Talking About Quality in Higher Education: A Corpus Linguistic Analysis of Quality Reports in the Irish University System

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Abstract

Quality reviews in the Irish university system are largely based on self-assessment reports by academic and administrative units, validated by peer review, in the form of peer-group reports, followed by written quality improvement plans, which contain agreed actions with a view to quality improvement. So far, research on quality related language has been a secondary aspect of educational politics and policies, handbooks on the implementation of quality systems, case studies and meta-cognitive aspects of researching higher education. To our knowledge, no research has been carried out on language use attached to quality mechanisms employed in the third-level sector. There is virtual unanimity in the literature that quality assurance and enhancement is about change. Implementing change has a lot to do with the culture of an institution (Barnett 1992, Yorke 2000). Organizational culture is reflected in, among other things, beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions (Schein 1997), which are all expressed explicitly or implicitly through language.

The present study is based on the QuaRT (Quality Related Texts) corpus consisting of 190 peer-group reports (approx. 1.5 million words) from six Irish universities. An initial data-analysis (*Wordsmith Tools, Paraconc*) was carried out to identify keywords, terms and themes. Subsequent analyses focus on specific linguistic features, such as personal and possessive pronouns and, in particular, modality. Modality, manifested in language through modal auxiliaries/adverbs, evaluative adjectives/adverbs and verbs of knowledge/ prediction/ evaluation and so on, is a main feature through which beliefs and values are expressed in language (Fowler 1996, Simpson 1993). The results will shed light on (i) some of the key-concepts, such as implicit definitions of 'quality' and preconceptions of 'education', and (ii) the way in which such key concepts are used by academic and service units to position themselves in the Irish university system.

References

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