Draft paper presented at the ICARE Conference, *The Social Practice of an Educational Research Community*, Manchester Metropolitan University, England, 13-14 September 2005. This is an unfinished work in progress. Quote at the risk of knowing that I change my mind frequently.

Internationalisation, globalisation, and quality audits: an empire of the mind?

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Empire as concept

> The empires of the future are the empires of the mind.
>
> —Winston Churchill, Speech at Harvard University, 5 September 1943[1]

> *The decline in sovereignty of nation-states… does not mean that sovereignty as such has declined.* …sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire.
>
> —Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri, *Empire* (2000, pp. xi-xii; authors' emphasis)

The concept of empire is back on the political science agenda in more ways than one, most obviously in relation to debates about the role(s) of the United States as the sole remaining superpower and/or imperialist oppressor. As Simon Dalby (2004) points out, until recently many historians have not seen the US as an empire in the same sense as the European nations from which its political rhetoric attempts to distinguish it (see also Niall Ferguson, 2003). Others argue that the global presence of the US navy, the ubiquity of its troop garrisons in many 'independent' nation-states, and its pre-emptive use of military force to impose its political and economic will, invites us to understand US power in imperial terms (see, for example, Andrew Bacevich, 2002; Max Boot, 2002) – all of which adds further weight to Rob Walker's (1993) long-standing argument that there is much more to global politics than many contemporary 'international relations' models of competing and cooperating autonomous states seem to suggest: in a world dominated by imperial power, territorial assumptions about sovereignty may not be particularly useful.

Churchill's reference to 'empires of the mind' foreshadows another sense of empire that Hardt and Negri (2000) explicate at much greater length in *Empire*. They argue that even the most dominant nation-states have ever-diminishing powers to regulate the flows of capital, technologies and people across national boundaries and that sovereignty now is passing to an amorphous series of regulations and shared processes that exceed the mandates of nation-states and determine the rules for incorporating numerous institutions and peoples into what they simply call 'Empire', which they distinguish from imperialism:

> In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchangers through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow (pp. xii-xiii; authors' emphasis).

Hardt and Negri (2000) emphasise that they use 'Empire' not as a metaphor, 'which would require demonstration of the resemblances between today's world order and the Empires of

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[1] The Churchill Centre http://www.winstonchurchill.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=424 accessed 5 September 2005.

Rome, China, the Americas, and so forth, but rather as a *concept*' (p. xiv; authors' emphasis) characterized chiefly by a lack of boundaries: 'Empire's rule has no limits. … No territorial boundaries limit its reign' (p. xiv).[2]

Audit cultures or audit Empire?

A number of recent news items from different countries lead me to speculate that quality assurance in higher education might be becoming 'a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers' (Hardt & Negri 2000, p. xii), and that this marks a shift from what Marilyn Strathern (2000) termed 'audit cultures' (plural) to the singularity of *audit Empire*.

For example, in South Africa Victor Mecoamere (2005) reports that 'The Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council on Higher Education (HEQC) has just signed a memoranda [sic] of understanding with quality assurance agencies in the UK and India' (p. 8). According to Mecoamere's report, signing the memorandum will enable the three national agencies to exchange information and expertise on (for example) 'key policy documents and operational information' and 'collaboration in joint research of mutual benefit'. Similarly, the executive director of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), David Woodhouse (2005), recently reported on 'the signing of a memorandum of cooperation with the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation, and the Malaysian Lembaga Akreditasi Negara exploring the possibility of AUQA assisting it in a review of Malaysian providers' (p. 34). Woodhouse claims that '[t]hough we [AUQA] are acting in the best interests of the overseas operations of Australian universities, we are conscious of "quality imperialism" and must acknowledge that many countries have their own quality assurance systems in place'.

My experiences in three of the above-named countries (Australia, Hong Kong and South Africa) lead me to wonder what such 'free trade' between national quality agencies might produce (and/or prevent). In the remainder of this paper I explore some ways in which concepts drawn from Deleuze and Guattari's 'geophilosophy' might be used to analyse 'quality' in contemporary contexts of globalisation, multiculturalism and international communication networks, with particular reference to translating and/or interpreting 'quality' across national, linguistic and cultural borders.

Geophilosophy

> Nietzsche founded geophilosophy by seeking to determine the national characteristics of French, English and German philosophy. But why were only three countries collectively able to produce philosophy in the capitalist world?
>
> —Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (1994, p. 102)

Deleuze and Guattari created a new critical language for analysing thinking as flows or movements across space. Concepts such as *assemblage, deterritorialisation, lines of flight, nomadology,* and *rhizome/rhizomatics* clearly refer to spatial relationships and to ways of conceiving ourselves and other objects moving in space. For example, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) distinguish 'rhizomatic' thinking from 'arborescent' conceptions of knowledge as hierarchically articulated branches of a central stem or trunk rooted in firm foundations. As Umberto Eco (1984) explains, 'the rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite. The space of conjecture is a rhizome space' (p. 57).

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[2] Hardt and Negri explicitly acknowledge Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus* as a significant influence on their thinking, which is evident in their references to *deterritorialisation,* and their creation of Empire as a *concept* rather than a metaphor.

In a world of increasingly complex information/communication/knowledge technologies, the space of educational research is also becoming a 'rhizome space'. Rhizome is to a tree as the Internet is to a letter – networking that echoes the hyperconnectivity of the Internet. The structural reality of a tree and a letter is relatively simple: a trunk connecting two points through or over a mapped surface. But rhizomes and the Internet (see figs. 1 and 2) are infinitely complex and continuously changing. Imagining knowledge production in a rhizomatic space is particularly generative in postcolonialist educational inquiry because, as Patricia O'Riley (2003) explains: 'Rhizomes affirm what is excluded from western thought and reintroduce reality as dynamic, heterogeneous, and nondichotomous; they implicate rather than replicate; they propagate, displace, join, circle back, fold' (p. 27).

Figure 1: A tangle of rhizomes
(Drawing: Warren Sellers)

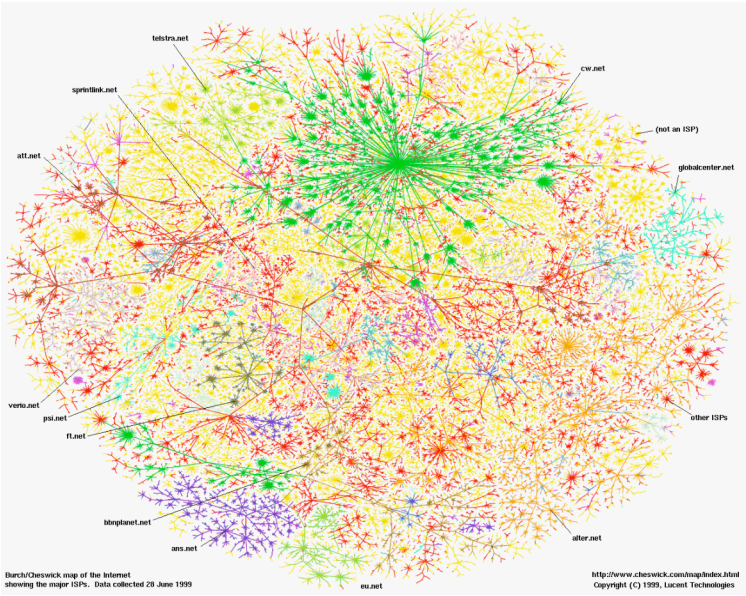

Figure 2: A map of the Internet
(http://research.lumeta.com/ches/map/gallery/isp-ss.gif)

In their last book together, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) ask: *What is Philosophy?* They answer by plotting the 'geography of reason' from pre-Socratic times to the present, and characterise philosophy as the *creation* of concepts through which knowledge can be generated. As Michael Peters (2004) points out, this is very different from the approaches taken by many analytic and linguistic philosophers who are more concerned with the *clarification* of concepts:

> Against the conservatism, apoliticism and ahistoricism of analytic philosophy that has denied its own history until very recently, Deleuze and Guattari attempt [a] geography of philosophy – a history of geophilosophy – beginning with the Greeks. Rather than providing a history, they conceptualise philosophy in spatial terms as *geophilosophy*. Such a conception immediately complicates the question of philosophy: by tying it to a geography and a history, a kind of historical and spatial specificity, philosophy cannot escape its relationship to the City and the State. In its modern and postmodern forms it cannot escape its form under industrial and knowledge capitalism (p. 218).

One of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) conceptual creations is what they call *'mots d'ordre'*, 'order-words', which are not commands but terms that link implicit presuppositions to social obligations and produce locatable effects:

> We call *order-words*, not a particular category of explicit statements (for example, in the imperative), but the relation of every word or every statement to implicit presuppositions, in other words, to speech acts that are, and can only be, accomplished in the statement. Order-words do not concern commands only, but every act that is linked to statements by a 'social obligation.' Every statement displays this link, directly or indirectly. Questions, promises, are order-words. …language is the set of all order-words, implicit presuppositions, or speech acts current in a language at a given time (p. 79).

Brian Massumi, in his 'Translator's endnote' to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*, notes that *mot d'ordre* means 'slogan' or '(military) password' in standard French and argues that Deleuze and Guattari use it literally to mean 'word of order', that is, to suggest a command as well as a word that creates a political order (p. 523). Similarly, Robert and Kerry-Ann Porter (2003) suggest that 'order-word' signifies 'the immediate, irreducible and pragmatic relation between *words* and *orders*' (p. 139), which can in turn be viewed in two ways:

> 1. Words or speech acts are pragmatically implicated in a *social order* or in forms of, what Deleuze and Guattari call, 'social obligation'. These forms of 'social obligation' always presuppose *imperatives*…
> 2. Words or speech acts can perform an *ordering function*: that is, they can *imperatively* or immediately change the circumstances in which they are formulated (p. 139).

To exemplify their first point, Porter and Porter (2003) consider the imperatives presupposed by the 'social obligations' that 'order' the ways in which a PhD student and an examiner perform the *viva*:

> Think about the *social-institutional setting* in which the communicative exchange takes place, and the roles the examiner and student are *obligated* to perform in order to make their discourse function in this context. It is *imperative* that the examiner makes judgements relevant to the substantive content of the text under discussion. It is *imperative* that the student exhibits an intimate knowledge of the work she is required to defend. Clearly, all bets would be off if the examiner insisted on asking the doctoral candidate questions concerning her personal life rather than her thesis. Similarly, there would be no pragmatic grounds on which to proceed if the student responded to questions by turning cartwheels around the room. This is just another way of saying that forms of 'social obligation' – that is, the imperatives implied by the social order or social-institutional setting – precede the performative assumption of speech action roles (pp. 139-40).

Kaustuv Roy (2004) offers a succinct example of the second way in which Porter and Porter (2003) see words relating to orders: 'when the judge pronounces "Guilty", the result is not simple penitence but the *production of the convict* with its own intricate social structure' (p. 304; emphasis in original). For Deleuze and Guattari, language is neither information nor communication, but 'a leaping from order-word to order-word, punctuated by action, as each statement performs an act or an act is performed in the statement… A word is what a word does or prevents from doing' (Roy, 2004, pp. 304-5).

If we approach 'quality' as an order-word in educational discourses, then we will not ask what quality *means* but ask how it *works* and what it *does* or *produces* (or prevents) in specific locations.[3] Understanding 'quality' as an order-word might help us understand what

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[3] Several recent studies demonstrate the generativity of this approach to analysing the semiotics of institutions such as schools and universities; see, for example, Kaustuv Roy (2003) and the recent special issue of *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36 (3) 2004 on Deleuze and Education.

national quality agencies are able to 'trade' across national, linguistic and cultural borders – which may be especially significant if such boundaries also designate power differentials.

I initially intended to explore this speculation further by focusing on three particular examples drawn from 'quality' discourses in different nations, namely, the auditing processes managed by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), the promotion of 'quality school education' by Hong Kong's Quality Education Fund, and continuing debates about 'balancing quality and equality' in post-apartheid South Africa. However, as I began to write an earlier version of this paper, a well-publicised controversy over AUQA's approach to quality audits provided me with a particularly rich example of how 'quality' as an order-word is pragmatically implicated in a social order and in forms of social obligation – albeit through events that clearly disrupt this order and deny these obligations. I will therefore examine the Australian situation in greater depth than I anticipated and, as a consequence, will give the other two examples somewhat more cursory attention.

Auditing 'quality': the Australian Universities Quality Agency

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) describes itself as 'an independent, not-for-profit national agency that will promote, audit, and report on quality assurance in Australian higher education'.[4] Among other things, AUQA is responsible for 'conducting quality audits of self-accrediting Australian higher education institutions… [and] providing public reports on the outcomes of these audits'. AUQA provides an online glossary which includes stipulative definitions of 'quality' and eight other 'quality' terms, namely, 'quality approval', 'quality assessment', 'quality assurance (QA)', 'quality audit', 'quality control (QC)', 'quality management', 'quality management system (QMS)' and 'quality system'. For example, the AUQA glossary defines 'quality' as:

> Fitness for purpose, where 'purpose' is to be interpreted broadly, to include mission, goals, objectives, specifications, and so on. This is an inclusive definition, as every organisation or activity has a purpose, even if it is not always precisely stated. 'Fitness for purpose' means both that an organisation has procedures in place that are appropriate for the specified purposes, and that there is evidence to show that these procedures are in fact achieving the specified purposes.

AUQA therefore requires each university to prepare a 'performance portfolio', a self-study of the 'fitness' of its procedures for achieving its specified purposes. This portfolio is then scrutinised by an audit panel which may ask further questions of clarification, seek further documentation, and undertake a site visit in which they observe aspects of the university's operations and interview various members of staff. The audit panel eventually prepares a report containing commendations (statements about what the institution is doing well), recommendations (things that need to be done) and, since 2004, affirmations (matters in need of attention that the auditee has already diagnosed).

In the Australian higher education community, 'quality' is thus a word that has created a socio-political order (materialized in AUQA, the activities it 'orders' in universities, and the portfolios and reports these activities produce). Enunciations such as 'quality assurance' and 'quality audit' are pragmatically implicated in forms of social obligation that presuppose imperatives for all of the parties concerned. The roles and actions that AUQA and the universities are obligated to take in order to make their discourse function are implicit presuppositions, but they become more visible when these imperatives and obligations are challenged or ignored, as would also be the case in Porter and Porter's (2003) PhD *viva*

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[4] Unless stated otherwise, all quotations pertaining to AUQA are taken from its website at www.auqa.edu.au <16 November 2004>

scenario, quoted above, if (for example) the examiner *did* ask inappropriate personal questions or the student *did* turn cartwheels around the room in response to the examiner's academic question.

The social order in which communicative exchanges between AUQA and Australian universities take place, and the roles each party is obliged to perform in order to make their discourse function, was challenged recently by Edith Cowan University (ECU). Immediately after AUQA released its report on ECU, the university placed a quarter-page advertisement in the *Higher Education Supplement (HES)* of *The Australian* newspaper which included a table ranking institutions based on the number of commendations each university received from AUQA (see fig. 3). One week later, the *HES* carried three letters to the editor, grouped in three columns under the common headline, 'Audit comparisons controversy'. Reading from left to right, the first letter was from the Executive Director of AUQA, Dr David Woodhouse (2004); the second letter was from Dr David Hamilton (2004), Director, Planning and Resource Development, University of Canberra; the third letter was from ECU's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Millicent Poole (2004).

Woodhouse (2004) refers to ECU's advertisement as 'unfortunate and misleading':

> unfortunate because it purports to use the outcome of the AUQA audit process as a basis for producing comparisons among universities. These audits were not set up for this purpose – in fact quite the converse. Each audit reviews the auditee against its own objectives… Under such circumstances, comparisons become meaningless. The universities themselves expressed repeated concerns that AUQA's audit reports would lead to the media generating league tables, and AUQA promised to attempt to write them in such a way as to discourage this tendency. It is particularly unfortunate therefore that a member of the AVCC [Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee] has chosen to take such an approach (p. 31).

Woodhouse adds that 'AUQA was conscious that the only area that might lend itself to – admittedly spurious – comparisons would be the numbers of recommendations and commendations' and explains how the ECU advertisement misleads readers by making such comparisons.[5]

Hamilton's (2004) letter begins by supporting Woodhouse's interpretation of the purposes of AUQA's audits:

> 'Never, never' was the mantra chanted by the inaugural executive director of the Australian Universities Quality Agency, David Woodhouse, as he made his way from university to university a couple of years ago introducing the compulsory audits. Never would the audits be used to rank universities.
>
> That was until last week when Millicent Poole, vice-chancellor of Edith Cowan University, broke ranks with her higher education colleagues and purchased space in the *HES* to publish her rankings of institutions based on the number of commendations each university received in their AUQA report (p. 31).

I doubt if it was a coincidence that the letters from Woodhouse, Hamilton and Poole were placed alongside a one-and-a-half page feature article, 'Ranking mania reflects distortion of priorities', in which Colin Steele (2004) discusses the scores achieved by Australian universities in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* World University Rankings.

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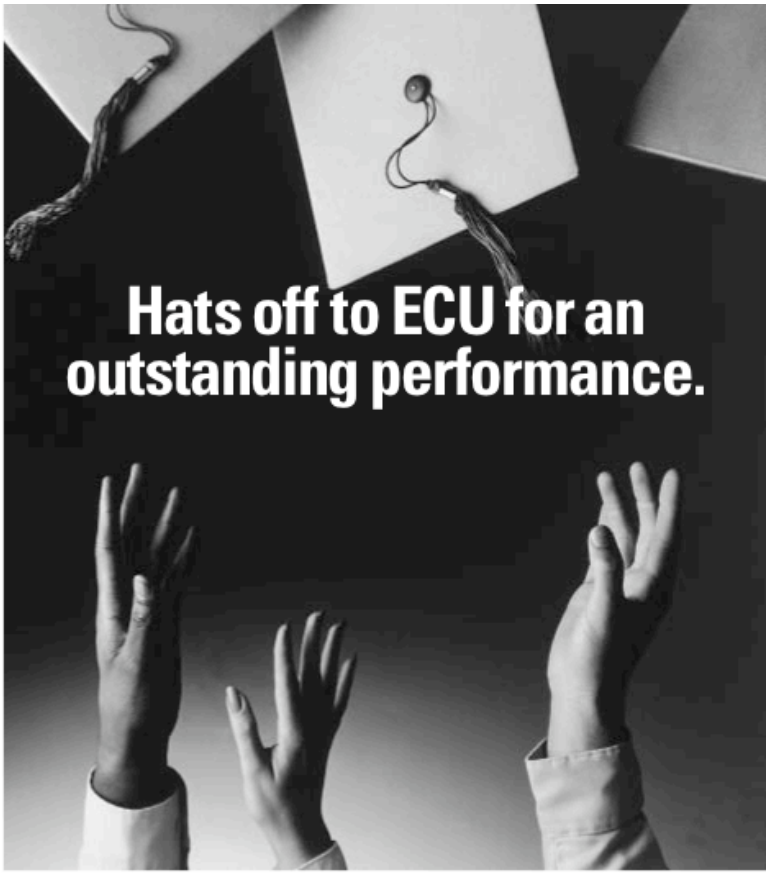
[5] Woodhouse argues that comparing the numbers of recommendations and commendations assumes that they all have equivalent weight, whereas in any given audit some are rather specific and confined, while others are of broader import.



In the latest audit undertaken by the independent Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Western Australia's Edith Cowan University (ECU) gained strong endorsement for its strategic focus, reputation and performance across many operational areas.

Leading outcome

As a New Generation University, ECU attained the highest number of commendations of any University audited by AUQA during its three years of operation.

And its ratio of commendations to recommendations for improvement is also the best of all Universities so far examined: 23 to 12.

SUMMARY AUQA AUDIT REPORTS

	Commend-ations	Recommend-ations
EDITH COWAN	23	12
Griffith	21	16
Queensland	19	16
UWA	18	21
James Cook	17	16
Macquarie	17	23
South Australia	16	10
Newcastle	16	19
Southern Queensland	14	22
Australian Maritime College	13	16
Southern Cross	13	18
New England	12	16
Australian Catholic	12	19
Canberra	11	21
CURTIN	10	20
NOTRE DAME	10	22
RMIT	10	24
Swinburne	8	18
Adelaide	7	26
Ballarat	6	26

Key findings

This is how the AUQA panel summarised its key findings:

1. ECU is to be applauded for the significant progress it has made on a range of fronts in recent years.

2. It has clearly grown in stature and now offers diverse and differentiated programs which make it the second largest university in Western Australia.

3. Strategically, ECU has developed a strong identity as a university focusing on the service professions. This identity is firmly embedded within the University community's practices and strategic thinking and the wider public perception.

4. The University is to be congratulated for achieving such a unity of purpose.

5. AUQA commends ECU's leaders for establishing a clear strategic focus, which provides strong guidance for the University's internal efforts and helps present a distinctive image to the University's external communities.

View the full audit report at AUQA's web site: http://www.auqa.edu.au/qualityaudit/sai_reports/index.shtml

Commendations and recommendations

The AUQA panel's long list of commendations for ECU found merit in a great number of practices. These include the presentation of a distinctive image to external communities, a performance-based funding model, comprehensive Areas of Scholarship reviews, effective course approval delegations, embedding of a thorough teaching evaluation instrument, a strong emphasis on teaching, on-campus support for international students, pervasive research linkages with communities, government, professions and industry, data-driven student services, performance management, Internet innovations and library integration with faculties.

Overall, the main improvements recommended by the panel relate to the need for greater consistency in some areas such as management of offshore partners and its regional campus. It is always challenging to ensure standards, practices and policies are applied consistently across all campuses and in all markets.

The AUQA report will give ECU renewed impetus to attain consistency and equivalence in areas such as course and unit reviews, academic quality assurance, entrance standards, student outcomes and research-informed teaching.

Vice-Chancellor's response

ECU's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Millicent Poole, sees the AUQA results as a powerful validation of the University's quality journey:

"This report is a clear endorsement of ECU's strenuous and innovative commitment to comprehensive strategic planning and continuous improvement.

"AUQA confirms my belief that our quality assurance systems have become a compelling feature of the University's culture and are well understood and applied by staff in the interests of our students. ECU has been innovative in adapting the seven quality principles of the Australian Business Excellence Framework. We benchmark consistently with international universities and other public sector organisations.

"Our ability to differentiate ECU within the higher education system is also affirmed by this audit, as is our focus on preparing graduates for the service professions.

"We have taken a lead on consolidating campuses and in using data to shape the quality of student services.

"This excellent audit outcome reflects well on the University's governing Council, on the leadership, management and staff of ECU, the student body and the many partners and collaborators with whom ECU engages."

Great careers start @ ECU EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

Figure 3: Edith Cowan University's advertisement in *The Australian*, 3 November 2004, p. 25 (shown 75% of actual size)

Elsewhere in the same issue of *HES*, columnist Dorothy Illing (2004) alludes to these rankings in a very forthright commentary on the ECU advertisement:

> Forget the international league ladders: Edith Cowan University has established its own set of quality rankings. And it has already raised the ire of the Australian Universities Quality Agency. Last week the uni took out a big advertisement trumpeting the positive findings of its first audit by AUQA… To demonstrate its success the uni drew up a table ranking the ratio of commendations to recommendations[6] (never mind the new category of affirmations) for all unis audited so far. Of course, ECU was at the top. And by its spurious measures, two competing West Australian unis were highlighted near the bottom. Bit cheeky. The number of recommendations and commendations – the standard reporting format used by AUQA – does not reflect winners and losers. Nor are the reports to be used as rankings. ECU vice-chancellor Millicent Poole should know that. She sits on the AUQA board (p. 34).

Poole (2004) justifies the advertisement by claiming that 'ECU was seriously disadvantaged by the circumstances' of the public release of the AUQA audit report and the subsequent press coverage, 'and felt compelled to defend its reputation'. The circumstances to which Poole refers include *The Australian* publishing a story (within hours of the AUQA report's public release) 'which focused almost entirely on criticism contained in the report and made no attempt to offset the criticism with a response from ECU'. She argues that: 'The advertisement was chosen as an effective way of establishing some degree of balance on the public record and responding to public perceptions' (p. 31).

If, as Poole (2004) alleges, 'the advertisement merely presented publicly available data as evidence that ECU had been audited favourably overall', then I doubt that ECU would have raised AUQA's ire or that Poole would have been accused of breaking ranks with her higher education colleagues. Rather, despite Poole's (2004) extraordinary claim that 'There was no intention to rank other institutions' (p. 31), ranking other institutions is precisely what the ECU advertisement does (see fig. 4).

The imperatives implied by the social-institutional setting in which AUQA produces quality audit reports for Australian universities include a social obligation *not* to use the reports to make meaningless comparisons between institutions or to produce spurious rankings. If we use Porter and Porter's (2003) PhD *viva* scenario as an analogy, we could say that Poole has replied to AUQA's report (and media stories based on it) by turning cartwheels around the room – and then vehemently denying that she did so.

The ECU advertisement might itself have performed an ordering function and changed the circumstances in which it was formulated. Hamilton's (2004) response reveals some ambivalence about the 'order' in which AUQA and universities are mutually implicated. For example, he agrees that 'audit commendations and recommendations are meaningful only in the context of the particular institutional quality framework to which they refer' and that 'counting commendations contributes nothing to assessments of institutional quality or quality frameworks' (p. 31). But having asserted that 'counting commendations contributes nothing', Hamilton begins his very next sentence by writing: 'Even if the count of commendations meant something…'. Is this wishful thinking? Does Hamilton imagine that a 'count of commendations' *could* conceivably mean something? His initial support for AUQA's position shifts ground a little towards the end of his letter:

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[6] Illing is not correct here. The ECU advertisement (see fig. 3) ranks the universities by numbers of commendations. However, a paragraph immediately above the table points out that ECU's 'ratio of commendations to recommendations for improvement is also the best of all Universities so far examined: 23 to 12'.

An analysis reveals the counts of AUQA commendations have varied over time. There are clear signs of commendation inflation – there has been a steadily increasing trend in the number of commendations…

Analysing the median number of commendations for each of AUQA's auditor directors shows one auditor has a median number of commendations of nine, compared to another, who has 16…

Commendation inflation, auditor impact and the… oscillations in the number of commendations included in reports all suggest that now is just the right time to audit the auditor – independently (p. 31).

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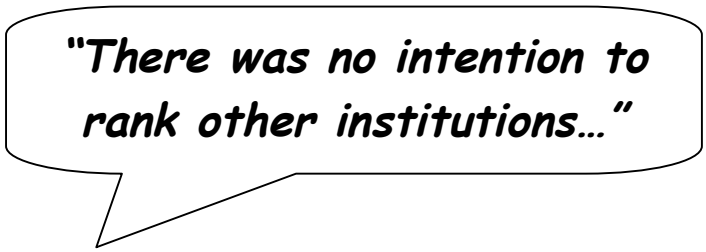

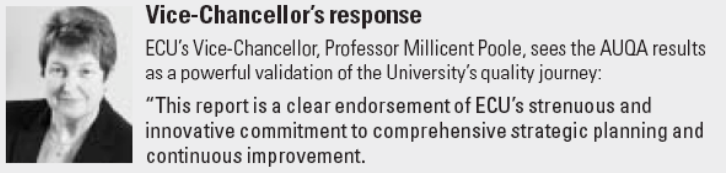

Figure 4: Left and lower right: details from Edith Cowan University's advertisement in *The Australian*, 3 November 2004, p. 25 (actual size). Upper right: Poole's (10 November 2004) assertion that the table at left does not constitute ranking other institutions.

What I have described above is a snapshot of what 'quality' as an order-word *does* and *produces* and *prevents from doing* in the audit culture of Australian higher education. It has produced a new bureaucracy (AUQA) and produces flurries of intense activity in universities as teams of academics and administrators strive to generate a 'performance portfolio' that demonstrates the 'fitness for purpose' of its plans, policies, procedures, protocols, programs etc. At the same time it prevents (or at least distracts) these same academics and administrators from other 'quality'-related activities, such as considering the fitness *of* purpose of various university operations. As the above example demonstrates, 'quality' in Australian higher education also produces controversy, dissent, and the somewhat bizarre public spectacle of a Vice-Chancellor attempting to deny the undeniable.

Quality as 'value for money': Hong Kong's Quality Education Fund

In Hong Kong, 'quality' as an order-word in higher education produces different effects from those it produces in Australia. Neither the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) nor the University Grants Committee (UGC) of Hong Kong – the two

organisations that self-identify as quality assurance agencies in higher education[7] – work in similar ways to AUQA. The HKCAA conducts academic accreditation of degree courses only for non-university institutions. The UGC is a non-statutory advisory committee responsible for advising the Government of the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China on the development and funding needs of higher education institutions in the SAR. The UGC describes its own roles and functions in terms of acting 'as a "buffer", safeguarding the academic freedom and institutional autonomy of the institutions on the one hand, and ensuring value for money for the taxpayers on the other'.[8] In other words, universities are not constrained to focus their quality assurance activities on demonstrating quality as 'fitness for purpose' but are under some obligation to demonstrate quality as 'value for money'.

Quality as value for money also seems to be one of the prime ordering functions of Hong Kong's Quality Education Fund (QEF): 'Formally established on 2 January 1998 with an allocation of HK$5 billion [approx. AUD$800 million], the QEF provides an effective channel for worthwhile projects from the school education sector to be funded'.[9] However, a more significant effect may be that it produces innovation. An exhaustive search of the QEF homepages reveals no stipulative definitions of 'quality'. Rather, it seems to be left largely to applicants for funding to demonstrate that their projects are likely to be 'worthwhile' within a very broad range of parameters. For example, the current Call for Applications/Guide to Applicants describes the scope of the QEF as follows:

> The Quality Education Fund (QEF) mainly sponsors worthwhile projects that benefit pre-primary, primary, secondary and special education. These projects should be non-profit-making, pioneering or experimental in nature and aim to further the development of quality education in line with the prevailing education policies in Hong Kong.[10]

The 'prevailing education policies' include a major cultural shift from a highly centralised school education system to one that gives much more autonomy to teachers and school administrators in curriculum matters. Thus, the assessment criteria for QEF proposals foreground school development and teacher/principal professional development as well as cost-effectiveness. These criteria seem to be consistent with interpretations of the QEF's purposes by researchers such as Edmond Law and Maurice Galton (2004), namely, that QEF exists 'to promote and support various forms of teachers' participation in school-based initiatives' (p. 44).

Thus, in the context of Hong Kong's QEF, 'quality' can be seen to be pragmatically implicated in a new socio-political ordering of schooling and new forms of social obligation which presuppose imperatives to 'pioneer', 'experiment', and participate in school-based initiatives.

Quality and equality in South African education discourses

In post-apartheid South Africa, 'quality' can also be seen to be pragmatically implicated in a new socio-political ordering of education and schooling, but here the new forms of social obligation presuppose imperatives toward social *transformation.* Johann Steyn (2004) characterises transformation in South African education as:

- the transformation from a fragmented educational system to a unified system;

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7 Both, like AUQA, are full members of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education; see http://www.inqaahe.org/ <17 November 2004>

8 See http://www.ugc.edu.hk/english/role.html <17 November 2004>

9 See http://www.info.gov.hk/qef/object/index.htm <17 November 2004>

10 See http://www.info.gov.hk/qef/download/qa_tod/8th/appform_8e.doc <17 November 2004>

- the efforts to remover inequalities and the move towards equal education;
- the shift away from a monocultural educational system;
- the intention to shift from a content based education to Outcomes Based Education;
- the repealing of anti-democratic policies;
- the transformation from a closed society to a more open society;
- the 'catching up' with leaders in the field of education, and
- the intention to create a just system that provides for access to quality education (pp. 101-2)

In my experiences of working in South Africa since 1998, I have been struck by the ways in which the enunciation of 'quality' orders conversations around 'equality'. Most of my examples come from personal observation but there are instances where this can be documented in the literature of South African education. For example, Pam Christie (1993) argues that the pursuit of quality education 'has become a catch cry limiting the influence of Black students on the existing practices of historically privileged schools' (p. 11). Ken Hartshorne (1999) puts a similar position more bluntly: 'quality education is only a strategy to slam doors in the faces of Black learners' (p. 7). Similarly, Willem Du Plessis (2000) observes that during the apartheid years 'all good quality education was the sole property of schools for Whites, in White residential areas, beyond the reach of non-White students' (p. 65). Thus, conversations around 'quality' in South Africa frequently lead to perceptions such as the following being aired:

- the (previous) National Party government merely propagated quality education for the White community and ignored the notion of equal education
- the (present) ANC government is undermining quality education because it is only interested in redressing inequalities
- the quest for quality education is an attempt to maintain standards in White schools and universities and to exclude Black learners
- the eradication of gross inequalities is not a viable option in the light of the hard economic realities
- quality education is still beyond the reach of most Black learners[11]

Such perceptions are, of course, stereotypes and reflect particular stakeholder standpoints and partial perspectives; counter evidence to each of these assertions is readily available (see, for example, Steyn 2004).

Conclusion

'Quality' (as a Deleuzean 'order-word') produces different effects in different locations. For example, the deployment of 'quality' in the audit discourse of Australian higher education clearly produces very different effects from its mobilisation in debates about 'quality versus equality' in South Africa's social transformation. One implication of this analysis is that when we engage in conversations about 'quality' across national, linguistic and cultural borders, we cannot be content with stipulative definitions. It would be nonsense to say that *here* quality 'means' fitness for purpose, or that *there* quality 'means' value for money, or that somewhere else quality 'means' social transformation. Rather, we need to try to understand how quality works and what it does, what it produces, and what it prevents from being done in specific locations through a more determined scrutiny of its locatable effects. Such scrutiny should perhaps also precede any 'trading' of quality assurance artefacts such as policy documents and operational information and might help us to resist 'quality imperialism'.

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[11] These are my characterisations of positions aired in conversations in which I have participated with South African colleagues; none of these statements is a caricature.

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