

Utility and Pervasive Uncertainty in British Higher Education

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Introduction

British Universities and their activities are increasingly scrutinised through the rubric of accountability relations established by government funding bodies. EVINCE is no exception. Research, teaching and learning, university management and administration are all expected to engage with accountability assessments. These accountability assessments require that specific utility claims are produced and negotiated with funders (in the case of EVINCE, the HEFCE Good Management Practice Programme). The EVINCE project forms one example of an increasing number of HE-utility assessments. So what claims to utility value does EVINCE make, how are these accounted for and with what results?

The paper will begin by engaging with current social science claims to utility. It will be argued that these claims need to be understood as part of an on-going process of accountability negotiation. EVINCE will then be used as an exemplar for studying these utility negotiations. Utility will feature as an on-going achievement involving multiple mobilisations which call upon a diverse array of human and non-human entities. In particular, utility will depend upon the assignment of rights and responsibilities to various identified actants. The need to adequately perform these rights and responsibilities provides for a structured utility field. This field comprises minimally negotiable positions for fund providers and researchers to occupy, while the content of research itself attains a more ambiguous identity. So how does EVINCE operate in the rubric of research deliverables of utility value? Further to this, alongside fund providers and researchers, research participants and research users are also called upon to perform specific identities. What questions does this raise about negotiations of utility claims? To what extent do these relations help to maintain the continuing utility of regimes of accountability? How can the various parties deal with uncertainty in claims and possible corroboration of claims to utility value?

Literature

Utility

Social science research features a range of claims to utility value. There is only the space here to deal with a few of the claims; policy relevance, political value, enhanced public understanding and user orientations. Policy relevance as utility value is implicated within a series of on-going questions as to the "circumstances under which social science research enters the decision-making domain," (Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980:248). It is argued that social science is "underutilised" (Wagner, Weiss, Wittrock and Wollman 1991:5) and that most policy makers are happy to carry on regardless of social science (Weiss, 1986). A second treatment of utility argues for greater political engagement (see for example Pels 1996, Martin 1996, Winner 1993, and Smith 2001). This engagement involves issues of representation, of unmasking power relations, of active and open partisanship. Woodhouse et al (2002) ask "might a rapprochement be desirable and possible between the more academic and the more activist wings of STS [science and technology studies]" (2002:297) in order to combine "practical utility and scholarly excellence," (2002:298). The utility value of STS here lies in "helping to inform and deepen public inquiries, deliberation and negotiations concerning the democratic shaping and reshaping of technologies," (2002:299).

In these two approaches utility value is considered as a possibility. The claims are that social science research could have utility value if taken up by decision makers or if engaged in politically democratic acts. For the purposes of this paper, however, there is little detailed analysis of any corroboration of utility claims. A third area of utility analysing Public Understanding of Science (PUS) makes a further claim. Utility within PUS often forms a question: what do publics find to be of utility value within science. This literature seeks to ask questions of what 'Public,' 'Understanding' and 'Science' might convey (see particularly Michael 2002). However, there is little analysis of what might constitute a Public Understanding of Social Science (PUSS) such as EVINCE. This can leave utility value as an uninterrogated claim in social science research, leaving questions unanswered of who finds the research to be of value, assessed through what means. Is it sufficient to say that making a claim for utility value

adequately demonstrates that the research has utility? If this seems too certain then which research audiences might be most important in making utility assessments and what form might the assessment take?

A fourth approach to utility does focus upon research audiences. This fourth area of utility analyses the relations established in moves made by research funding bodies to inaugurate a shift towards the marketability or customer orientation of research. As Du Gay and Salaman (1992) argue, there is hardly a public service organisation in Britain "that has not in some way become permeated by the language of enterprise," (1992:622). This language of enterprise, however, is not a "vague, incalculable 'spirit,' the culture of enterprise is inscribed into a variety of mechanisms, such as application forms, recruitment 'auditions,' and communication groups," (1992:626). For Rappert (1997) one such mechanism can be found in University funding bodies' establishment of particular themes. These themes call for the "incorporation of users' needs," (1997:1) and suggest that "customer-contractor relations" (1997:2) are an important basis for research funding. These moves are incorporated under broader motifs such as the "need to meet the challenges of international competitiveness and improve the quality of life," (1997:1). Gibbons (2000) ties this shift in research funding to the shift he identifies from Mode One to Mode Two society. Rather than setting research problems and solving them (Mode One), science and social science research is now more closely incorporated into the context of application for research and is produced via teams of mixed-skill researchers in close collaboration with users (Mode Two).

This issue of utility in relation to users of research is not a straightforward one, however. As Shove and Rip (2000) suggest "the over-reliance on an embodied notion of use and uncritical acceptance of associated pathways of influence is understandable but unnecessary... In short, the challenge is to understand better the process of use even if that means abandoning the comforting fairy-tale of the research user," (2000:175). This call fits with Woolgar's (2000) suggestion that "we should accept that users' needs rarely pre-exist the efforts and activities of producers to engage with them," (2000:169). Woolgar (2000), while not questioning the characteristics of Mode Two research directly, does suggest that the shift Gibbons (2000) highlights should not be emphasised too greatly. "Does not ISS [Interactive Social Science] merely comprise the ideals and aspirations of many previous attempts to make social science more relevant, useful, accountable and so on?" (2000:171).

These claims to utility value via users do not leave utility as an uninterrogated assumption. Questions are asked of the relation between users and research and questions are placed next to the existence and straightforward availability of user groups for research. Utility involves on-going relations with users who are configured as such by the on-going relations. Yet for current British funding agencies, the configuration of a user group in itself is insufficient. The funding bodies themselves need to recognise the existence and utility value of the user group. So the questions pertaining to each area of utility remain: how do funding bodies find these claims to be of utility value, how are claims decided, under what regimes of accountability? How are these claims made, negotiated, disputed and/or corroborated? A fifth notion of utility is required then which details the uncertain negotiation surrounding claims and possible corroboration of utility.

Utility value in accountability relations

Simmons and Walker (2000) help introduce a further notion of utility by arguing that "policy oriented social science research almost invariably involves an on-going process of negotiation and mutual construction of what constitutes 'relevant' or 'usable' knowledge," (2000:193). Rappert (1997) when talking of collaborative research suggests that "rather than being a rational, well defined process of meeting specific needs, collaborations are better seen as processes in which goals, needs, and the criteria for quality are negotiated," (1997:7). This suggests that decisions on utility might be the result of an on-going negotiation where the terms of the negotiation are established in order to produce a claim and a corroboration of utility.

Cambrosio et al (1990) in their analysis of Quebec science policy further suggest that "one can perceive the government's science policy department as a locus where representations of scientific and technological practices are translated into yet other, more abstract representations of those same practices, while being, at the same time, associated with representations of other domains (for instance financial, economic or social needs)" (1990:196). Taking on this notion of multiple representative practices moving through a more focussed passage point, it would be possible to treat the locus of analysis here as a boundary object. Star and Griesemer (1989) argue that: "Scientific work is heterogeneous, requiring many different actors and viewpoints. It also requires co-operation. The two

create tension between divergent viewpoints and the need for generalizable findings... Boundary objects are both adaptable to different viewpoints and robust enough to maintain identity across them," (1989:387). If we take 'scientific work' to incorporate social scientific work, the boundary object could prove a useful device.

Simmons and Walker (2000) suggest that a project brief can act as a boundary object; "a construct that facilitated the co-ordination or 'articulation' of the very different social worlds and practices of the research team and the research funders," (2000:196). From this starting point, it would be possible to argue that the research project featured in this paper is a boundary object through and around which a myriad of relations between researchers, beneficiaries, fund holders, notions of utility, performances and re-performances of STS are played out. Through these relations, the utility of the content and approach of the research project might be decided. But what form do these relations take? How are the content of claims to utility produced and corroborated or disputed? The production of a claim to be further interrogated in a set of relations designed for negotiation of the content of the claim, suggests a complex form of accountability relations. However as Neyland and Woolgar (2002) argue, accountability is itself a widely used term and precise specification of the nature of accountability relations is required. While the boundary object might prove useful as a general means of conceptualising an organising centre through which a range of accountability relations operate, the operation of these accountability relations requires further specification.

Garfinkel's concern was "directed at examining how various types of social activity are brought to adequate description and thus rendered 'account-able,'" (Heritage, 1984:136). This offers a way into interrogating the specific accounting relations through which utility is negotiated. In claims to the utility value of research demanded by research funders, what work is done to render a claim adequately accountable? How are claims either corroborated or refuted? Strathern, in looking at British academic research, suggests that: "Activities are decontextualized for the purposes of quantification, output disembedded from the complexity of organizational life," (2002:306). Quantification of research output into already-agreed-upon indicators, sets in motion the abstraction and decontextualization of research into assessable and accountable criteria. Indicators are a key mechanism, Strathern argues, for emphasising a focus on outcome "for it restricts the output (results) of observation to data suitable for constructing measures of it," and, "indicators come in turn to have a life or efficacy of their own," (2002:307). So things are no longer measured by indicators, but rather indicators establish targets to aim for. If the indicator of success in academic research is number of publications, this becomes the key target for academics to attain.

However, what of the content of research? If content, rather than number of publication is key, how can academics aim to produce a high level of output to match uncertain criteria? Also, what form does abstraction and decontextualization take in any focus on assessing the content of (rather than the number of publications stemming from) academic research? Strathern suggests that ethnography stands quite distinct from accountability regimes in that it extols loose ends, uncertainty and the possibility of disconnections, while accountability regimes, and particularly audit, "cannot afford to tolerate loose ends, unpredictability or disconnections," (2002:308). If it is the content of ethnography which is brought under the spotlight of such accountability regimes, however, how can its loose ends and disconnections be made accountable? How much abstraction and decontextualization is required if the criteria for assessment is not only number of publications, but some criteria relating to the content of the research?

Law and Mol (1998) pursue this question of the work required to render things available to accounting: "Our object is to distinguish between that which is (ac)countable and that which is fluid and to show that the one is necessarily implicated in the other in a labour of division," (1998:23). This labour of division, they suggest, is enabled through "technologies of calculation," (1998: 27). Law (1996) argues that, like Strathern's abstraction and decontextualization, this shift between the fluid and the (ac)countable requires "an active process of blocking, summarizing, simplifying and deleting...[which decides] what is to count and what, therefore, becomes counted," (1996:291). Within this view, utility claims in STS informed ethnographic research, such as EVINCE, would require a great deal of work. To render an STS ethnography (ac)countable would involve a large amount of simplification, abstraction and decontextualisation and some technology of calculation for its assessment. But what should be simplified, abstracted and decontextualised? What are research funders likely to find of high utility value? How will funders decide, through what form of calculation, that a claim to meet utility criteria does indeed suggest utility value?

The work of Law (1996), Law and Mol (1998) and Strathern (2002) on the content of research is closely linked to Latour's ideas on immutable mobility. Latour (1990) suggests that an argument can be won by being able to "muster on the spot the largest number of well aligned and faithful allies," (1990:23). Latour is interested in the question of how "someone convinces someone else to take up a statement, to pass it along, to make it more of a fact," (1990:24). This appears to be precisely what academics might need to know in producing a claim to utility; how to get the claim taken up in the way they intend for it to be understood and how to get it treated like a fact. According to Latour, in order to get faithful allies to remain well aligned, to get them to hold together in a single point (in this case an account) and to get them accepted in a fact-like way, "you have to invent objects which have the properties of being mobile but also immutable, presentable, readable, and combinable with one another," (1990:26). But where does the certainty lie in these attempts at immutable mobilisation? How can we know the decontextualised, simplified, abstracted version of the STS ethnography will hold together? Latour makes no particular claims in this direction. For him the immutable mobile is a post-hoc application of a particular historical rationalisation for things which either did hold together or did not. Although he analyses specific examples of immutable mobility, involving specific instruments of visualisation, there is no secret recipe for guaranteeing immutability.

To return to the work of Garfinkel which opened this section, in producing an account of a conversation "Many of its expressions are such that their sense cannot be decided by an auditor unless he knows or assumes something about the biography and the purposes of the speaker, the circumstances of the utterance, the previous course of conversation, or the particular relationship of actual or potential interaction that exists between user and auditor. The expressions do not have a sense that remains identical through the changing occasions of their use," (1972:5). If we take the occasion of a conversation transcript handed to an auditor as similar to an abstracted and decontextualised STS informed ethnography handed to a funding body, the question of immutable mobility becomes particularly pertinent. For Garfinkel, the ethnography and associated utility claims would not have a sense that remained identical through the changing occasions of its use. What claims could then be made on behalf of the ethnography? What guarantees would there be that the ethnography, or the utility claim in relation to the ethnography, would achieve immutability?

For Garfinkel accounts perform in particular interactional settings and it is in the interactional setting that any particular corroboration or disputation, or indeed any reading, will take place. It is in the interactional setting of reading that the account gets a particular form. So no amount of simplifying, decontextualising or abstracting would generate a guaranteed immutable mobility. The certainty of immutability remains out of reach. For Garfinkel the point of focus for any analysis should be these particular interactional settings. For Strathern (2002), Law and Mol (1998) and Law (1996), the point of focus should be the work done to shift from fluid or uncertain and partially disconnected relations to simplified, abstracted and decontextualised (ac)countable data. This does not suggest, in a return to Shove and Rip's (2000) warning against accepting the comforting fairytale of the readily available user, that there is a readily available context from which to decontextualise. Rather the claim made by Strathern (2002), Law and Mol (1998) and Law (1996) is that accounts make claims to represent certainty which is not matched by the fluidity and messiness of social relations. However does this suggest that a decontextualised account is guaranteed immutable mobility? Does this suggest that it is possible to simplify, abstract and decontextualise to the point that an account can be produced that will always be recognised in the same way in all occasions of reading? Strathern (2002), Law and Mol (1998) and Law (1996) pay attention to the occasions on which accounts are produced after which the accounts appear to remain stable, while Garfinkel (1972) focuses on the occasions when accounts are taken up as a constitutive feature of the sense of the accounts.

So which approach are we to take on board? If we return to the earlier notions of utility and the potential of the boundary object, we can identify a formidable range of questions requiring answers in this area. Firstly, while there are a diverse array of utility claims that social science research can make (see above), the particular focus in this paper will be on the possible corroboration of those utility claims by research funders. What regimes of accountability are in place for the making, corroboration and disputation of utility claims? Secondly, two particular approaches to the production of accounts have been introduced, as either abstracted and decontextualised (attempts to produce) immutable mobiles or as understood in moment to moment interactional settings. Which of these is available and useful to academics? Thirdly, the notion of the research project as a boundary object was highlighted. What is the interrogative utility value of the boundary object in analysing accountability regimes? Fourthly, what sustains a commitment to these accountability regimes through which utility claims must

be made and corroborated? Why is the utility claim a central feature of British academic research funding? This paper will now turn attention to a specific STS-informed ethnographic research project where these questions were brought to the fore.

Establishing EVINCE and an accountable relationship with HEFCE

Establishing the EVINCE project involved a series of negotiations initiated in late 1999. These negotiations were sparked by an invitation to bid document sent from HEFCE's new Fund for the Development of Good Management Practice (FDGMP). The fund of £10 million pounds would be made available to "accelerate the implementation of management improvements" (HEFCE, 1999). During 1999, the University of Reading had been looking at running three IT change projects. Reading's Director of Information Services was aware that these projects had parallels at other Universities (at Southampton and Brunel particularly). A decision was made by the Information Strategy Committee at Reading that these projects could form an observational basis for getting at how IT change occurs in practice in universities and a joint bid to HEFCE could be launched.

In January of 2000, a short bid document was produced emphasising that 3 case-studies would form the basis for an ethnographic study of IT change in Universities. HEFCE wanted 'hard' quantitative performance measures and 'soft' qualitative performance measures to be clearly set out in the bid. Reading suggested that 'hard' measures would be the number of users using the case study technologies and how long it took them to use it. 'Soft' measures would be the observational data. However, these do not fit traditional notions of performance measures. A performance measure involves the identification of a range of types of numbers to be collected against which a benchmark figure will be set from which change can be measured. Ethnography is not particularly useful at setting figures to aim for or benchmarks to measure along the way. Ethnographies, their aim and direction, tend to develop over time and indeed this is seen as an advantage of the ethnographic method. This exploratory approach to research, however, makes the establishment of performance measures in advance of the research difficult. This indicated an early slippage between HEFCE's call and the bid.

HEFCE assessed the bids using 6 criteria (the proven events value of financial and non-financial improvements, extent of roll-out across Universities, possibility of sustaining improvements, level of commitment, value for money, robust performance measures). HEFCE responded rapidly to the EVINCE bid and informed Reading that it had progressed to the next stage. HEFCE suggested the second round document would need to provide more detail on: senior level commitment, performance measures, milestones, collaboration, relevance to HE, how progress would be reported, financial and non-financial benefits, what each University was contributing to costs.

In March 2000, a further bid document was produced. In terms of financial benefit, the second bid emphasised that HE would benefit from a minimum saving of £200,000 in staff time (the project cost was £170,000). In terms of non-financial benefit, the project would improve user experience and provide a greater understanding of HE. The document also clearly set out a reporting structure for the project, benefits to HE as a whole, milestones (at least dates when a report would be produced, not what the content would be) and the long-term relevance of the likely findings of the project were highlighted. Project management diagrams established the Project Direction Group (PDG) which would meet 4 times a year and include members of each collaborating institution, someone from each case-study, an ethnographer (to be funded by the project) and Professor Woolgar as academic consultant.

In April 2000, although HEFCE accepted the bid and sent a letter of congratulations to the collaborating Universities, they still required further information. In June 2000, further detail was submitted to HEFCE, including a detailed plan of the ethnography, detail on each case-study and the costs to each institution, and an overall project plan was produced. In July, HEFCE responded that the University had obviously worked very hard, that the Performance Measures would require further work, but presumed the PDG would complete this work. This stage of the bidding process featured the gradual production of a field of relations in, around and through which the research project was produced. There was the production of the terms on which assessment of the projects' on-going correctness would be assessed (meeting milestones, holding meetings, producing spending plans, spending but not exceeding the budget, etc). Then there were also a series of suggestions that the ethnography would have to demonstrate success (ie feature at a range of conferences and other dissemination events including HEFCE's own events). The introduction of the HEFCE auditor to the PDG meant PDG meetings could

form occasions on which the project's on-going correctness/success could be demonstrated to, and assessed by, HEFCE.

Correctness

There were a series of PDG meetings spread across 2 years of research activity. The negotiated bidding process, it turned out, had produced a robust series of accounting relations which the PDG had to meet. Thus progress of the content of case-studies, relevance of the project to HE, continuing the project beyond the HEFCE money, financial and non-financial benefits that the project might be able to deliver, alongside ethnography having utility value, were persistent and resistant reporting categories. Partly this was due to the minutes for each meeting. As the minutes were grouped into such categories as content of case-studies and continuation of the project, and as the minutes were made available from the last meeting for the next meeting, an expectation was established that these were the criteria to report on.

However, correctness was not just a constituent element of the reports for each meeting, but was also a feature of the interactivity of members of the PDG meetings. Thus the Universities involved in the project had to demonstrate high level commitment to the project through having high level figures on the PDG. Also the academic consultant had to be present in PDG meetings to confer expert comments. Further to this, the HEFCE auditor had to turn up and contribute HEFCE's latest interests in each meeting. This community performance in the direct interactional setting of the PDG appeared at certain points during the project as an important feature of maintaining the notion of EVINCE's utility. The pre-project negotiation established a commitment to produce reports, to meet regularly and to use those meetings to hold the reports and members of the group to account. The upshot of these meetings was an on-going assessment that the project was continuing correctly.

Success

With the commitment to maintaining correct reporting facilities came a matching commitment to demonstrate success. Success for HEFCE, according to the original call for proposals, entailed the production of a set of deliverables relevant to the HE community as a whole which would have a long-term impact. As secretary to the PDG meetings and ethnographer on the project, in each meeting I produced an agenda which allowed for me to report on the latest analysis produced from the ethnographic data. At the first PDG meeting I presented a selection of themes drawn from initial ethnographic observations. I gained corroboration of the relevance and strength of these themes from other PDG members and from HEFCE, and from Professor Woolgar the academic consultant on the project. At later meetings I presented detail on the conferences where project papers had been delivered and offered versions of these presentations to the PDG.

Delivering success to HEFCE through the PDG involved a range of different claims for these presentations. Firstly, the PDG members from each collaborating University could be called upon to corroborate the utility of the presentations produced by the project. Secondly, the academic consultant on the PDG could corroborate the strength of the ethnographic work. Thirdly, claims were made that conferences were well attended and that high scores had been achieved on feedback forms produced at these events. Fourthly, however, the presentations themselves were delivered to the PDG. These PDG presentations as well as conference presentations, provided a range of stimulus as to how the utility of findings from the EVINCE ethnography might be assessed by University IT, University management and HEFCE audiences.

The performance of success in PDG meetings was characterised by on-going uncertainty. What should we report? Who should we report this to? What kinds of dissemination by prove to be most valued by HEFCE? How should this be presented? The marketing of EVINCE in both dissemination events and in PDG meetings involved the production and mobilisation of a broad variety of claims about the utility value of EVINCE. The making and mobilising of these claims gradually shifted over time from pervasive uncertainty to greater certainty. It is not clear, however, that this was due to any increased confidence in the output of the project. Rather, the presence of the HEFCE auditor on the PDG allowed for an on-going performative community configuration in which the HEFCE auditor was configured into a beneficiary of ethnography and the project team gradually learnt how to configure reports in order to best communicate utility on terms recognisably adequate to HEFCE.

This on-going performance of correctness and success involves both abstraction and decontextualisation of project activity into reports and communicable offerings of project activity, and uncertainty involving ways in which those abstracted and decontextualised might be read in moment to moment interactions involving HEFCE. Further utility research needs to pay attention to both the complex constructive and performative work involved in the building of accounts incorporating claims to value and to the on-going interactivity involved in reading accounts in particular assessment communities.

Summary

Claims and assessments of utility are worked through regimes of accountability. The regime highlighted in this paper involved protracted pre-project negotiations which established a field of minimally negotiable identities for project participants to occupy. It was in occupying these positions that an interactive series of negotiations was entered into surrounding the utility of the EVINCE research. Having negotiated a get-out from the production of performance measures, the project team had to attempt to shift this negotiated ambiguity and replace it with project work of recognisable utility. This involved work to mobilise reports of the project's continuing operation (reporting on criteria agreed in the pre-project negotiation) and attempts to deliver ethnographic analysis the funders would find of value. Both the reports and the ethnographic delivery involved attempts to produce immutable mobiles. The absence of a guarantee of immutability led the EVINCE team to reconsider the project as a boundary object through which funders, researchers and utility would be articulated. This articulation eventually included attempts by the funded to hold the funders to account in their use of ethnography.

So what is the utility value of these accountability regimes? What sustains commitment to these accountability regimes? The regimes are mutually sustaining. The project team is called upon to demonstrate the utility value of its methodology. This requires the drawing together (Latour 1990) of the project's own ethnography, ethnographic methodology more broadly and STS research, in one place, implicated within a set of claims to utility value. The accountability mechanisms featured in this paper offer the project team the opportunity to deliver an abstracted, decontextualised version of these areas in the PDG, by e-mail and so on. At the same time, HEFCE requires a simplified, abstracted and decontextualised version of EVINCE for the occasions on which funding bodies are called upon to deliver, for example, a summary assessment of the 50 different FDGMP projects. These simplifying mechanisms do a great deal of work in allowing for the possibility of broad assessments and compilations of information from diverse areas.

This ability to abstract, compile and simplify has utility value and puts accountability regimes in a good position to carry on. However, as Strathern (2002), Mol and Law (1998) and Law (1996) suggest, these simplifying mechanisms also work to disguise the dis-juncture between messy social relations and abstracted accounts which purport to represent these relations. This paper has further suggested that these simplified, abstracted and decontextualised accounts are social phenomena in themselves and subject to pervasive uncertainty. Drawing on the work of Garfinkel (1972) and Latour (1990), there is no guarantee of immutability in these accounts. Claims to utility value need to be understood in each occasion of their use.

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