that *you don't always want students to be safe in what they do, you want them to be, to experiment and take risks* s/he demonstrates that s/he is not necessarily uncomfortable with the ideas which underpin wickedity.

In one sense though T11's comments point to a distinction between learning and assessment. Students do not enter HE to be assessed. For teaching staff there may be a somewhat idealistic idea that students enter HE to learn and develop, for students however, the purpose of HE is varied. Students may enter HE with the aim of getting a job, or to get what they see as a better job. Some may see HE as a challenge and use it to see what they

are capable of. However, once in HE the need to get the award for which they are studying for will be central to many. This is important because to get an award students have to engage with assessment and successful achievement will only happen where students have learnt and developed. Maybe a more pragmatic approach would be to recognise this. To recognise that students are there to gain an award, whatever level that award is and as such, they are compelled to engage with some form of assessment. This also means that the university must establish some system whereby a judgement can be made (notwithstanding the awarding of Masters degrees by the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford which rest upon the achievement of a first degree and the subsequent payment of a fee).

In making this claim though T11 appeared to be putting the onus on to the student. In contrast to the comments made by T11, for the students interviewed the concerns rested on how the assessment of their learning was facilitated:

*If it's about what we've learnt but if we can't tell you .... ....then it's actually the outcome of what you want us to have learnt rather than what we have completely learnt.*

This is not to negate what T11 is saying about the ability of students to determine what they will share. It seems a pertinent point and there was some overlap in concerns raised by students regarding how we assess for this can impact upon what students do reveal. In respect of student opinions and views regarding assessment, a number of their comments revealed insights into the complexity of learning and the potential limitations of assessment practices. This is revealing when it comes to considering a wicked epistemology as it shows that students have some awareness that not everything that they learn is likely to be captured and revealed within assessment. For example in response to an early question asking if assessment is concerned with judging what a student knows:

*No, like for me, I struggle to put things on paper. I can verbally say to you a lot better than what I can write down so it's not really assessing; what we hand in isn't technically just what we know. We might know a lot more but not know how to get that onto paper.*

This reflects an ongoing concern with students and reflects their perceptions of their writing skills but it also shows that they recognise that not everything gets assessed. As such, this issue of what we can assess was pursued further by trying to get the students to draw a

distinction between things that they know and things that they understand. Two responses stand out and demonstrate an understanding of the difference between knowing and understanding. They are in response to me asking, 'can we assess, are we assessing what you know or are we assessing what you understand, is it the same, knowing and understanding?'

*S1: Not really.*

*S2: Some people are just very good at taking in information in aren't they and it can be like a memory thing can't it, you can do something but do you actually understand why you are doing it there's a difference isn't there.*

From this the discussion turned back to the question of what assessment reveals and, in turn, what the assessor can realistically know about the student's development with me asking 'can I ever know what you've learned?'

*S1: No, only a tiny bit through what you've written I suppose but it's not everything we've learnt ... it's impossible to fit it all into 2500 words, you can't possibly put everything down can you so you could know a little bit couldn't you?*

*S2: Some of the stuff you've been reading, you will store some of it and some of it will go in your work and you will think afterwards "oh there was that as well I could have put that in" so it's where the information is stored and you won't know that we know that because we haven't written it down.*

In general, the conversation with students raised a different concern regarding how assessment was carried out with students recognising that limitations such as word counts could be an impediment to demonstrating all they had learnt.

For teaching staff the concepts of wicked and tame are evident but, as with Quality Officers and students, they are not widespread. For example, T8 comments that:

*At the minute assessment has a very functional role and I don't think it necessarily has to, I think assessment can be part of learning it doesn't have to be the measure of learning.*

This comment from T8 (TS) relates to other comments that were made regarding a distinction that can be drawn between assessment of learning and assessment for learning, an issue that was discussed at the beginning of this chapter. T2 also reiterates points that

were made earlier regarding why we are working within a particular way with a comment which suggests that HE is not unusual in its approach:

*I just think we work within very restricted perceptions of what we are meant to be doing but that's not just HE, the whole system is set up like that.*

This reflects the comments that were made earlier regarding the ways in which standardised approaches as per Weber's concerns regarding rationalisation permeate society. This is echoed to some extent by T6 (TS) who sees a rather docile body of staff accepting how things are done:

*I think the staff are pretty passive and I think the staff go along with assessment, rather than questioning it.*

This comment from T6 suggests that there is a tameness to assessment within the department being studied. At the same time though they made an apparently general comment relating to the overall learning as is experienced by students which pointed towards recognition of a more wicked approach:

*I do have some sympathy with the view that [refers to a senior member of the university's academic staff] got which is you might not have them because in a true learning experience you might not know what the outcome is.*

This comment in particular shows an understanding of the complexity and randomness of the learning experience, something which sits well with the concept of wickedity. However, s/he went on to make a comment which draws upon an understanding of different educational levels and which sheds some light on the forces which shape how educational systems are run:

*For me that was part of the HE-ness, you know lower down you have your exams, you have your learning outcomes, HE-ness had that fluidity, however, it relies on a higher degree of professionalism and has very little accountability that makes it hard to monitor.*

T2 (TS) provides some insight into the possibility of wickedity when s/he makes the comment:

*You could have a form of assessment which is totally formative that you don't need to come to some judgement, is it a 60, 80 or a 35 whatever, you could talk about it you could engage with the students about it.*

In saying this T2 is recognising that assessment itself is generally predicated upon the making of a judgement which sees the students' work being awarded a mark. A system such as T2 suggests could be seen as being more wicked because the focus would be on encouraging development rather than working towards a mark. S/he develops this idea further in a manner which recognises that in some ways there are forces upon assessment practices which tame the process and said a lot about issues which fall in to the conceptual scope of wicked and tame problems. S/he was particularly critical about the way in which HE has become tame, albeit not using that particular word:

*What we get at the moment is we've got prescribed learning. We as lecturers determine what they are going to learn. We decide how it's going to be put across. You know, basically, we are in total control yet we talk about the rhetoric of independent creativity, criticality, where even the criticality is within limited bands of what we determine as criticality.*

For T2 this control feeds into the way we assess so that, in general, the student's output is rarely original or surprising:

*So the way we work at the moment I have got a pretty good idea of what a good one will look like at the end and some students surprise you by showing you a different version of what a good one will look like but basically you've got an image in your head of what a good piece of assessed work will look like so all the way down the line we are working within certain tram lines you know.*

T2 does, however, offer an understanding that this is not in itself inevitable by ending his/her discussion of this matter as follows:

*It doesn't have to be that way.*

## 6.10 Conclusion

This chapter has provided data drawn from interviews with three stakeholder groups within HE: Teaching Staff, Quality Officers, and Students. In doing so it has addressed both the main research question, regarding how the concepts of wicked and tame are evidenced within each of the three stakeholder groups, and sub-research question 1. SRQ1 is concerned with the drivers outlined in chapter 3, and these were explored within this chapter.

In each stakeholder group early discussions of assessment revealed that it is understood as being used for, or serving, multiple purposes. Each stakeholder group was clear about the different facets to assessment. As part of this it was seen that each group, but Teaching Staff in particular, commented upon not only what assessment is for, but who it is for. The value of identifying this is in respect of how this reflects an understanding of the influence of other parties. It is a view which demonstrates an understanding of HE as existing within a socio-political context and which raises a consideration of power in respect to a changing landscape within HE.

Comments from students in respect of learning outcomes did much to show that students are well aware that teaching staff do not have absolute power. Their view, that some external body would determine the learning outcomes that staff teach to, reflects this idea of a higher authority that is external to the university. This provided a starting point for an understanding of the role of the State. For teaching staff there was evidence of an increasing concern with the State's powers. Some, possibly because of other work experiences, saw what was happening within universities as representing a transfer of power from teaching staff to the State in a manner that reflected developments in other educational sectors.

It had been argued within chapter 3 that one way that the State achieves greater control over the HE sector is through the adoption of what is often referred to as New Public Management. A major component of NPM is the concept of accountability and this was one area where a clear difference in understanding between the three groups was evident. Students demonstrated little understanding of accountability whereas both teaching staff and quality officers were very much aware of it as both a concept and in respect of its practical manifestations.



As a mechanism for ensuring accountability, learning outcomes were shown to be a contentious issue amongst all groups and it is in this respect that some clear evidence of wicked and tame understandings could be seen. In developing this idea though it may be very useful to establish that seeing wicked and tame as mutually exclusive positions is not helpful to understanding the positions adopted by these three stakeholder groups. It becomes more useful to view wicked and tame as extremes on a continuum. If these are seen as part of a continuum then the nuances of understanding can be accommodated. This is best understood perhaps by considering the evidence that was presented showing quality officers being aware of the limitations or weaknesses of learning outcomes whilst supporting their use. Similarly it could be seen in the different positions adopted by teaching staff regarding marking, especially in respect of dealing with a student's failure to meet one or more of the learning outcomes. Teaching staff were not united in their approach and this was presented above as reflecting those who adopted a soft approach towards learning outcomes and those who adopted a hard approach.

The idea that either a soft or a hard approach can be taken towards learning outcomes is also evident within student responses. Students generally saw learning outcomes as something which provided a guide or framework though the idea that they were something that had to be met was not alien to them.

Much has been said and written in recent years about the marketization of HE and it would not have been unexpected to see students articulating the idea that they were consumers in respect of HE. This was not the case. Students did not refer to fees and did not comment either upon markets. Similarly, economisation was largely absent from discussions with quality officers. It was teaching staff who were more aware of how economisation has changed the landscape of HE, and who were more likely to comment upon it. The absence of student comments on economisation may reflect the fact that students are usually only briefly engaged in HE, unlike teaching staff who are much more likely to have previous experience from which to recognise change and to make comparisons. As such, for teaching staff economisation has clearly changed the nature of HE.

Internationalisation was not understood in the same way. In spite of general concerns within the university relating to internationalisation this was not something that either teaching staff or students discussed. Only one of the quality officers raised the impact or consequences of internationalisation for HE. The one respondent who did refer to this driver saw it as something bound up with frameworks which facilitated fairness and comparisons.

It was seen as facilitating movement between nations but in many ways it was discussed as something which operated at a level one step removed from the actual workings of the HE process or in terms of the student experience.

In conclusion then, the data provides evidence in support of sub-research question 1, what are the policy drivers in respect of assessment within HE? Respondents did demonstrate the relevance of considering the drivers that were considered in chapter 3. The main research question also, how are tame and wicked views on assessment practices within HE represented within three stakeholder groups; can be seen as being evidenced within the data. What was seen was that a number of respondents made comments which support the idea that assessment within HE can be understood through the concepts of tame and wicked. In each group there was evidence to support the claim that assessment can either embrace wickedity or lead to tameness. There was little to suggest however, that any of the three groups saw existing practices as something in need of change. Students seemed quite articulate in terms of the extent to which assessment practices can illustrate their learning. They were also clear in stating that the ways in which they are assessed can restrict what they show. In turn this reflects the idea that assessment can be tame.

Quality Officers tended to locate issues with assessment in the students rather than the system. The comment from one, that we can only assess what students choose to share with us illustrates this and will be explored further in the following chapter. Quality Officers did reveal an understanding of wicked issues within assessment but it did not appear as strongly in their responses as with students or teaching staff and there appeared to be a general acceptance of existing practices in spite of some misgivings.

For Teaching Staff, similarly, there was an appreciation that how we assess can tame the process albeit not articulated through the use of this terminology. Teaching Staff were more pessimistic regarding assessment and were more likely to see HE being tamed but their comments were generally focused on concerns with existing practice rather than a consideration of how this may be countered. It is also important to reiterate that responses from teaching staff were not homogenous.

The idea raised earlier, that it may be better to understand wicked and tame as part of a continuum rather than two absolute positions is supported by the responses from each of the three stakeholder groups. The following chapter discusses the implications of this further.

## **Chapter 7: Discussion**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the value of the evidence provided in chapter 6. It does so by returning to the sub-research questions to begin with before moving on to consider the main research question. In doing so it presents the view that tameness predominates in respect of the views of each of the three stakeholder groups. This chapter also discusses ways in which each of the three groups considers assessment within HE to be driven by extrinsic factors. In some ways this reflects an element of victim blaming with problems being seen to rest with some other party though a further discussion of learning outcomes also indicates how structures influence how assessment is carried out.

As was established in Chapter 4, the evidence is warrantable in that the issues considered, and the positions revealed, will be broadly recognisable to Quality Officers, Teaching Staff and Students in other HE institutions within England. Although the case study is of one department, within one faculty of one university, the drivers that impact upon HE within England influence all universities. This reflects the argument put forward in chapter 4 regarding fuzzy generalisations (Bassey, 1999, 2001).

In Chapter 2 the thesis argued that one important aspect of HE is the promotion and nurturing of creativity and originality. As such, if creativity and originality are to be valued an approach to assessment which is able to capture and reward this is required. This has been presented as being wicked assessment as opposed to assessment which is tame. The thesis investigated the epistemological positions adopted by three stakeholder groups within HE so as to evaluate the extent to which the concept of wicked and tame can be used to understand their positions regarding contemporary approaches to assessment. A concern was raised earlier in the thesis that employing assessment that is tame may have negative consequences for HE. The general conclusion to be drawn from the data is that assessment within HE is tame. This is something that appears to be generally accepted by each of the three stakeholder groups in that there was little evidence of a wicked epistemology.

The starting point of the thesis was to apply Rittel and Webber's concept of wicked and tame problems to assessment but recognising that in its original form this concept has limitations if it is accepted as a duality. By starting as a duality it was argued that four

epistemological positions regarding assessment may be revealed when carrying out the research. These are:

1. Tame epistemology and Tame assessment practices;
2. Tame epistemology and Wicked assessment practices;
3. Wicked epistemology and Tame assessment practices;
4. Wicked epistemology and Wicked assessment practices.

Of these it was argued that position 2 is unlikely and that position 4 is the ideal in the context of HE. Position 4 was presented as being the favoured position on the grounds that this is able to accommodate creativity and originality.

It was argued that seeing wicked and tame as a continuum rather than as absolute positions is a more useful approach to take. As such it can be seen that the positions illustrated above form a continuum from position 1 through to position 4. In terms of the epistemological position held by individuals it is argued that position 1 represents an individual who sees assessment as being able to reveal the extent to which students have learned and developed and who accepts the status quo regarding assessment practices because there is no understanding that how assessment may be carried out may be inappropriate or problematic. Position 2 represents an individual who sees assessment as being able to reveal the extent to which students have learned and developed but who has some concerns about how assessment is carried out in general. Position 3 represents an individual who recognises the problematic nature of understanding the extent to which a student has learned and developed but who does not see any problem with the assessment approaches that are in general use. Position 4 reflects the individual who recognises the problematic nature of understanding the extent to which a student has learned and developed and who also recognises that how assessment is carried out is also problematic. In considering position 4 it can be argued that this is indicative of individuals who adopt a critically reflective approach. Integral to this approach is a concern to be aware of the nature of practice and to consider the consequences of it, especially with regards to weaknesses.

## **7.2 The sub-research questions**

Before going on to discuss the extent to which the research has answered the main research question it is pertinent to note that the sub-research questions have also been supported.

In respect of SRQ1: "What are the policy drivers in respect of assessment within HE?" a number of drivers were presented and for the most part their value in terms of being considered in establishing the context of assessment was demonstrated within the results. Although economization was not a concern for students as far as the data collected here was concerned, both Teaching Staff and Quality Officers saw this as an issue. This was especially the case for Teaching Staff. Internationalisation however, was not evident in any of the three stakeholder groups in any significant way. Only one respondent referred to this at all. The absence of this in the data however does not provide an argument for not considering it as a driver. The impact of international agendas will have a greater impact at a national, rather than a personal level and this may contribute to it being overlooked. It may be an absence that is particular to those respondents included in this research.

SRQ2, "Which research methods provide the best approach for this thesis?" was also addressed. A case was made justifying the use of a qualitative case study and the responses provided have generated data which have supported the thesis. In turn, this contributes to an assessment of SRQ3, "What empirical data will be required to answer the MRQ?" The empirical data takes the form of texts generated from interviews. In turn, samples taken from these texts have been presented in chapter 6 to provide an insight into how individuals, within each of the three stakeholder groups, understand the nature of assessment within HE. Their responses have been accepted as a representation of the epistemological position which they hold regarding assessment and which illustrates the extent to which they understand assessment from either a tame or a wicked position. As such, this returns us to the Main Research Question: How are tame and wicked views on assessment practices within HE represented within three stakeholder groups?

## **7.3 The main research question and the tameness of HE**

In general, the results did little to support an argument that any group was really concerned with assessment in a manner that could be characterised as wicked. Noticeably, none of the three groups provided a unified approach. Variations existed in each which would position

them along the continuum. This may not be surprising as individuals approach and understand assessment based on a range of positions and previous experiences. Given that the interview questions provided opportunities for each of the stakeholder groups to express their thoughts regarding how assessment might be changed though, the lack of engagement with this question supports the view that a tame epistemology is more prevalent than a wicked epistemology. Although concerns were demonstrated by each group it could be seen that these tended to focus on dissatisfaction with how assessment was organised rather than a concern for what it could be.

This was evident in asking the question regarding the purpose of assessment. Students appeared to struggle at first, possibly because they approach HE knowing that assessment is a part of it. The question could well have surprised them because initially the practice of assessment appears to be axiomatic. For students it is bound up with how they experience HE and we can imagine that all students have an expectation that assessment will take place. It was further probing however which revealed some wickedity to the epistemological position taken by the students as is illustrated in the following two examples:

*Some people are just very good at taking in information in aren't they and can be like a memory thing can't it you can do something but do you actually understand why you are doing it there's a difference isn't there?*

*It's actually the outcome of what you want us to have learnt rather than what we have completely learnt*

In adopting an understanding of epistemological positions as constituting a continuum, it is students who tend to populate the middle ground. Although, as has been said, there is no uniformity within each stakeholder group, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that it is Teaching Staff who demonstrate the most wicked of positions with Quality Officers adopting the tamest. This is illustrated in examples drawn from the previous chapter. Firstly, from Teaching Staff:

*I'm quite happy if someone produces something which is a really good piece of work which shows criticality, originality and all that and if they haven't managed to meet one of the learning outcomes personally that wouldn't bother me too much T2*

*I do have some sympathy with the view that... ..you might not have them (learning outcomes) because in a true learning experience you might not know what the outcome is. T6*

These responses may be compared to a very different position as found within interviews with Quality Officers:

*We've had that before where somebody has done a stunning piece of work which should have been an 80; haven't addressed the question, haven't addressed the learning outcome. T10*

*You can only identify what they wish to share so it's how you use assessments to elicit the information you want from them and to give them the scope to demonstrate, that's showing off their knowledge isn't it? T11*

The final comment above suggests that students choose what to reveal about their learning and development. In doing so it points to an issue that is bound up with the epistemological positions adopted within each group. This relates to agency with regards to the extent of what students do to reveal what they have learnt and what might support or restrict this. In considering agency though it can also be seen how each of the groups position responsibility for assessment performance extrinsically. Further issues concerning how extrinsic forces drive assessment, as reflecting the discussions in chapter 3, will be considered in section 7.5, later in this chapter. Section 7.4 however considers the relevance of agency to this thesis.

#### **7.4 The role of agency in assessment**

In a sociological sense agency can be summed up as the capacity to act. As a concept this was introduced in Chapter 6. Agency is evident within the data in terms of how each of the three groups refers to actions taken within the assessment process which contribute to demonstrating the extent of learning and development. What can be seen within the data is evidence that agency is positioned differently by each stakeholder group. To explain this further, it was noted in chapter 6 that one of the quality officers commented that the only thing that can be assessed is what the students choose to share with us. If this is the case then there is an element of victim blaming here as the responsibility is seen to rest with the student rather than with the designer of the assessment task. Students however, referred to

the extent to which the restrictions on assignments made it more or less possible for them to demonstrate what they know and teaching staff often commented upon the actions of students in asking for explicit guidance regarding what assignments should look like.

From this we have three positions: from the Quality Officer's responses there is evidence of seeing agency as resting with the student, but this assumes an approach to assessment where the possibility of revealing the full extent of what has been learnt is not questioned. This reflects an epistemological position wherein assessment strategies achieve what they purport to achieve; where knowledge is assumed to be objective; and where language is assumed to be transparent. As such this reflects tameness. How we assess is assumed to work. Any weaknesses rest with the student. This perspective negates the context of assessment and lays the responsibility for the demonstrating of learning and development solely with the student.

From the student's responses there is some evidence of a wicked conceptualisation of assessment practices but this is not significant. Students do recognise that their ability to demonstrate what they have learnt is limited by the context within which any assessment takes place. They recognise that the rules and regulations of assessment restrict the opportunities to demonstrate the full extent of learning. Students also recognised that knowing and understanding is not the same thing and that an assessment task which relied on demonstrating knowledge would not necessarily provide an opportunity to demonstrate the development of understanding. In this sense the extent of agency on the part of students is restricted by bureaucratic systems, manifest as assessment regulations. Such regulations are imposed upon students by the university as it adopts a degree of standardisation. As such, agency rests with the university for it is the university which has the power to establish assessment systems which can accommodate wickedity.

For example, if the university insists that each learning outcome must be met for a student to pass an assignment the university is determining what will be revealed. This does not preclude the student from demonstrating learning and development which is additional or contiguous to the stated learning outcomes, but it must not be instead of demonstrating the stated learning outcomes and limits on word counts may mean that demonstrating the full extent of learning and development becomes difficult. This makes the writing of learning outcomes very important, if they are to be used, for varying degrees of flexibility can be written into a learning outcome. This reflects the students concerns regarding knowledge and understanding.



The element of victim blaming that was inferred from comments from a Quality Officer is also evident in comments from teaching staff. As far as teaching staff were concerned there is evidence of a general feeling that the agency which students possess is somewhat misdirected. This is because their requests to be told what to include within assessment tasks sees students transferring agency away from themselves and towards teaching staff. Students have the power to reveal the extent of their learning and development but by seeking model answers or detailed guidance from staff this has the effect of allowing teaching staff to determine the extent to which the student reveals anything. Many teaching staff express frustration with students because of this but as was demonstrated in chapter 6, there are teaching staff that mark to the learning outcome. It may not be surprising then, that students seek to clarify just what is required of them. In this situation agency is reluctantly held by teaching staff in that they come to be seen as determining what is revealed. Teaching staff are complicit in this in two ways. Firstly they are the writers of learning outcomes and of assignment tasks, and secondly they often provide guidelines regarding what assignments should look like or contain. In this way, they shape what the student does and therefore, what the student reveals.

In each of the positions being adopted regarding agency the explanation positions the action extrinsically. In each case agency is seen as resting with one of the other stakeholder groups but extrinsic forces do not end there.

## **7.5 Extrinsic forces and the landscape of assessment within HE**

Quality Officers and Teaching Staff provide further evidence of extrinsic forces being seen as shaping HE. This can be seen in the comment from one of the Quality Officers which suggested that in his/her time at university; students had been more motivated to study for the sake of it. S/he considered that contemporary students did not have a similar relationship to their studies. Furthermore, some Teaching Staff adopted a somewhat critical position regarding both the abilities and motivation of students entering the university with concerns being raised that the standards required of students to gain admittance were being lowered. Both motivation and the ability to provide satisfactory assessment form part of an epistemological position regarding assessment that is either more or less, wicked or tame. In each case the responsibility for academic performance is seen to have an extrinsic origin.

From a teaching perspective this may appear counter-intuitive. If the satisfaction that is gained from teaching is considered it might be expected that greater satisfaction accrues with respect to those students who develop the most. This could mean that a lower starting point provides for greater satisfaction. In practice a concern with the abilities of students when they enter HE takes precedence, rather than their ability when they leave, but where it is lower abilities that are seen as problematic. Both Quality Officers and Teaching Staff within this research did not appear to consider that their actions might contribute to the motivation of students. However, in respect of motivation, and motivation is a major contributory factor in achievement, a wicked environment is likely to provide more motivation than a tame one.

In pointing to the way in which some Teaching Staff and Quality Officers see extrinsic factors as having an impact upon how students approach their work it can be recognised how the drivers which were identified in chapter 3 overlap and interplay. Although this thesis is concerned with assessment, how the university approaches assessment and what happens as part of this, is affected by external forces or drivers. Typically, students come to the university at the age of 18 but many are older. This means that they will have experienced assessment in other organisations and those previous experiences, along with more general understandings of assessment, may shape their behaviour towards assessment within the university.

Teaching Staff in particular demonstrated awareness of how external factors impact upon assessment especially with regards to how changes to education below HE, that is, Schools and Colleges, have impacted upon students. These changes were often seen as having an impact upon how universities have to work. Some Teaching Staff talked about students as not being motivated or not having sufficient ability which, in light of comments regarding external drivers, could be seen as victim blaming.

What was not particularly evident though was a sense that Teaching Staff themselves might be adopting the sort of systems and processes which was being seen as having demotivated the students in the first place. There was evidence to suggest that an awareness of how certain approaches, as adopted by other educational systems, experienced before entry to HE, can demotivate or lead to routinized behaviour, but there was little sense of an argument which rested upon resistance to this type of approach being adopted within HE because of what it does to students. If anything there was a degree of acceptance that it would become adopted within HE.

It could be argued then, that amongst the two staff groups, Quality Officers and Teaching Staff, there was little sense of an understanding that assessment within HE could and should promote creativity, that assessment could be wicked. It was clear that some Teaching Staff expressed concern regarding the consequences of standardisation but it was more a sense of being critical of such approaches than of promoting a creative alternative. In other words, there was little sense that a wicked approach to assessment within HE was something to strive for. This was most evident in the discussions about learning outcomes.

## **7.6 The place of Learning Outcomes**

It was the discussion of learning outcomes that may have been the most fruitful for this thesis. The issue of learning outcomes fits with the concept of agency discussed earlier especially with how Teaching Staff use learning outcomes in either a hard or soft way. It also has some resonance for the idea that wicked assessment may benefit HE. In chapter 6 it was proposed that the responses provided to questioning about learning outcomes generally reflected a hard position in that they were thresholds which students were required to meet. In this position the way in which a bureaucratic, techno-rational device, acts to tame the social process of assessment is demonstrated. Teaching Staff in particular talked about how it would be possible for a student to submit a good assignment yet still be awarded a fail mark when that assignment was not able to demonstrate that one or more of the learning outcomes had been met.

The use of learning outcomes within assessment reflects a tame approach because of the way that the learning outcome establishes what the student will learn. In doing so it generally restricts their work to demonstrating this. In such a system creativity and originality are less likely to be rewarded. A wicked approach to assessment would more easily accommodate a demonstration of learning which is not captured by the learning outcomes but which is made clear and explicit by the student. A wicked approach to assessment then would be able to accommodate and reward a student who is able to demonstrate creativity or originality.

On the other hand, teaching staff who restrict their teaching to a narrow focus on learning outcomes and who direct students to provide assignments which are tied closely to the learning outcomes are less likely to stimulate creativity and originality in students. This was

reflected in some of the comments from students who had soon recognised that to achieve a pass mark there is a need to ensure that all learning outcomes have been demonstrated.

*I will write maybe a paragraph on each learning outcome and then fit everything else in around it.*

*I think I look at it as a guide as to what has to be in the assignment. You use your assignment to show things in the outcomes*

It is not surprising then that students seek clarification regarding the content or structure required of assessment tasks. This utilitarian approach was referred to in chapter 6 wherein it was suggested that this may well be as a consequence of experiences prior to entering HE. It was a Quality Officer who emphasised the nature of education within Schools and Colleges, arguing that much of the creativity had been reduced as a consequence of education policies since the late 1980s. Although s/he did not use the term, it appears that they were seeing education in schools and colleges as tame. Similarly, Teaching Staff were very aware of developments within the school and FE sectors and appeared both critical and concerned about the consequences of such developments.

For many teaching staff learning outcomes were understood as problematic but this was not accompanied by a general concern not to use them or to only use them in a soft manner. It may be characteristic of how HE has become tame that when faced with an approach that many found problematic there was little sense of seeking to change it. The approach adopted by Teaching Staff towards learning outcomes may be seen to constitute a real dividing line with some teaching staff adopting a hard approach reflecting tameness and with other Teaching Staff adopting a soft approach reflecting, but not necessarily incorporating, wickedity. As such, where learning outcomes were seen as guides, reflecting a soft approach, there is the possibility of a much more wicked approach being adopted by staff which would probably contribute to a more wicked experience for students. The possibility of a soft approach to the use of learning outcomes was present within each of the three stakeholder groups and provides the potential for effective change in establishing wicked assessment as will be discussed later.

Although it may have been surprising to find Quality Officers offering an understanding of learning outcomes as guides rather than as a threshold this view was evident. It was suggested by one Quality Officer that a degree of interpretation takes place with respect to learning outcomes. In general though, Quality Officers generally adopted a harder line with

respect towards them. In doing so they demonstrated a much tamer approach to assessment than the other two groups.

## **7.7 Standardisation, equity and the benefits of wicked assessment**

Evidence of tameness within the results was summed up by two members of Teaching Staff, one of who referred to the nature of HE as having the effect of restricting how it is currently understood, and one who referred to staff as passive.

*I just think we work within very restricted perceptions of what we are meant to be doing but that's not just HE the whole system is set up like that. T2*

*I think the staff are pretty passive and I think the staff go along with assessment, rather than questioning it. T6*

If passive is read as tame it can be seen how it is tameness which dominates what happens within HE but where wicked understandings are sometimes present, if rarely acted upon. Similarly, wicked epistemologies can be seen in the responses from students in how they recognise that existing forms of assessment inevitably limit their ability to demonstrate learning and development but for the students interviewed in this research there was little sense of being able to influence change in this.

As such it may not be surprising to see students developing mechanisms with which to cope with the system. Teaching Staff appeared to be critical of how students cope but a consideration of how teaching staff approach learning outcomes illustrates that many of them actually encourage what students do. For Teaching Staff overall, there was a greater sense of a wicked epistemology but this was not demonstrated in a uniform manner and it was rather limited. Similarly, wickedity was present in responses from Quality Officers but there seemed to be a reluctance at times to acknowledge this or move beyond the systems in place. Overall, the extent of a wicked epistemology was very limited.

From the data presented in chapter 6 it appears to be the case that contemporary approaches to assessment are somewhat tame. Being tame, they are less able to accommodate the unexpected, the unusual. In an environment where the student experience is becoming ever more prominent tameness is unlikely to generate either motivation or creativity. This is important because, as argued previously, promoting and

nurturing creativity and originality is a significant part of HE. As was argued in the introduction to this chapter, if HE does value creativity and originality it is necessary to establish assessment that can accommodate this. The inference was that this would be assessment that is wicked. However, developments relating to standardisation are quite likely to lead to assessment within HE wherein students are being taught to be tame. As such there may be benefits to be gained from an approach which promotes wickedity.

Developments that have led to increasing standardisation were established in chapter 3 and concerns about standardisation were evident within the interviews. Indeed, there is a strong case for standardisation as it can be promoted on the grounds of equity. It can also be seen in discussions regarding accountability. If accountability is a driver then standardisation can be recognised as a way of achieving that. Accountability and standardisation however, fit more easily with processes that are tame, than they do with processes, such as teaching and learning which can be understood as wicked. This reiterates a concern for all parties engaged in HE though. The question may be asked regarding what HE is for and whether or not accountability and standardisation should be privileged over the development of creativity and originality. There is a sense wherein it appears as though that is precisely the situation that has been arrived at.

Currently it appears that assessment within HE can be seen as being squeezed, to an extent, between two external forces which share similar concerns. On the one hand the position of the QAA acts as force which pushes for increasing standardisation on the grounds of accountability; on the other hand students have a strong claim to be treated in an equitable manner. There is some degree of synergy in these two forces because standardisation can be seen to give the illusion of equity but each may act to tame assessment. A more wicked approach to assessment could appear to undermine standardisation and could be seen as inequitable if not presented clearly. Any calls for wicked assessment then must be able to incorporate the range of benefits that it may afford.

The issue of equity might be something that can be seen as problematic within a wicked approach to assessment. It would be hard to argue that different students could be treated differently when it comes to assessment but there is still a concern regarding how to accommodate creativity and originality. Recognising the wicked nature of many contemporary problems can also mean recognising that sometimes there is no perfect,

enduring solution. A wicked problem is a messy problem (Ney and Verweij, 2014). Following Ney and Verweij, a wicked problem is not a problem that can have a tame solution.

Although wicked assessment has tended to be presented as promoting creativity and originality, in a way that standardised approaches often fail to do, it can be seen that the benefits of wicked assessment are not restricted to this. Wicked assessment will also be fairer in giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities to a greater extent and, as will be argued, may also contribute to fostering greater student engagement.

A claim such as this however, may conflict with concerns for accountability but it can be argued that that are good reasons for not privileging accountability if the outcome is a system that stifles creativity. Indeed it was noted that one member of Teaching Staff defended the use of learning outcomes because such a standardised approach affords a degree of protection to students by restricting the activities of academics. In this way reducing the power of academics who teach was presented as positive but this was not for academic reasons, it was for bureaucratic reasons. If, by reducing the power of academics who teach, their power to motivate and stimulate students is also reduced it might be argued that this has the consequence of impoverishing the potential of HE.

This is not to suggest that academics should have no restrictions *per se* but it does provide support for a system of quality assurance which evaluates the outcomes of programmes of study in a way that can accommodate the demonstration by students of creativity and originality rather than determining what will count as a valid outcome to begin with. In achieving this HE is in a strong position as Teaching Staff are expected to have expert knowledge.

As such, achieving wicked assessment will rest upon accommodating a plurality of views with respect to how student work is assessed. In developing wicked assessment there is the potential for revitalising HE in general but as Ney and Verweij (2014) have argued, failing to take the concerns of all parties into account is likely to lead to failure. As such, they refer to the clumsiness of solutions to wicked problems. There cannot be a tame strategy to achieving wickedity. So, because the drivers of tame assessment are plural it should be recognised that changing this will not be straightforward. As such it is necessary to consider some ways in which the central concerns of the thesis can be used to promote practical changes within assessment in HE.

## 7.8 Towards wicked assessment

It has been demonstrated that there is limited evidence of wickedity amongst each of the three stakeholder groups, with concerns being mired in aspects of assessment which may prove frustrating rather than providing any appetite for change. Arguments have been presented which suggest that achieving wicked assessment will be beneficial to HE as a whole but that this will pose a challenge. There is little likelihood of a simple solution. To take one example, it has been argued that there is a strong driver against wickedity, and for tameness, originating in those parties who promote standardisation and accountability on the grounds of equity. These are difficult claims to counter but adopting tame assessment on the grounds that demonstrating equity within a wicked system is challenging is not a justification for it. It seems then that establishing wicked assessment will involve a degree of reorientation in each of the three stakeholder groups.

If the purpose of the thesis was to investigate the epistemological position adopted by each of the three stakeholder groups, and it was found that there is a degree of tameness to assessment within HE, so it can be argued that achieving wicked assessment will rest upon changing these positions. In this way the aim is to establish HE as a sector which embraces wickedity and which resists tameness. This could be on the grounds that wickedity is integral to HE. In achieving this, promoting the concept of wicked and tame may be made easier by presenting this as assessment practices which accommodate creativity and originality.

In making this claim though I am jumping ahead and focusing upon the outcomes of change rather than considering how change can be effected. As such there are areas where developing wicked assessment within HE will be achievable starting with reviewing how learning outcomes are used. It may appear that a central thrust of this thesis is to argue against the use of learning outcomes. This is not the case. What has emerged from this thesis is the promotion of the case for wicked assessment in HE. It has been demonstrated however that learning outcomes may act to tame assessment and for this reason there is evidence to suggest that a revised approach to assessment is required.

It has been argued that learning outcomes can stifle creativity and originality, so taming assessment and impoverishing HE. It has also been demonstrated that how teaching staff approach learning outcomes is a potential source for differential practice which can be seen as providing for inequitable practices. If it is accepted that the university is obliged to assure



the QAA that it has robust quality systems in place and that these provide for equity it can be argued that to cease using learning outcomes completely may create problems. However, it should be possible to revise how learning outcomes are used in a way which reflects the idea presented earlier regarding how they may be seen as hard or soft.

If learning outcomes at programme level are treated as hard, in that they exist as threshold statements it is possible for the university to satisfy the QAA that programmes reflect subject benchmarks. As such, students must demonstrate that they have met them. However, learning outcomes at module level could be treated as soft. In this way, learning outcomes at module level become guides rather than thresholds. At the moment both programme and module level learning outcomes are established at validation but it is only module level learning outcomes which are assessed. There is an assumption then that completing modules within a programme means that a student has achieved programme level learning outcomes.

In this way programme level learning outcomes provide for quality assurance systems relating to subject benchmark statements and have to be demonstrated but a greater degree of flexibility is provided in terms of how students achieve the threshold at each level. Given that it is marks awarded at module level which contribute to the overall degree classification the establishment of soft learning outcomes at module level, (presented as intended learning outcomes and which are used to guide what students and teaching staff are likely to do within a module), provide greater scope for students to be rewarded for creative and original work.

It may also be necessary to review learning outcomes at module level. The aim will be to evaluate the extent to which creativity and originality can be supported and rewarded. Where learning outcomes are identified as being restrictive, or which do little to promote and accommodate creativity and originality they should be considered as being in need of change.

To achieve wicked assessment though there is also a need to change the epistemological positions held by each of the three stakeholder groups. As part of this the development of critically reflective practice, with a focus on creativity and originality, is necessary. Within the HE sector the role of research has a prominent position and for many teaching staff it is engagement with the subject discipline that motivates them to become academic staff. The importance of this is that many staff may be less concerned with understanding the practice

of teaching than they are in their subject discipline. To address this, staff development activities should be provided which support the development of critical reflection on assessment within HE.

Teaching staff will often be very comfortable with the idea of being critical within their own discipline; the task is to make them critical when it comes to how assessment of their discipline is carried out. This is not to argue that all existing assessment practices are in need of changing, rather it is to recognise that the reasons for assessment may be more important than how we carry out assessment and to suggest that how we assess may be due to concerns which are not focused on developing creativity and originality.

With respect to Quality Officers there is a need to establish why wickedity should be privileged over tameness. This may involve demonstrating how learning outcomes stifle creativity and originality. If teaching staff review learning outcomes and find that changes are required it falls to Quality Officers to facilitate such change. The university must have a system whereby module amendments can be made easily. There is an understanding here that teaching staff are not free to make changes to their modules and courses. They are required to follow procedures which are in place to achieve certain assurances regarding matters of quality.

The issue however, is what counts as quality. If it can be demonstrated that a change of assessment will provide a higher degree of quality in terms of a better student experience and outcome then an administrative system which prevents or delays such a change must be seen as undermining quality. That is, unless quality is viewed as a measure of following a bureaucratic administrative system rather than in terms of academic outcomes. The argument here is that the real measure of a quality assurance system is the extent to which it provides for outcomes that are prized. Although chapter 2 demonstrated the ways in which economic aims have been important in recent decades it can be argued that the measure of quality within HE is the extent to which creativity and originality are nurtured and rewarded. This reflects the arguments presented in chapter 3 by Bottery (2004) and Hargreaves (2003), both of whom point to the importance of innovation within contemporary economic activities. This is because the role of individuals who can innovate plays a significant part in achieving economic advantage. As such a more responsive system, which provides for rapid change, should be seen as facilitating quality.

From a student perspective the move towards intended learning outcomes should provide a firmer basis from which to develop their work as it removes the existing threshold which contributes to some students adopting a utilitarian approach. Within wicked assessment the student can be supported to take risks and to appreciate that they have scope to be creative whilst recognising that the professional judgement of the marker will be concerned with the extent to which their work reflects the concerns of any module in relation to the marking criteria. As such, learning outcomes still operate to guide students but their own interests and concerns can be accommodated and rewarded where appropriate. In turn, the benefit should be greater motivation on the part of students and greater levels of student engagement which is likely to translate into higher levels of completion and achievement, something which the university is likely to welcome in the face of funding and feedback mechanisms.

## **7.9 Conclusion**

The data generated by this research provided a number of points for discussion but in general the epistemological position evident within each of the three stakeholder groups was one in which tameness was more common than wickedity. The concept of wicked as presented within this thesis was generally absent even when Teaching Staff and Quality Officers raised concerns about contemporary approaches to assessment.

It often appeared as though the driver behind an increasing tameness within assessment was understood as extrinsic to their role, and perhaps even, their responsibility. This thesis does accept that there are extrinsic drivers with regards to assessment but this does not negate the fact that both Teaching Staff and Quality Officers are employed to provide HE in a way which needs to be fit for purpose. In drawing upon Bottery (2004) and Hargreaves (2003) it was argued that what would be fit for purpose would be HE which supported creativity and originality.

In sum, this thesis has come to argue for wicked assessment on the grounds that this would promote creativity and originality, and in doing so reflect the economic agenda as encompassed by ideas regarding a knowledge society; increase student motivation; and enhance the role of professional judgement. To achieve this will require some changes and a number of recommendations are presented in chapter 8 which follows. Changes should be achievable though. Although the results did demonstrate some cause for concern,

suggesting that all is not well within HE there was however some degree of wickedity evident, enough to argue that change may be possible, although in true wicked fashion, this will not be a simple solution.

## **Chapter 8 Conclusion and recommendations**

### **8.1 Introduction**

The thesis as presented has explored the epistemological positions adopted by three stakeholder groups: Students, Teaching Staff and Quality Officers, within one department of an English university with respect to contemporary assessment practices. In chapter 1, it was proposed that the aim of the thesis was to consider the extent to which principles can be established by which assessment practices can capture the richness and complexity of learning within HE and reward creativity and originality.

The approach taken within the thesis was to make use of the concepts of wicked and tame as proposed by Rittel and Webber and to use this a tool for evaluating how assessment is understood by the three stakeholder groups. This was covered in chapter 2. In subsequent chapters the thesis demonstrated the value of this conceptual approach and, in employing this as a conceptual framework, has argued that a range of drivers have had the effect of taming assessment within HE. The consequence of this can be understood as the impoverishment of the HE experience for students. Having established the value of the concept of wickedity and arguing that wickedity provides for a better HE experience than does tameness, this chapter concludes the thesis and lays the ground for recommendations.

It is perhaps generally accepted that the conclusion to a thesis draws the overall discussion together and points to ways in which a weakness or a problem may be addressed. In doing so the author demonstrates the value of the thesis and of the research. This conclusion seeks to remain faithful to this aim. The research has demonstrated that in the main, approaches towards assessment within HE are tame rather than wicked and that this is supported, though not necessarily caused, by the epistemological position evident within each of the three stakeholder groups. This is not to state however that there is a simple response to the issues described. Although tameness in assessment has been presented as being undesirable the thesis has also demonstrated that the factors which drive this are numerous and multi-layered. As such, although ways in which assessment can be made more wicked have been offered, achieving this will not be simple.

Indeed it may be argued from the outset that such a tidy ending would fly in the face of the concept of wickedity, providing, as it does, a degree of tameness. Instead, this thesis

concludes by promoting the value of wickedity together with some recommendations but where the overall conclusions being drawn from the research are that to establish wicked assessment will entail challenging existing practice and epistemological positions.

In considering the findings of the research, and my responses to this, the analogy of a “silver bullet” is useful; the strategy which encapsulates an identifiable solution. The formulation of a perfect, tame, strategy may fit with a problem that is tame but, as has been argued throughout this thesis, HE is neither tame, nor desirable. HE exists within a dynamic landscape wherein numerous drivers exert greater or lesser force, influencing what happens within the sector. In place of the silver bullet then, more success may be achieved in the use of silver buckshot as per Ney and Verweij (2014), wherein a number of changes are enacted which accommodates a range of views. In sum it can be argued that what is really being argued for within this thesis is an approach or strategy which resists tameness and which promotes and supports wickedity within assessment. As such, what is required is not an approach which will solve the problem *per se* but rather an approach which is vigilant to it, an approach which accepts and emphasises the risks of allowing HE to be tame and which recognises the benefits of wickedity.

## **8.2 In support of wicked assessment**

The main proposal to emerge from this thesis is that wicked and tame are useful concepts for evaluating the nature of HE. This rests upon the synthesis of the literature reviews and the data. The thesis has argued that the outcome of various influences, presented in chapter 3 as drivers, has been the taming of assessment in HE and that this may impoverish HE. It may impoverish HE by reducing the scope for students to demonstrate creativity and originality and although this thesis has been focused upon undergraduate students, the claim made earlier, and drawn from the results, that experiences at one level impact upon the next, are pertinent. If tame HE is provided to undergraduates it will not be surprising to find that this impacts upon the experience and activities of post-graduate students.

There was little sense of wickedity demonstrated by any of the three stakeholder groups but that may not be unexpected if we consider the drivers which constitute the context within which each group works. For example, it was argued that a concern for equity provided a strong driver for standardisation but standardisation had already been established as a broad social force in its own right. In that sense the concern for equity simply has the effect of giving credence to standardisation and reducing the possibility of resistance to it.

This example illustrates the ways in which different drivers overlap with each other and demonstrate why this, itself, is a wicked problem, and why there can be no silver bullet. As such there is a need to appreciate that multiple drivers influence HE and that there is no one over-riding factor which lies at the heart of any problem.

To achieve and accommodate wickedity there is a need for assessment practices to be revised and amended but alongside this is a need to change how assessment and assessment practices are understood by each of the three stakeholder groups. This however, raises the question of how this might be achieved. As such, the question becomes that of establishing how we can achieve a situation whereby wickedity is accommodated. This was initially considered in chapter 7 by considering steps that may be taken to change the way that learning outcomes are used and to change the epistemological position of individuals within each stakeholder group.

In this sense the use of wicked and tame as concepts with which to evaluate assessment in HE are useful in that they establish a guiding principle. An analogy may be drawn here with Children's Services during the last decade or so where a guiding principle was established by which policies and practices were assessed against a simple requirement; what provides the best outcomes for the child? Returning to HE, the aim is that any practices which are adopted are able to accommodate wickedity, and in doing so, avoid being tame. What will be valuable in achieving this is to establish an understanding that a key purpose of HE is to promote creativity and originality rather than just the mastery of what is already known. As such, the concept of wickedity may be drawn upon in a way that reminds us that we cannot foresee what HE students will learn or what they will contribute and that we need to find a way to reward them for being creative. If this is the case then we need to establish how we can achieve wicked assessment.

Starting with a review of learning outcomes is likely to be a task that is achievable and which will in turn change perceptions of the place of learning outcomes. Change can be difficult to achieve so any attempt to remove the use of learning outcomes may be very unlikely at this time. Using them in hard and soft ways, as described in chapter 7 would be a good start, i.e. establish programme level learning outcomes as hard but use module level learning outcomes as soft by seeing them as intended or potential outcomes.

Establishing the use of intended learning outcomes at module level will still provide guidance for teaching staff in respect of planning but some development activities may be useful for

those staff who have come to see them as things to teach to. This should see changes in how teaching staff understand their role as professionals. This will be particularly apparent when marking assessments as marking to intended learning outcomes rather than proscribed learning outcomes requires greater use of professional judgement. In turn, clear and unambiguous marking criteria can contribute to this.

For staff employed in quality matters a similar change in understanding is required and a similar reiteration of what HE is, and should be, may be necessary. It may be that this claim highlights the challenge of achieving wicked assessment in that different groups will understand HE in different ways. It was established earlier that the three stakeholder groups are not homogenous but the individuals who comprise each group may not be homogenous either. Job roles within HE may be complex and it could be argued that quality should be a concern for all individuals. Individuals who make up these groups will be subject to the drivers that have been discussed in different ways and it would not be surprising perhaps to find that Quality Officers will be more inclined than others to favour bureaucratic systems, especially where these make the administration of assessment more manageable.

Part of change then must be include recognition that bureaucratic procedures cannot replace trust or professional judgements, their function should be to support such qualities. As such the quality systems employed must be responsive to the concept of wickedity and recognise that in terms of employability we will provide a better service to our students if we do not tame them. There is a danger that in establishing quality procedures, for perfectly legitimate reasons, HE becomes tamed as a consequence of such quality systems being seen as of greater importance than learning and development. Establishing the role and purpose of HE then will require a different approach being taken with each of the three stakeholder groups because each is concerned with slightly different aspects of it.

For students wicked assessment gives greater scope for their own development but may require discussions which introduce them to ideas about standards and quality with respect to marking. Given the practices in other levels of education this may be challenging for students but as was referred to in chapter 6, there are benefits to be gained from being challenged and taking risks. In summarising a key part of Biesta's (2013) argument, education is risky but risk should not be equated with wrong. Risk is necessary for development and development may be seen as integral to HE.



In sum, achieving wicked assessment will not be possible by an approach which conceptualises the task as tame. HE is wicked in the way that the concept is used in this thesis.

### **8.3 Recommendations**

Although this chapter opened by stating that there was to be no simple solution to the problem as defined it should be obvious that both this chapter and chapter 7 have raised the possibility of changes which would start to address tameness and in doing so promote wickedity. In summarising these, three recommendations are presented as the starting point:

1. Seek to change the epistemological position of each of the three stakeholder groups by focusing on the benefits of creativity and originality and how these can be developed within HE so that wickedity comes to be associated with promoting this;
2. Revise the approach to assessment starting with the use of learning outcomes so that programme level outcomes are treated as hard and module level outcomes are treated as soft;
3. Establish the concept of wicked and tame as a guiding principle wherein wickedity is sought and tameness is to be avoided.

Just like the drivers though these do not exist independently of each other. Each can be seen as influencing the other and an appreciation of each reinforces the other. Efforts could be put into achieving recommendation 1 but if recommendation 2 is not achieved then any concerns for creativity and originality may falter at the point of assessment. Seeking to achieve recommendation 2 may be attempted but without developing an understanding of wicked and tame as per recommendation 3 may make the challenge more difficult as resistance often accompanies change. As such these three recommendations together provide a coherent start to achieving wickedity in HE.

In conclusion it may appear that these closing comments have started to drift away from the focus on assessment. However, although assessment is but one part of HE it is one that is vital and it is one which shapes the experience and value of HE for students in particular. In one sense it is assessment which shapes HE to a much greater extent than other aspects as

it is the mechanism by which awards are made. As such, it is important that it is fit for purpose. It is important that it is wicked, rather than tame.

## Appendix A

### Research Ethical Considerations Screening Checklist

(Adapted from: The Economic & Social Research Council Research Ethics framework 2005)

This checklist should be completed for every research project that involves human participants\* or *other animal* participants\*. It is used to identify whether a full application for ethics approval needs to be submitted. If a full application is required, the university [proforma](#) must be used.

Before completing this form, please refer to the University [Ethical Guidelines for Research, Consultancy and Project Work](#) and the [Guidelines on Ethics](#).

The principal investigator or, where the principal investigator is a student, the identified supervisor, is responsible for exercising appropriate professional judgement in this review.

This checklist must be completed before potential participants\* are approached to take part in any research.

All research activity must adhere to the university's [Equal Opportunity Policy Statement](#).

|  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Title of research:</b>              | Wicked problems and assessment in HE |
| <b>Name of researcher (applicant):</b> | Rob Creasy                           |
| Status (please select):                | Staff                                |
| Email address:                         | r.creasy                             |
| Contact address:                       | Faculty of E&T, YSJU                 |
| Telephone number:                      | 6248                                 |

#### For Students Only

|                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Module name and number:               |  |
| Supervisor's or module leader's name: |  |
| Email address:                        |  |
| Contact address:                      |  |
| Telephone number                      |  |

Please complete the screening checklist below. **Answering yes to any of the questions will require you to explain how the ethical issues raised will be managed and a full application to the relevant research ethics committee will be needed (*links that provide additional information for several questions are provided, if needed*)**

- |     |   |    |
|-----|---|----|
| 1.  | Does the study involve participants* who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent (e.g. children, people with learning disabilities, your own students)                                       | No |
|     | <a href="#"><u>British Psychological Society (BPS)</u></a>  |    |
| 2.  | Does the study require the researcher(s) to have CRB clearance?   | No |
|     | <a href="#"><u>Criminal Records Bureau (CRB)</u></a>  |    |
| 3.  | Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited? (e.g. students at school, members of a self-help group, residents of a nursing home)       | No |
| 4.  | Will it be necessary for participants* to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time?   | No |
| 5.  | Will the study involve discussion of or the disclosure of information about sensitive topics? (e.g. sexual activity, drug use)  | No |
| 6.  | Are drugs, placebos or other substances (e.g. food substances, vitamins) to be administered to the study participants* or will the study involve invasive, intrusive or potentially harmful procedures of any kind? | No |
| 7.  | Will blood or tissue samples be obtained from participants*?  | No |
|     | <a href="#"><u>Royal College of Nursing (RCN)</u></a>   |    |
| 8.  | Is physical pain or more than mild discomfort likely to result from the study?  | No |
|     | <a href="#"><u>Economic &amp; Social Research Council (ESRC)</u></a>  |    |
| 9.  | Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety or cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?  | No |
| 10. | Is an extensive degree of exercise or physical exertion involved?   | No |
| 11. | Will financial inducements be offered to participants* other than to cover expenses or time involved?   | No |
|     | <a href="#"><u>British Educational Research Association (BERA)</u></a>  |    |
| 12. | Will the study involve recruitment of patients through the NHS?   | No |
|     | <a href="#"><u>National Research Ethics Service (NRES) (NHS)</u></a>  |    |
| 13. | Will the study demand participants* to commit extensive time to the study?  | No |

---

\* For 'participants' read 'subjects' in terms of national interpretations

**Signed:** ..... **Date:** .....

## Appendix B

### Research consent form.

These interviews are being held to generate data which will be used within a doctorate in education.

The researcher is Rob Creasy, a candidate for the doctorate in education.

Rob is studying for the doctorate at University of Hull, supervised by Professor Mike Bottery.

**Preamble:** For a long time I have had interests in respect of how we assess in HE and what we expect or intend assessment to do. Staff, who teach within HE will tend to have a view on this but so will others such as students and administrative staff who are also involved in HE. Similarly the administrative demands which govern how we organise the HE experience influences when and how we assess. At the same time regulatory bodies such as the QAA also exert an influence upon assessment. As an academic I instinctively look for a theoretical framework which I can use to make sense of the assessment practices within HE. As such, in this research, I am drawing on the work of Rittel and Weber, who propose that problems fall into one of two camps; they are either wicked or they are tame. The assumption being that assessment reflects an approach to tackle a problem. In exploring this I am interviewing Teaching Staff, Quality Officers and Students about issues relating to assessment within HE.

**Ethical note:** University of Hull and YSJU ethical guidelines were consulted prior to carrying out this research. No ethical issues were identified. That said you should be aware that you are free to cease participation at any time. You are under no obligation and have the right to answer only those questions that you wish to answer. No questions should cause any discomfort but that is a matter for you to decide. I cannot presume to know what will cause you discomfort. The interview will be recorded and the recording will then be transcribed. You retain the right to refuse the use of any part or all of the data that results from your interview. I endeavour to ensure that your anonymity is preserved when writing up. Teaching staff will be referred to as teaching staff with a number if there is a need to distinguish between responses. Quality Officers will also be referred to in the same manner as will students.

#### Consent:

I understand how the research is being carried out and that no ethical issues have been identified. I accept that I am under no obligation to take part in the research and am free to withdraw at any time. I also accept that I may withdraw my consent for the data to be used.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

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\* For 'participants' read 'subjects' in terms of national interpretations