Arrey, Marie Claudine Erock Forbi Epse

Finnish Higher Education: A study of the impact of neoliberal values on the perceptions of quality and quality assessment among academics at a Finnish education institution

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| Department of Educational Sciences and Teacher Education | Author |
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**Abstract**

The shift from the industrial to the post-industrial era, as well as the infiltration of the neoliberal ideology into the higher education sector, have brought with it ramifications with regards to the tasks of higher education, and the idea of quality and quality assessment in higher education. In the industrial era, tangible factors of production such as land and money were considered the key factors of economic development. However, in the 21st century post-industrial era, knowledge has emerged as the key driver of economic development. Knowledge is no longer seen as stuff, which could be stored away for future use and codified into disciplines, rather, it is seen as a factor that is defined by the results it achieves. Neoliberalism is an ideology that sees the market as having the potential to produce a wide range of beneficial outcomes for individuals in a competitive market environment. Inspired by neoliberalism, governments around the world have put in place competitive performance-based funding schemes, by which higher education institutions are funded, not on the basis of intake, but on production, efficiency, and effectiveness. Central concepts of neoliberalism include: efficiency, productivity, effectiveness, and quality, along with their assessment. The present use of the term quality is a concept that emerged from the manufacturing industry and infiltrated into higher education, with implications for what the tasks of higher education are, and how quality is defined and assessed in higher education. Higher education has had its own traditional understanding of quality and quality assessment, which relied more on peer review to ascertain the quality of its work. In the four dominant archetypal models of the university; the Napoleonic, Humboldtian, Newmannian, and Deweyan, a common feature was that the university was an institution for the state by the state, and it was to promote collective good, and foster values such as democracy, equality, and critical thinking. One thing that is inherent in the neoliberal ideology is that it provides a narrower conception of what the tasks of higher education are, as well as a skeletal definition of quality in higher education.

This research involved interviews with university staff, and sets out to answer two questions:

1) How do the participants perceive the tasks of the University of X?

2) How do the participants perceive quality and quality assessment at the University of X?

This research aims to find out the impact of neoliberal values on the perceptions of quality and quality assessment among academics at a Finnish education institution (given the pseudonym the University of X in this research). The research participants comprises of a teacher, junior researcher, professor, professor emeritus, and an academic in a managerial position. Phenomenography, a qualitative methodological approach which studies the perceptions of individuals was used in this research. Data was collected using semi-structured phenomenographical thematic interviews, and was analysed using the phenomenographical method of data analysis. The findings of this research revealed that, the participants perceived that research and journal article publication are the main tasks of the University of X, while the institution’s societal and teaching tasks are not a primary focus. This research also established that, quality is conceived of as, and assessed more in terms of productivity, efficiency, effectiveness and reputation, rather than in terms of process, educational value, content, or human well-being. The participants also felt that, the performance-based funding scheme instituted by the Finnish government and the neoliberal market values which has swept over Europe, play vital roles in the University of X’s narrowed conception of what its tasks, quality and quality assessment are. The participants expressed an awareness of the role of neoliberalism in narrowing the University of X’s tasks to economic instrumentality, and reducing its conception of quality and quality assessment to quantitative performance indicators, to the exclusion of non-quantitative educational and societal indicators of quality.

**Keywords**: Quality, quality assessment, Higher Education, Neoliberalism, Phenomenography, Knowledge Economy, Performativity, Commoditisation, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Productivity, Performance-based funding
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Appendices
1. Introduction

The 21st century post-industrial era in which higher education operates is different from the 18th century industrial era. In the industrial era, tangible factors of production such as land and money were the key drivers of economic development (Gilbert 2007). In the 21st century, these traditional tangible factors of economic development have been replaced by intangible ones. Nowadays, knowledge is considered the principal driver of economic development (Johnson 2008). These changes have been linked, but are not limited to strong ideological trends such as neoliberalism and its free market logic. Neoliberalism sees the free market as having the potential to produce a wide range of benefits for individuals and nation-states (Harvey 2005). A central project in neoliberalism is the knowledge economy, which emphasises knowledge and productivity as necessary for competition and the maximisation of profit (Levidow 2002). The infiltration of neoliberal market values into higher education has considerably changed the landscape in which higher education operates (Biesta 2011). These changes are related to what higher education is for, for what cause, as well as the way quality is defined and assessed. Central concepts in the neoliberal ideology include: quality, competition, effectiveness, efficiency, productivity, and performativity (Levidow 2002). Nowadays, higher education is directly linked to the market and has become more utilitarian (Tirronen & Nokkala 2009). Its tasks are perceived more in terms of economic instrumentality (Kohtamäki 2011), while performance indicators have become the very definition of quality in higher education (Barnett 1992).

Although there are several conceptions of higher education, the four dominant medieval conceptions of the university include: the “Napoleonic model”, the “Humboldtian model”, the “Newmanian model”, and the “Deweyan model” (Zgaga 2009). One thing that is common in all four models is the central idea of the collective good; universities were owned and funded by the state. Even the “Napoleonic model”, which is the most utilitarian of the four dominant medieval conceptions of the university, had as aim to serve the interest of the nation as a whole. It also had a task to maintain equality through the prevention of the emergence of social classes. In all these models, the university was seen as an institution by the state for the state (Biesta et al. 2009). Nowadays, governments are participating less in higher education, fostering competition by instituting competitive funding schemes, and encouraging higher education institutions to campaign for funding from, and develop close ties with firms and businesses (Smith 2006). This situation has been inspired by neoliberal-
ism, which urges governments to withdraw from areas of social provision, to put in place competitive schemes of resource allocation, as well as market-friendly institutional frameworks (Harvey 2005). The result of this has been the lending of higher education institutions to the fate of the market (King 2004). Higher education institutions are required to play a role in the economic development and international competitiveness of nation-states (Tirronen & Nokkala 2009). They are also expected to be efficient, effective, deliver outcomes, and move up ranking lists of international league tables; all of this to exploit the potential of increasing international competitiveness, standing, reputation, or prestige (Saarivirta 2010). As a consequence, higher education is increasingly being conceived of in utilitarian terms, while quality becomes understood in terms of performance indicators, productivity, and efficiency (Biesta 2011).

The idea is that what we take higher education to be will determine what we view of as quality in higher education, and how we perceive it could be assessed or improved (Barnett 1992). The argument in this thesis is that the role played by the neoliberal ideology in shaping the way higher education is increasingly conceived of as serving economic needs cannot be undermined. This thesis also argues that neoliberalism equally plays a role in shaping the conception of quality and quality assessment in higher education along the lines of productivity, performativity, effectiveness, and efficiency. This thesis equally posits that the possibility that the neoliberal market ethic may displace national ethos of equity, access, and equity cannot be overlooked. The argument in this thesis also represents the significance of this study, given that this investigation is carried out in the context of Finland. Finland is generally known as a country in which education is seen as something cultural, and universities have played a great role the realisation of the welfare state (Välimaa 2004). It is a country with strong beliefs on social welfare, equality in access to healthcare services and education, and equitable distribution of resources (Wahlbeck et al. 2008). The findings of this research are significant in the sense that it may probe debates and discussions about the possible implications of neoliberal values on Finnish ethos of equality, equity, and collective good.

1.1. Aims of the research and research questions

I have met many theoretical discourses (understood as conversations, discussions) pertaining to the infiltration of neoliberal market values into higher education; values which em-
phasise effectiveness, efficiency, productivity, and performativity. I have however come across few empirical studies that shed more light into the neoliberal market influence in higher education by talking to academics in order to get an insider perspective. The aim of this research is to take an empirical approach and contribute to these “fresh” theoretical discourses pertaining to the tasks of higher education, and the idea of quality and quality assessment in higher education in the neoliberal era. As a result, this research does not set out to test anything or establish any form of cause and effect. It sets out to get richer insights by grasping the perceptions of academics. For ethical considerations, the pseudonym “the University of X” will be used throughout this thesis to refer to the education institution at which the participants who provided data for the purpose of this study work.

The research questions this study investigates are:

1. How do the research participants perceive the tasks of the University of X?

2. How do the research participants perceive quality and quality assessment at the University of X?

1.2. Theoretical point of departure

It is important for the reader to understand my theoretical starting points with respect to ontology and epistemology as they have significantly informed the methodological choices of this research. My ontological position is that there is no one “truth” or “reality” out there to be known, there are several. On an epistemological note, my belief is that we know or gain knowledge by talking to people, and that knowledge is within the meaning that people give to it (Creswell 1998). Also, I believe that reality is subjective in nature and that it is largely influenced by our experiences and background (Marton & Booth 1997). For these reasons, I chose to do a qualitative research which ties to these ontological and epistemological standpoints. This research neither seeks to generalise findings, nor assume that perceptions represent “reality”. Rather, the position this research takes is that the “reality” the participants’ perceptions represent are experiential; the experiences in their respective departments and faculties. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be said to be symbolic of a “Finnish reality”.
2. Theoretical framework of the research

The theoretical part of this thesis is going to look at the concept of higher education, and the idea of quality and quality assessment in higher education. It is going to be structured around the theme “Defining Quality: The controversies of the idea of quality in higher education. Conceptualising quality and neoliberalism in the context of higher education” This theme will look at the different theoretical discourses surrounding the idea of quality and quality assessment in higher education. The theme will equally conceptualise neoliberalism in the context of higher education. The theoretical framework of this research presents the theoretical discourses that have guided my own understanding of higher education’s tasks, and the idea of quality and quality assessment in higher education. Neoliberalism is an overall umbrella lens in this research. This chapter begins by conceptualising quality in higher education, followed by a conceptualisation of quality assessment in the context of higher education. The next part conceptualises neoliberalism in the context of higher education, followed by a conceptualisation of higher education beyond the neoliberal agenda.

2.1. Conceptualising quality in higher education

Quality in higher education is a multi-dimensional concept, the usage of which permits no use of a single definition, and the absence of an agreed upon definition of the term is one of the sources of controversy (Brennan 1997; Brennan & Shah 2000). Quality in higher education is obviously something self-evidently desirable, such that it may be difficult to argue that it should not be strived for or improved, yet, debates about quality in higher education have provoked controversy (Bietsa 2009; Martens & Masschelein 2009; Brennan 1997). The language of quality in higher education is part of the controversy. The term ‘quality’ itself has become almost like a totem in mass postmodernism culture, a prefix that could be attached to anything, from automobiles to baked beans, from plumbing to lager (Brennan 1997). According to Filippakou (2011), the language of quality in higher education has an ideological character which serves a particular set of interests and provides a monolithic view of what higher education is. Brennan (1997) argues that, the term evokes the invasion of the market place, particularly bringing with it an alien concept and practices which take no account of higher education’s special characteristics. The term reflects contemporary management theory which developed in the manufacturing and service industry. It is a language that can turn students into customers, academic staff into produc-
ers/providers, universities into businesses, and their departments into profit centres. Higher education has its own traditional language of quality which reflects notions of standards, academic coherence and progression, of attainment and of understanding. Much of the language of quality are imported from elsewhere, emphasising higher education’s extrinsic functions over its intrinsic functions, such as servicing the economy, over the creation and transmission of new knowledge (Brennan 1997).

Brennan (1997) also identifies a controversy over power, arguing that higher education institutions are subject to political, economic, and cultural control from different sources despite an almost universal emphasis on ‘autonomy’. The extent to which the state, individual institutions, faculties, departments, academic staff, students, and external stakeholders decide on things varies between countries and higher education systems. The different sources of power include the state, the academic profession and markets, and much of the debate about quality assessment in higher education has been a question of not only ownership, but also a question of method. While representatives of government may lay emphasis on the need of externality in the assessment process, representatives of institutions might prefer self-evaluation. Although the different parties (state, academic profession, and market) are in favour of quality, their claims to better knowledge than the other as to how to achieve it are not based on any proven efficacy of any particular method, but have more to do with the exercise of power (Brennan 1997). Brennan further argues that the controversy about quality in higher education is also about change: the expansion of new institutions, the growth of existing ones, and larger class sizes. The controversy about quality in higher education is also about diversification: different kinds of students, courses, and new ways of teaching and assessing them. These changes and diversification have to a greater extent placed emphasis on higher education’s extrinsic functions, such as training people for jobs, and greater relevance in research. These changes have also been accompanied by declining levels of resources, and greater accountability for their use.

The massification of higher education, its shift from being part of a cultural to an economic apparatus, and from it being valued for instrumental good rather than intrinsic purposes in an era of expanding markets are some of the sources of the debate about quality in higher education (Barnett 1992). The extent of public interest in quality is not synonymous to people having a clear sense of what quality is or might be. From a philosophical standpoint, the suspicion is that quality has become a ‘hurrah’ word, one of approval rather than
of dismissal, since the characteristics and achievements of higher education have translated to an indication of its quality. Quality is like “good”, and its expression signals an element a person wants to endorse and is likely to reflect the social position of the user. It is important to determine whether quality is one or a set of related things, a justifiable attribute or entities of higher education, or whether it resides in higher education itself or in the minds of those who use the language of quality (Barnett 1992). Barnett further emphasises that he does not argue for a vocabulary of a market approach to quality in which the claims of students are central. Rather, Barnett argues for a vocabulary in which the key questions are concerned with figuring out what higher education is trying to offer to students and whether the offering is of quality. Barnett also argues for a conception of quality in which central questions relate to how to improve quality, the arrangements in higher education and their effects on students’ minds. Similarly, Radford (1997) presents that quality in higher education is a question of educational value, what higher education ought to be about, and what graduates ought to know.

What we conceive of higher education will in turn have implications on our conception of quality, how we improve, assess, and evaluate success in achieving it (Barnett 1992). Therefore, in the sphere of human interaction, we cannot take a definite approach towards, or form secure ideas about the quality of higher education without taking a normative position as to what might be included under the umbrella concept of “higher education”. There are at least two things wrong in the assumption that modern debates about quality, or the development of our systems of quality assurance and appraisal can take place in such a conceptual void. One is that higher education is a highly contested concept, and there is not just one, but rival concepts, with some being promoted to the exclusion of others; with an understanding of the existence of rival conceptions of higher education, it is misleading to think we can bypass our disagreements about the purpose of higher education, and proceed to work through our ideas and practices concerned with quality (Barnett 1992). The second, Barnett further posits, is that whether as teachers, researchers, employers, or students, we cannot escape having some implicit or explicit conception of the nature and purpose of higher education. According to Barnett, even if our conception is not explicit, it will be reflected in the ideas that we form about quality.

Barnett further presents that the two dominant conceptions of quality in the modern age are: the communicative and instrumental versions of quality. The former is based on a tacit
expression of value and propriety of the academic community. By relying on peer review, this version of quality bars outside voices from getting a purchase; since it takes academic conversations as self-sufficient and having internal meaning, external commentary is _ultra vires_. On this conception of quality, higher education is seen as a ‘practice’ with its own rules and warrant (Mclyntyre 1985, as cited in Barnett 1992). Also, in the communicative version of quality, a definite outcome or endpoint is not as much an issue, than the character and quality of the continuing interactions of its members (Barnett 1992). With respect to the instrumental version of quality, Barnett further contends that this version of quality takes the outside world as its starting point, both in determining the purpose of higher education, and the means by which quality is to be assessed and improved. On this conception, quality is understood in terms of ‘performance’ captured in performance indicators, and to a significant degree, the institution’s effectiveness is assessed in terms of efficiency. For Barnett, this approach to quality is not educational or driven by any educational considerations because in the western world, the key interest groups - the state, the academic community, and the market are not overwhelmed by educational sensitivity. The basis for this argument is that, while the market is educationally neutral with no educational orientation, efficient outcomes are a key consideration for the state, and for the academic communities, the concern is the survival of the different academic parts of the academic class (Barnett 1992). According to Liuhanen (2007), the peer review is the traditional evaluation method in higher education, based on the expertise of members of the academic community, and leading to an actual judgment of academic quality. While academic quality was traditionally defined internally by the guild, the modern understanding of quality assumes external stakeholders have a say in the definition of the quality of higher education and how it is assessed.

The principle is that there is a logical connection between the concepts of higher education and the different approaches to quality (Barnett 1992). If we conceive of higher education as a process of providing the labour market with productive individuals to fulfil particular slots, then one way of assessing quality would be to examine the destination of students, not just whether students are employed, but whether they hold the positions envisaged by the course designers (Boys et al. 1988, as cited in Barnett 1992). In this case, students take up value as, and are described in the vocabulary of “products” of the system. In another instance, quality in higher education will take on a different character if we believe it is demonstrated in the nature of the intellectual development that takes place in the students’
minds, the depth and breadth of understanding that students achieve, and their capacity to apply that understanding and analytical capacity to all they do and experience. In such a case, a proper appraisal of higher education will not rest content with economic indicators of output. Rather, it will prompt an examination of the intellectual challenges presented to students, and an exploration of the educational process within our institutions (Barnett 1992).

This section looked at the different theoretical discourses which bring to light the fact that the idea of quality in higher education is a complex and multi-dimensional one. The fact that the term itself originated from the manufacturing and industry sector problematises the concept of quality in higher education. The market approach to quality not only defines quality along the lines of productivity and consumer satisfaction, but it also emphasises higher education’s instrumental task, and takes no consideration of higher education’s special characteristics. Students’ experiences, understanding, intellectual development and analytical capacity are left out of the market conception of quality. The discussions in this section also provide a lens through which the data collected in this study will be looked at. These discussions will also enable a better understanding of the data, and also to find out which approach to quality in higher education is emphasised more; the instrumental market model or the communicative academic model. Also, the discourses in this section will be used in the Discussion part of this thesis, in which the findings will be discussed in the light of theory.

2.2. Conceptualising higher education

The problem of striving for quality and excellence by higher education institutions is that, quality tends to be defined in terms of a narrow set of comparative performance indicators (Biesta 2004, as cited in Biesta 2011). More so, quality indicators have turned into definitions of quality itself, such that, the position in a league table is no longer seen as a judgment about what makes a good university, but it becomes the very definition of what a good university is. For Volkwein & Grunig (2005), the problem with reputation ratings is that they constitute academic “beauty contests” where looks matter more than substance, such that, admission selectivity becomes the superficial substitute for knowing the educational experience that students are exposed to. Within higher education, it is a tradition that prevails that apart from a few established professions such as law, medicines, the clergy,
the arts, and sciences, higher education institutions are not only the preservers, but also transmitters and generators of knowledge (Lewis & Smith 1994). Higher education should not therefore directly relate to the world of business, or play the role of provider of employees for employers. Within the academia, this view is still held by many members. However, there are some whose views do not concur with this position. There is a disagreement, at the very basic level, over the traditional trio functions of the university.

The tasks of the university consist of teaching, research, and service (Raivo 2008). It is a combination of these tasks that makes the uniqueness and specificity of the university (Biesta at al. 2009). With the view of maximising competitive advantage, efficiency, and effectiveness in the knowledge economy, governments around the world are compelling higher education institutions to innovate and modernise themselves. With such a trend, committing universities to a critical and political form of citizenship becomes a matter of concern (Biesta et al. 2009). Barnett (1992) posits that there are alternative conceptions of higher education that take the educational process seriously and do not lend themselves to numeric performances. These conceptions are not however reflected in contemporary quality debates. These alternative conceptions include seeing higher education as: developing students’ intellectual integrity and capacity to be their own person, enhancing individual autonomy, the formation of general intellectual perspectives and abilities, enhancing students’ individual personal character, the breadth to grasp beyond the confines of one single discipline, the acquisition of cultural capital, and the developing of competence to participate in a critical commentary in society.

While accepting that higher education institutions are battling real issues such as squeezing resources, Biesta (2011) argues that the emergence of the ‘global university’ has an even more threatening trend on higher education. The ‘global university’ refers to the notion that more universities want to be ‘world class’, ‘excellent’, research-led, are chasing high journal publication numbers in a small global citation indexes, and competing for the same resources, students, and prestige (Biesta 2011; Lorange 2008; Duderstadt 2008). As a result, it is not uncommon to see the global university defining its objectives in terms of particular positions in the league tables (Biesta 2011). According to Biesta (2011), due to the fact that the university is a historical, and not a natural phenomenon, it is difficult to argue that the global university is a perversion of the very idea of the university. In this regard, it is therefore difficult to claim some kind of essence of the university because the university has
been, and is being constructed in a number of different ways. To understand how the global university might be a perversion of the very idea of the university, Biesta suggests it might be helpful to look at the different ways in which the university has developed in different local and national contexts.

It is necessary to consider the historical trends and ideas concerning the role and purposes of higher education (Zgaga 2009). One of the key questions in higher education discussions has been what higher education’s genuine contribution to citizenship is, or should be. The concept of citizenship is one that is inherent in the idea and role of the university. Zgaga proposes four ‘archetypal models’ to construct an ‘analytical tool’ and ‘programmatic tool’ in order to understand which tasks are being stressed nowadays. A history of the university is also a history of the various understandings of the university’s mission, purpose, and tasks. Although there are several ways to classify possible models, they mainly follow the dominant practices of large national systems which became traditional (Zgaga 2009). Zgaga stresses that none of these archetypal models can be associated with a single period of time, national context, or distinguished scholar. In acknowledgement of the fact that there are concrete historical backgrounds upon which these models were built, Zgaga considers these models in their structural, rather than historical emergence. This is so because, since the organisation of higher education in a particular context has been an amalgamation of the dominant roles and purposes which can be deconstructed in ‘archetypal models’, it will be very difficult to identify a purely ‘national model’ of higher education.

The turn from the eighteenth and nineteenth century was the cradle for the modern understanding of the tasks and purpose of higher education institutions, as well as the emergence of national systems of higher education in Europe (Zgaga 2009). The four ‘archetypal models’ of the university which Zgaga (2009) and other authors (Block 1995; Ziolowski 1995; Radford 1997; King 2004; Anderson 2009) identify are the “Napoleonic”, “Humboldtian”, “Newmanian”, and “Deweyan” models of the medieval university.

2.2.1. The Napoleonic model

According to Zgaga (2009), at the start of the industrial societies, universities as sites for training clergy, lawyers, and administrators of the classicism period became outmoded due to their inability to meet the challenges of the Industrial Revolution. New knowledge institutions often not called universities such as the ‘mechanics’ institute’ in Britain, emerged
to serve the needs of society and artisan classes. These institutes provided opportunities for the acquisition of skills not available in either traditional or renewed universities at the time. These institutes also focused on the ‘theoretical sides’ of the ‘mechanical arts’, and some of them eventually became universities (Graham 2002, as cited in Zgaga 2009). In France, the emergence of universities was in response to the problems of the industrial society and the economy. The university had three primary goals: to secure the officials necessary for the political and social stabilisation of the post-revolutionary society, ensure education is carried out in harmony, and prevent the emergence of new professional classes (King 2004). The university also imposed limits on the intellect if it was likely to be dangerous to the state. This model is called the “Napoleonic model”, although this trend cannot be attributed to France alone. In this medieval model of the university, universities and other higher education institutions had as their basic mission to train students for their multiple, diverse future careers (Zgaga 2009).

2.2.2. The Humboldtian model

This model has a key conceptual difference from the Napoleonic model in that, the teaching of existing knowledge and passing on of directly usable knowledge as the main role of higher institutions of learning was rejected, and its utilitarian conception kicked against (Zgaga 2009). In the Humboldtian model, higher education’s main task was to demonstrate how knowledge was discovered and create a unity in teaching and research (Ziolowski 1995; Höltä 1998; Radford 1997; Anderson 2009). Higher institutions of learning were to treat all knowledge as not yet wholly solved problems, and the teacher exists for the sake of learning and no longer for the sake of the student (Humboldt 1963, as cited in Zgaga 2009). The emphasis given to learning is understood as the highest form of knowledge and theoretical work. However, this new mission would not be possible without the university being granted autonomy. The paradox of the modern university was that it relied on the state for material support, and for defence of its freedom from its greatest threat - the state (Perkins 2006, as cited in Zgaga 2009). German universities which marked the centre of scientific progress and contributed immensely not only to the nation’s recovery but also to its new political and economic characteristics as a whole, became a strongly influential and exemplary model abroad (Zgaga 2009; Anderson 2009). Although it was frequently re-interpreted in different ways, it was transferred to Europe and the rest of the globe. Despite re-interpretations abroad, the elements of the “Humboldtian model” have remained vital
and can be recognised even today. According to this ‘archetypal model’, the role of universities is the creation and maintenance of an advanced knowledge base, and the stimulation of research and innovation (Ziolowski 1995; Radford 1997; Höltä 1998; Zgaga 2009; Anderson 2009).

2.2.3. The Newsonian model

The industrial age created challenges such that the training of professionals to develop and protect the nation-state and the carrying out research in autonomous institutions were not enough response to them (Zgaga 2009). Changes in understandings of the roles and purposes of higher education in the modern times were intensified by disputes over: narrowness as versus broadness, developing new knowledge and skills versus the cultivation of the intellect, utilitarian versus liberal education. Newman rejects professional or scientific knowledge as the sufficient end of a university education, and proposes the cultivation of the intellect as a good in itself (Newman 1996, as cited in Zgaga 2009). To Newman, such an intellectual cultivation brings with it a power and a grace to every work and occupation it undertakes, and enables the individual to be more useful. Newman argues for a liberal education by which the process of training does not sacrifice the intellect for some profession, study, or science, but is disciplined for its own sake and perception of its own proper object. For Newman, the professional interests are not rejected, but postponed to the formation of the citizen (Newman 1996, as cited in Zgaga 2009). Zgaga (2009) contends that these statements are still alive, as even of today, there are similar normative statements in trends in higher education; universities should care (more) about contributing to a democratic society, cultivating the public mind and raising the intellectual tone of society. Just like the “Napoleonic” and “Humboldtian” models, the name “Newsonian model” is not intended to be attributed to a particular scholar or geographical area.

2.3.4. The Deweyan model

The claim that universities should, and can contribute to the development of citizenship is seemingly similar, but in substance, it is a quite differently elaborated topic (Zgaga 2009). Discussions on citizenship have a long pre-history, and the topic in itself could be problematic. It is beyond dispute that universities cannot be immune from providing a relatively instrumental mode of citizenship and serving as part of the state’s apparatus as this has
been practiced for centuries. Although this trend developed in different contexts, North America cannot be excluded from it. In North America, education has never been understood as a predominantly ‘state affair’, and its service to community has deep roots (Zgaga 2009). ‘Liberal education’ has been kept legitimate as the kind of learning needed for a free society and for the full development of human talent (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2007, as cited in Zgaga 2009). Considering and acknowledging these past debates provide some material to construct the fourth archetypal model of the medieval university. Since the development of education in the United States of America has not been any less important and globally influential than that of Europe, this model is named the Deweyan model (Zgaga 2009). Under this model, the primary role and purpose of the university is to serve the surrounding community and to prepare students for life as active citizens in the society. Just like the “Napoleonic”, “Humboldtian”, and “Newmanian” models, the name the “Deweyan model” is not to attribute this model to any particular geographical area or scholar.

In order to better understand and appreciate how the tasks of the university may have shifted from what they used to be, I found it important to look at what the tasks of medieval universities were. This section looked at the tasks the four dominant models of the medieval university. A common feature in all four medieval models is that the university was first and foremost seen as a public good rather than a provision oriented towards particular individuals. Even the “Napoleonic model”, which is the most utilitarian of the four ‘archetypal models’, was informed by a rationale in which the university was an institution that served the public interest. These four ‘archetypal models’ will serve as an analytical tool through which the data collected in this study will be looked at in order to understand which tasks of the university are stressed nowadays. Also, the discussions surrounding the emergence of the ‘global university’ which emphasises research and strives for reputation will enable me to better appreciate higher education’s tasks of in the wake of competition and reputation ratings. The discussions in this section also problematised the focus on economic instrumentality as it draws attention to the fact that with an emphasis on instrumentality, it becomes difficult for universities to be committed to a critical and political form of citizenship; which is an integral part of the tasks of the university.
2.3. Conceptualising quality assessment, assurance and control in the context of higher education

According to Brennan & Shah (2000), while quality assessment are processes concerned with the judgment and measurement of quality such as evaluation, quality management is concerned with the decisions and actions that might be taken as a result of those judgments and measurements. Quality control on the other hand implies a regulatory function, while quality assurance, like quality management, can also imply regulation, development, or enhancement. Quality assessment and quality assurance in higher education are an invention of the 1980s and 1990s (Wächter 1999). Quality assessment and quality assurance have been sparked up by tight public budgets and increasing demands for accountability. Universities and other higher education institutions have always had their own ways and mechanisms for assuring the quality of their work (Brennan & Shah 2000). These ways and mechanisms consisted mainly in the quality of the people, the necessary qualification to get appointment to an academic post or achieve promotion as a professor, or for a student to gain admission and a subsequent degree. Evaluation through peer review of research and publications was, and is still, a further important element of the traditional ‘people’ approaches to quality in higher education. Nowadays, these traditional ‘people’ approaches to quality have been replaced by the demonstration of satisfactory performance. Expansion in higher education has also drawn attention to issues of quality (Brennan & Shah 2000).

Brennan & Shah further argue that, the principle of selectivity on which elite systems could rest claims of quality has become obsolete with the mass higher education system. The expansion of higher education, and the fact that higher education is both labour and capital intensive, and a relatively high cost service, has appeared on the public agenda and culminated debates over funding, participation rates, and access (Barnett 1992; Brennan 1999; Gourley 1999; Green & Hayward 1997). Diminishing unit cost has been one way of funding expansion, and the state is hopeful that each student will be educated at a proportionally smaller cost than in the past (Barnet 1992). The possible conflict between expansion and squeezing of resources has not only given rise to quality assessments of higher education in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and performance indicators (Johnes & Taylor 1990), but it has also casts doubts upon the quality of the system’s products (Barnett

Although there has been much debate about the systems and method used, there is less information and discussions about the real purposes of quality assessment, or what effects quality assessment is having on higher education institutions themselves (Shah 1997). The very idea of quality assessment itself is problematic in the sense that, it is still unclear whether the quality of a lecture is to be assessed in terms of the importance of ideas, or the clarity of its exposition (Brennan 1997). The answer to this question, Brennan contends will be emphasised differently by different people. How one might assess the quality of a whole institution seems to be another ubiquitous issue. The reason for this ambiguity is that, while one university leader might want to emphasise research productivity, another might want to look at the scores achieved in the assessment of teaching. Also, another leader might refer to the culture of the institution in terms of the quality of the relationship existing between institutional members, both staff and students (Brennan 1997).

According to Brennan & Shah (2000), quality assessment has been stimulated by forces mainly from outside higher education institutions. In many countries, market conditions have significantly influenced the relationship between higher education and its wider social environment. Without overstating the importance of the operations of markets in higher education, it is undeniable that market conditions are replacing state control as the principal mechanism of higher education steering. Market conditions also account for higher education institutions increasingly competing for students, funding, staff, and reputation. Higher education institutions face two kinds of problems: the need to initiate change to deal with higher education’s problems which may have been created by the external environment, and the need to also comply with changing external requirements (Brennan & Shah 2000). Brennan & Shah further contend that the need to comply has got to do with not just accountability to the state, but that failure to do so can affect institutional reputation and market competitiveness. These changes in higher education are partly due to globalisation which has rendered the boundaries between universities and the outside world more porous (King 2004). Also, national governments face increased pressure from industry and commerce to provide incentives to universities so that they generate more market innovative innovation.
In many countries, as Dill (2004) argues, quality assurance policies have been influenced by traditional theories about regulation. They include logics of hierarchical control through government inspection, performance funding, and reliance on enhancing market competition through deregulation and information provision. A decline in governmental trust in the claims of the academic profession to guarantee competency and consumer protection marks the start of external evaluation of university quality and standards, as well as greater provision of information to third parties (King 2004). The emphasis is not on ‘intimate’ knowledge, but on transparency by providing publicly available data so that purchasers of goods and services are confident they have sufficient information on which to make discriminate choices and base their decisions (King 2004; Attiyeh & Lumsden 1974). As King (2004) argues, these are the processes to which public institutions are subject. The assumption is that providing prospective students and other purchasers of university services with information about universities’ competence will improve institutional performance. Dill (1995, as cited in Dill 2004) contends that contemporary academic quality assurance systems are rooted either directly or indirectly upon the ‘market failure’ assumption of insufficient information.

Dill (2004) emphasises that it is important to note that in all countries, quality assurance policies are evolving in an active environment. Contemporary social demands about individual employability, living standards, and industrial competitiveness have taken their toll on higher education. They have raised expectations regarding participation rates, made higher education credentials indispensable for success in the labour market, and increased employers’ concerns about the preparation and productivity of the work force. In many countries, there has been an increasing complexity of higher education providers, the evolution of information technology as a viable mechanism for teaching and learning, and the emergence of ‘entrepreneurial’ colleges and universities. These factors are drastically changing the traditional academic context upon which previous quality assurance and practices were based (Dill 2004). Although the concept of the market is not readily acceptable to many academics because it implies a commercial view of higher education, the current characteristics of university systems in Europe and the world at large, and the competition by universities to maintain a world reputation suggest a quasi-market (Edwards 2004). A common trend that can be found throughout the world is that universities are encouraged to be entrepreneurial, spin out new firms, develop close ties and engage more closely with firms (Smith 2006). The evidence that there is a fuelling growth market in education ser-
vices is increasingly confounding the idea that education is not to be traded or considered a commodity (Bjarnarson 2004).

2.4. Conceptualising neoliberalism in the context of higher education

Neoliberalism is equated with the free markets and competition. With markets and economics at its foreground, neoliberalism has an agenda to infiltrate market values into all sectors of human life and reduce human action and policy with the profit and the market rationale. The neoliberal ideology has a preference for instrumental values such as competition, economic efficiency, choice, and competitive regimes of resource allocation (Rizvi 2007). It also proposes that human well-being could be achieved within a framework of free trade and markets, with the state maintaining an institutional framework conducive for such practices (Harvey 2005). The state could maintain such favourable institutional framework by guaranteeing the integrity and value for money and withdrawing itself from areas of social provision. The belief is that the market is capable of producing social benefits through information technology that guides decisions in the global market place. As a result, neoliberalism pursues and has an interest in information technology. According to Levidow (2002), the neoliberal strategy for universities includes features such as educational efficiency, accountability, and quality defined in terms of accountability and performance criteria. Since the 1980s, in order to deserve state funding and raise competitiveness, universities have been urged to adopt commercial models of knowledge, skills, curriculum, finance, accounting, and management organisation. As part of the neoliberal ideology, universities must raise their own productivity, package knowledge, deliver flexible education through information technology, and produce more students at lower unit cost in order to survive. A central neoliberal project is the knowledge economy and under this paradigm, knowledge, management, quality, productivity, and speedy information flow are considered necessary for economic competitiveness (Levidow 2002).

Nowadays, knowledge is replacing traditional tangible factors of production such as land and money as the key drivers of economic growth (Gilbert 2007; Trilling & Hood 1999; Guile 2006; Johnson 2008; Duderstadt, Taggart & Weber 2008). The traditional philosophical understanding of knowledge is being transformed by new terms of knowledge such as knowledge management, knowledge clusters, knowledge work, and knowledge workers (Gilbert 2007). Countries’ attempt to catch the knowledge wave poses major challenges to
our education systems. Knowledge is no longer thought of as a thing or a kind of matter produced by human thought and then codified into disciplines by experts. It is now being understood as being more like energy, something defined by its effectiveness in action and by the results it achieves. Knowledge is now something that causes things to happen (Gilbert 2007). Knowledge is no longer thought of as stuff that can be learned or put away for future use (Manuel Castells 2000, as cited in Gilbert 2007). Knowledge is no longer important because of its relationship with the truth but for its performativity, for its ability to do things and its use value. With such a background, learners will be encouraged to develop an understanding of an organised stock of public or professional knowledge, not in order to add to it, but to pursue performativity (Jean Francois Lyotard 1984, as cited in Gilbert 2007). Knowledge therefore becomes something to apply to new situations, to use and replace it in the process of innovation.

In the neoliberal knowledge economy project, human capital is seen as a key driver of economic growth and competitiveness. Human capital refers to investment in aspects such as education, job training, or health in order to maximise output and increase economic returns (Schultz 1959; Attiyeh 1974; Johnson 1974; Bear 1974; Becker 2006; Schramm 2008; Eide & Showalter 2010). According to Rizvi (2007), the human capital theory imagines all human action to be based on economic selfish ends, such that it re-conceptualises education in which learning for learning sake is no longer sufficient. In the human capital theory, education does not have any intrinsic ends as such, but they must always be linked to the instrumental purpose of human capital development and economic maximisation. In the knowledge economy, wealth and prosperity are seen as depending on the capability to be ingenious, creative, outweigh competitors, and tune into the demands and desires of the consumer market (Hargreaves 2002). Also, education in the knowledge economy is viewed as a private good, a commodity that can provide an individual with an advantage over others, and which can differentiate people in terms of their economic value (Rizvi 2007). In this regard, education is defined in instrumental terms, and systems that do not meet these functional economic goals are regarded as ineffective and inefficient.

Nayyar (2008) argues that market forces have led to higher education being viewed of as a business. One thing that is different about the conditions under which universities operate is the neoliberal belief in the market to produce beneficial outcomes for individuals (Biesta 2011). This explains the rise of the adaptive university, one that tries to adapt to the de-
mands of global capitalism, the market logic, the needs of students, and tries to be competitive and efficient (Maarten & Masschelein 2009; Biesta 2011). According to Maarten & Masschelein (2009), the emergence of the demand of quality and excellence in universities has been due to the decline of the nation-state, and a shift from citizens concerned with national culture to those concerned with their knowledge economy and human capital. The issue with the infiltration of the human capital logic into higher education is that the value invested in the field of higher education is termed academic capital, and consists in the first instance of an intellectual or cultural, rather than an economic or political asset (Naidoo & Jamieson 2006). The market pressures on higher education may lead to the eradication of academic capital and the valorisation of economic capital. Such a shift may lead to the commoditisation of education and transform the educational process into a form that has an “exchange”, rather than an intrinsic “use value”. Although educational credentials have had an exchange value in the past, it was a by-product of the values, processes, and ethos of universities. The devaluation of academic capital is likely to shift the underlying logic shaping academic practices, and such a commercialised transaction turns the lecturer into the “commodity producer”, and the student into the “consumer” (Naidoo & Jamieson 2006).

Such a provider/consumer notion in higher education has led to measures that provide parents and students with information on the nature of the goods and services on which to base their choices, and know which higher education institution can meet their needs (Levin & Beltfield 2006). The emphasis is on the provision of information for the purpose of useful comparisons, informed decisions, and making discriminate choices. According to Naidoo & Jamieson (2006), performance indicators and league tables which have become part of higher education’s landscape to give students information and choice evoke a particular pathology as they function as market currencies. Rather than achieving missions, universities invest resources in order to move up rankings lists. Hence, as Ball (2006) notes, we now operate within a baffling array of performance indicators, comparisons, competition, and figures. In response to students’/parents’ needs, universities will adopt products of differentiation in order to appeal to particular educational preferences, rather than trying to produce a standardised educational product (Levin & Beltfield 2006). The idea that students come to education with particular needs and expectations to be met models education into an economic transaction, and symbolises an inadequate way of understanding the dynamics inherent in education (Biesta 2011). A distinction between the eco-
nomic and educational dynamics is that, education is simply not about giving students their desires, but engaging in the critical question of whether what is desired is desirable. Being an educational process, education is simply not about servicing wants and needs, but about engaging in a critical examination and transformation of those existing wants, needs, and desires. In trying to be useful and giving students what they want, education runs the risk of being anti-educational (Biesta 2005). Biesta makes a distinction between the market model and the educational model of education. In the market model, as long as they pay for it, parents or students may go to a supermarket, buy, and get the items on their list without question. In the educational model, although parents send their children to school to be educated, they do not do so with a list detailing what the teacher should do. It is up to the professional judgement and expertise of the teacher to identify and make decisions about what a particular student needs. The market model assumption that learners come to education with a clear understanding of what their needs are, is a problematic one (Biesta 2005). The reason for this, Biesta further argues, is that it misconstrues the role and position of both the educational professional and learner in the process. The market model of education forgets that a major reason for engaging in education is precisely to find out what it is that one actually needs. Educational professionals play a crucial role in this process by virtue of the fact that a major part of their expertise precisely lies there.

Biesta (2005) presents that, the idea that education should be about meeting the needs of the learner is also problematic. This is so because it suggests a framework in which the only questions that can be meaningfully asked about education are those limited to the technical effectiveness and efficiency of the educational process. This makes it impossible to ask important questions about the content and purpose of education other than those corresponding to the needs of the learner. On a wider social scale, the content and purpose of learning become subject to the force of the market. Questions about the content and purpose of education are political. Therefore, to leave this decision to the manipulative market to make has the potential danger of undermining educational professionalism and eroding the opportunity to have a democratic say in the content and purpose of education (Biesta 2005). The specialty about the educational relationship, Biesta further argues, centres around three interlocking concepts of trust without ground, transcendent violence, and responsibility without knowledge. Similarly, Naidoo & Jamieson (2006) posit that education requires risk-taking, faith, and trust on the part of the learner. As Tsichritzis (2008) argues, education is one of the main goals of universities. Below, I will show briefly each
of the three interlocking concepts which according to Biesta (2005) and Naidoo & Jamieson (2006), education centres around.

2.4.1. Trust without ground

The idea that education starts with the learner knowing what he or she wants and the provider does precisely this, has given rise to accountability, inspection, and control (Biesta 2005; Naidoo & Jamieson 2006). There is no learning without a risk; a risk that we may not learn what we wanted to learn, that we may learn things we never imagined we would have learned, or learn things that we never imagined we would have wanted to learn. Engaging in learning entails a risk that it may have an impact on us, and hence, education only begins when one is willing to take this risk. Risk and trust are related in the sense that trust is by nature without grounds (Biesta 2005; Naidoo & Jamieson 2006). This is so because if one knew what would happen, or how the person in whom we put our trust is going to act or respond, trust would no longer be needed; it would be replaced by calculation. Trust is about what is incalculable and structurally entails a moment of risk. To suggest that education is risk-free, and that learners do not run any risk by engaging in education, or that learning outcomes can be known and specified in advance, is a gross misrepresentation of what education is about.

2.4.2. Transcendental violence

Although there are different explanations of how the learning process takes place, many of them assume learning has to do with the acquisition of something external which existed before the act of learning, and as a result of learning, the acquisition becomes the possession of the learner (Biesta 2005; Naidoo & Jamieson 2006). Seeing learning as a process of getting more and more, trying to master, to acquire, or internalise is a misrepresentation of education. A more educational and significant way is to see learning as concerned with questions of subjectivity and coming into presence in an intersubjective world we share with others that are different. Coming into presence is relational and intersubjective. It is about responding to, and being challenged by who is, and what is other and different. In this sense, the teacher plays a crucial role in confronting students with questions of otherness and difference (Biesta 2005; Naidoo & Jamieson 2006). This suggests a sense of violence involved in education, not simply about meeting students’ needs, and presenting
learning as easy, entailing no risk-taking, nor transformative and disturbing challenges as suggested by the commoditisation of education (Biesta 2005; Naidoo & Jamieson 2006).

2.4.3. Responsibility without knowledge

Responsibility is more than a responsibility for the quality of teaching or meeting the needs of the students (Biesta 2005; Naidoo & Jamieson & 2006). Also, if teaching is about creating opportunity for the student to come into presence, then the first responsibility of the teacher becomes the subjectivity of the student. This allows the student to be a unique and singular being. Taking responsibility for a particular student’s subjectivity is not something that has to do with calculation. The responsibility of teachers and educators for individual learners is unlimited, as it cannot be based on what one knows he is taking responsibility for (Biesta 2005; Naidoo & Jamieson 2006).

The discussions presented in this section are important for the purpose of this research as they provide insights into how neoliberal market forces are shaping the higher education arena. Neoliberalism overemphasises higher education’s economic efficiency, performativity, and effectiveness. Within such an instrumental conception, these discussions present the idea that the educational process becomes modeled around a framework of effectiveness and efficiency. These discussions also shed light on the idea that performativity and results production are not the sufficient end of higher education’s tasks. An emphasis on performativity undermines the educational process which entails the creation of space to come into presence with intersubjectivity and focuses on students’ understanding, personal development, critical and analytical capacity. With such an understanding, these discussions bring to light the fact that within a neoliberal instrumental paradigm, education not only becomes commoditised, but vital educational issues become confined and subordinated to the efficiency and performativity discourse. Also, this section conceptualised the role of higher education and that of the teacher: the neoliberal market role which emphasises a focus on performativity through the satisfaction of needs, and the educational role which takes into consideration students’ personal development, maturation, and understanding. These discussions are important for the purpose of this research as they will enable me look at, and analyse the data collected in this study in a meaningful way.
2.5. The neoliberal agenda for higher education: Conceptualising higher education beyond neoliberal markets, competition, and efficiency

According to Rizvi & Lingard (2009), the knowledge economy reduces issues of learning to a purely economic logic and views education on narrow economic and technical terms. The neoliberal agenda is profit, and profit is a god for the neoliberals (Hill & Kumar 2009). Under neoliberalism, everything is either for sale or to be plundered for profit (Giroux 2009). Public service such as health care, public assistance, education, and transportation are now subject to the forces of the market. Health care no longer becomes a measure of the quality of democracy, but another market source of capital accumulation. As Hill & Kumar (2009) argue, the idea is to make education fit for business, and to subordinate higher education to the personality, ideological, and economic requirements of capital. The neoliberal agenda is that educational institutions reproduce ideologically indoctrinated, pro-capitalist, compliant, and effective workers. Apart from having an agenda to produce neoliberal compliant workers, Ball (2003) argues that, the three neoliberal policy technologies of the market, managerialism, and performativity have an agenda to reform teachers’ identities and subjectivities, reshape who teachers are, and how they view themselves and their profession. This agenda for educational institutions constitutes a broad transnational consensus to make educational institutions responsive to employers’ needs in terms of the effectiveness and efficiency with which employees produce their work (Hill & Kumar 2009).

A neoliberal strategy of infiltrating the market forces into higher education has been through urging cuts in the state funding of higher education, and the institution of performance-based funding systems (Levidow 2002; Harvey 2005). The rationale behind these measures is to stir up competition and allow the private sector and markets to produce beneficial outcomes for the more competitive. The infiltration of the market into education has also been facilitated by universities turning to corporate bodies for money and self-branding in the wake of decreasing government funding (King 2004). According to King (2004), university faculties turn to commercial forms of research and develop close ties with industry and commerce in order to maintain levels of funding. It is a university strategy of enhancing prestige by affiliating with large national or global players with major standing in their own rights. Positionality in comparison to other institutions has become important in attracting “consumers” who take reputation and standing as indicators for
what it means to be a good university (Biesta 2009). The ‘naming and shaming’ and league tables are processes designed to re-enforce the student as the consumer who, through improved choice is able to exert greater competitive pressures on higher education systems (King 2004). The choice of educational institution is justified by parents’ or students’ right to choose (McCowan 2009). The right to choose is seen as a guarantor of ‘democracy’ (Apple 2000). The act of choosing has as a consequence increased inequalities between educational institutions (Hill & Kumar 2009). Parental choice of educational institutions has become the educational institutions’ choice of the most desirable parents and children, and rejection of others. In this sense, higher education quickly becomes a privilege, not a right.

Although higher education has never been free from the market (Anderson 2009), the new intimacy between higher education and corporate culture, and the subordination of higher education to a for-profit business is not uncommon (Hill & Kumar 2009). The implication for this is not only a fundamental or abrupt change, but also an unmistakable reduction of higher education’s political and critical role (Miyoshi 1998, as cited in Hill & Kumar 2009). As the power of higher education is reduced to its ability to make corporate power accountable, it becomes difficult for students, faculties, and administrators to address social and ethical issues within this logic (Hill & Kumar 2009). Many university faculties are accepting the new rules of corporate professionalism in order to survive in the new corporate academy. They are more pre-occupied with the threats of either being punished or fired, than they are with quality research and teaching. Against the drive to commoditise curriculum, corporatise education, and treat students as consumers and trainees, higher education needs to be defended as a public good (Hill & Kumar 2009). The university’s mission needs to be defined beyond instrumental efficiency. Although the economic importance of higher education is undisputable, it is important to acknowledge that the role of the university is not exhausted by its economic function (Biesta 2007). There is a long standing tradition whereby it is argued that the university should be a place devoted to inquiry and scholarship and free from any utilitarian demands.

Universities also have a civic democratic role to play in society (Weber 2008). Higher education has always been viewed as a public good worthy of public investment because of its broad benefits to society as a whole (Berdahl 2008). While it is crucial for educators and others to defend higher education as a public good, it is also important to recognise that the
crisis of higher education cannot be understood outside the overall restructuring of social 
and civic life (Giroux 2009). The death of the social, devaluing of political agency, waning 
of non-commercial values, and the disappearance of non-commercial public spheres have 
to be understood as part of a broader attack on public entitlements such as health, educa-
tion, and social security (Newfield 2002, as cited in Giroux 2009). These spheres are 
turned over to the market forces and privatised so that economic transactions can subordi-
nate and in many cases replace political democracy. At the heart of inclusive democracy is 
the assumption that learning should be used to expand the public good, create a culture of 
questioning, and promote democratic social change (Hill & Kumar 2009). Situated within a 
broader context of issues concerned with social responsibility, global justice, and the digni-
ty of human life, higher education is a public sector with the potentials to offer students the 
opportunity to involve themselves in the deepest problems of society. It also enables stu-
dents to acquire skills, knowledge, and an ethical vocabulary necessary for modes of criti-
cal dialogue and forms of broadened civic participation. Higher education may be one of 
the few sites left in which students learn how to mediate critically: between democratic 
values and demands of corporate power, and between identities founded on democratic 
principles and identities steeped in forms of competitive individualism that celebrate self-
interest, profit-making, and greed (Hill & Kumar 2009).

The contribution of education to democracy and its social dimension has been captured by 
Naidoo & Jamieson 2006; Olssen 2006; Levin & Beltfield 2006; Biesta 2005. It has long 
been recognised that education is considered to be a primary source of external social ben-
fits because, the results of an education benefits not only the individual but also the soci-
ety of which she is part (Levin & Beltfield 2006). It has also been agreed that one of the 
central purposes of educational institutions is to improve social cohesion and stability of 
society through the provision of a common experience that prepares the youth for adult 
roles and responsibilities (Guttman 1987, as cited in Levin and Beltfield 2006). Social co-
hesion refers to the idea that educational institutions should promote the social good. Al-
though what constitutes the social good may vary across countries, in a democracy howev-
er, the purpose of education is usually interpreted as relating to elements regarding curricu-
ulum, values, goals, language, and political orientation. In this sense, citizens possess the 
skills and knowledge necessary for civic and economic participation in society. Going by 
this, the freedom to choose in the market education era emphasises the private, not the col-
lective good (Levin & Beltfield 2006). The fundamental purpose of education is to enlarge
human freedom, enhance human tolerance, citizenship, and the capacity for contributing to a social discourse (Berhdal 2008).

This section presented the theoretical discussions which conceptualise the tasks of higher education beyond the instrumental values of neoliberalism. These discussions are important in this study in the sense that they broaden higher education’s tasks beyond neoliberalism which conceptualises higher education’s tasks within a framework of economic instrumentality, efficiency, and effectiveness. Such a broadened conceptualisation of higher education provides a richer lens through which to look at data and discuss findings in a meaningful and analytical manner. This section also showed that there is more to universities’ tasks than producing compliant and pro-capitalist neoliberal workers. Universities also have a democratic, political, civic, critical, and ethical task. These discussions provide an important lens in this research, as they will enable me to make meaningful analysis with regards to aspects such as offcuts in state funding of universities, the focus of commercial research, and universities’ democratic tasks. This section also presented discourses pertaining to the idea that the educational process and higher education’s task cannot be understood it to their full scope within the transactional market framework of education. These diverse discussions are important for the purpose of this study as they broaden the lens through which the data collected in this research will be looked at and analysed.
3. Context of the research

After looking at the tasks of higher education and the idea of quality and quality assessment in higher education on a more broad perspective in the theoretical framework of this thesis, this part of the thesis seeks to contextualise the research by putting it in the Finnish context. It looks at Finnish higher education, the developments and trends that have taken place in it. It also looks at the phenomenon of expansion, as well as the idea of quality, quality assurance and the evaluation of Finnish higher education institutions.

3.1. Finnish higher education

The history of Finnish higher education began with the establishment of the Royal Academy of Åbo in 1640 (Välimaa 2001). At the time, Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden. The Royal Academy of Åbo was the first national institution in Finland in the sense that it trained civil servants for the kingdom. Between the world wars, Finnish higher education was an elite system in which studying was possible only for the more prosperous social classes, and the number of higher education students remained low. During the 20th century, Finnish higher education started witnessing expansion (Välimaa 2001). Expansion began in the late 1950s, with a growth in the number of students, universities, and academics. During the rapid period of massification, the logic of expansion was supported by internal academic interest, by industrial and commercial needs, and political processes involved in the making of the welfare state. During the 19th and 20th century, universities were seen as important factors in the making of Finnish national identities, but today, the official national rhetoric sees higher education institutions as a part of the national innovation strategy (Välimaa 2001).

In the era of globalisation, universities are seen as key institutions for producing knowledge and work force for the needs of the modern society (Tirronen & Nokkala 2009). Universities are also expected to play a central part in the innovation system, economic development, knowledge-based economy, and the competitiveness of nation-states. The Finnish higher education system is currently undergoing reform which aims at enhancing the competitiveness of universities through structural development. Finnish universities face the challenge of commercialisation and academic capitalism. Innovation in Finnish higher education policy has in essential parts been harmonised with European Union poli-
cy, especially the Lisbon strategy, and it aims at increasing the flexibility, economic efficiency, productivity, and quality of universities (Tirronen & Nokkala 2009). Higher education policies in Finland emphasise the role of higher education in promoting regional, economic, and social development. Institutions are required to be competitive, innovative, efficient, performance-oriented actors, and responsive to external stakeholders’ needs (Anyamele 2005; Kohtamäki 2011). A strong emphasis has been on ensuring the competitiveness and high level expertise of universities by allocating resources into fields that are essential for the development of a knowledge-based economy (Tirronen & Nokkala 2009). Universities must ensure their excellence and societal accountability, strengthen cooperation with industry and business life, and increase their performance. A recent incentive to respond to these policy goals has been offered through strengthening higher education’s autonomy, which is negotiated and conditional. Higher education institutions are supposed to meet set goals by the central government, and state steering mechanisms such as performance-funding agreements exert influence in the area of financial autonomy (Neave & van Vught 1991, as cited in Kohtamäki 2011).

The 2010 major Finnish university reform changed the legal status of the universities from state agencies to either legal persons under public law or foundations under private law (Kohtamäki 2011). Universities are therefore in a totally new situation, and have actively launched their fundraising campaigns, and compete for public and private research funding. The amount of private money collected by the end of 2010 was augmented by government funds. One euro from the private sector meant 2.5 euro from the state. The Ministry of Education pays 2.5 times as much as privately raised funds. According to Tjeldvoll (2008), Finnish universities are increasingly forced to compete for financing and talent in the international market. The new University Law gives universities increased power and economic responsibility, and allows them to be the driving force for goal-directedness and effectiveness. The Ministry of Education finances, monitors, and evaluates the activities in order to improve quality, effectiveness, and productivity in higher education. Even before the 2010 law which drastically changed the legal status of Finnish universities and marked the start of the external fundraising campaign, Finnish universities in the end of the 1980s sought external funding (Kuoppala 2005). Between 1990 and 2003, the proportion of private funding increased by almost 20%. One of the reasons for the rapid growth in non-governmental funding is that from the 1980s, large proportions of public funds channeled to universities were allocated through competitive schemes.
The Finnish higher education sector finds its roots in the German Humboldtian model, one characteristic of which is the autonomy of professors in academic matters (Hölttä 2000; Kallio 2001). The idea of higher education based on the Humboldtian model of unity of teaching and research has been deeply rooted in the Finnish academic world and academic profession (Hölttä 1998). The Finnish higher education system is a combination of university and polytechnics working together (Saarivirta 2010; Ahola 1997). The idea of the German fachhochschulen, in which the biggest higher education institutes are universities and polytechnics has informed Finland’s dual higher education system model. The Finnish university system consisted of 21 universities and 31 polytechnics. In the area of higher education, the government concentrates on increasing ‘world-class expertise’, and creating higher education entities that are regionally stronger and more effective in terms of knowledge (Valtioneuvosto 2007, as cited in Tirronen & Nokkala 2009).

Officially, the aim of universities is to conduct free research and provide higher education based on research. On the other hand, the target of polytechnics is to provide education, research, and development based on the requirements of working life (Ministry of Education 2006, as cited in Tammi 2009). Recently, more demands are set on universities to contribute directly to business and industry development. The aspiration of policy makers is to reform Finnish higher education into a world class system (Tjeldvoll 2008). The aim is to create a high-quality university system, enhance the competitiveness of universities in the international market place, and enhance universities’ contribution to the national economy (Tirronen & Nokkala 2009). Aiming to enhance the quality, competitiveness, and effectiveness of higher education, the Ministry of Education in March 2006, announced a discussion paper on the structural development of higher education. Co-operation between higher education institutions is a common policy and a strategic instrument for re-organising higher education. For the universities, the objectives of institutional co-operation are structural, and are related to advancing the relevance, efficiency, and effectiveness of universities, and cost reduction. The new Finnish university policy seems to simultaneously promote both differentiation and stratification, which is a fairly new phenomenon in the Finnish university system which traditionally emphasised equality and cohesion (Tirronen & Nokkala 2009). Merging has also been another strategy of increasing competitiveness, and three major mergers have taken place in Finnish higher education. The University of Turku and the Turku School of Business merged to create the Turku University, while the University of Kuopio and the University of Joensuu merged to create
the University of Eastern Finland. The Helsinki School of Economics, Helsinki University of Technology, University of Arts and Design merged to create the “Innovation University”. The aim is to develop the “Innovation University” as a world class university with strong international brand. The “Innovation University” is supposed to achieve global and world class standing in education and research (Tirronen & Nokkala 2009). According to Tjeldvoll (2008), the “Innovation University” is the government’s tool for Finnish international competitiveness.

The main trends in the current Finnish higher education policy can be characterised as encouragement of institutional co-operation and mergers, stratification and differentiation, and changes in governance and leadership (Tirronen & Nokkala 2009). The aim of these trends is to achieve academic excellence and competitiveness. These strategic mergers turn the number of Finnish universities from 21 to 15, thus increasing the concentration and unit size of the Finnish university arena (Saarivita 2010). The future envisaged through these strategic mergers is a strengthening of institutional profiles, the enhancement of the research capacity and marketability of Finnish universities, and efficient use of resources (Tirronen & Nokkala 2009). The Ministry of Education and the private sector have a key role in steering these development projects. In the case of the “Innovation University” especially, the role of the market is central. Mergers are central instruments in re-organising quite fragmented resources of the Finnish university system in order to increase the flexibility and viability of universities to meet the challenges of the market-oriented era. (Saarivirta 2010) posits that, what the Finnish government wants at the moment are bigger university complexes to be able to compete internationally, instead of spending money on many small units that cannot achieve international competitiveness. The need for such a reform was outlined with respect to the increase in universities’ importance for economic growth, success, social welfare, and public innovation (Tammi 2009). The need for the universities to stay competitive in a more competitive global economy has also stimulated these reforms (Tjeldvoll 2008).

It seems that the globalised social dynamics of higher education have found their way into Finnish higher education policy making in three steps (Välimaa 2004). It started by paying attention to issues of efficiency and institutional management, and then a focus on evaluation practices. The third step involved an emphasis on the financial steering of higher education using instruments often seen as belonging to the neoliberal tool box (Poropudas and
Volanen 2003, as cited in Välimaa 2004). The efficiency discourse has been one of the most permanent topics in Finnish higher education. Such an understanding sees universities as business enterprises, and subordinates the cultural and educational functions of higher education to the efficiency discourse (Välimaa 2004). Since the 1980s, a market-oriented strategy which has been labeled the “doctrine of management by results” has played an important part in the governance of Finnish universities and Finnish Higher education policy (Välimaa & Jalkanen 2001; Hölttä & Reikila 2003; Kuoppala 2005). The “doctrine of management by results” continues till this present day.

According to the “doctrine of management by results”, market forces are the main drivers, and universities are considered to be entrepreneurial units with emphasis placed on innovativeness, flexibility, and ability to react to external change (Kuoppala 2005). The Finnish higher education policy doctrine that preceded the management by results strategy was the academic-traditional doctrine, and the development doctrine. The former lasted until the 1960s, and the latter from the end of the 1960s to the end of the 1980s. During the academic-traditional doctrine, the state provided no nationwide policy or unified guidelines. Academic traditions were respected and autonomous, and the universities and their independent professors determined the direction of higher education policy (Kuoppala 2005). Kuoppala further presents that, under the development doctrine, the state increased resources to higher education institutions from 1966 under the “Development of Higher Education” legislation, but it strictly controlled higher education policy. A typicality of this era was the development of a comprehensive planning system for higher education steered by the Ministry of Education with reference to the reform of universities’ internal administration and degree content. One outcome of the change to management by results has been that, compared to the collegial model that existed before, it has led to an increase in the direct authority of university rectors, deans, department heads and administrators (Kuoppala 2005). Public administration reformers drew their inspiration of the management by results doctrine from the management systems that developed in the private sector. As Välimaa (1994) points out, the notion of “lack of academic leadership” inspired legislative bodies in the 1980s and 1990s to give more power to academic leaders such as deans, heads of departments, and rectors. The assumption was that increased managerial tools would make faculties and basic units more conscious of their outcomes and more efficient. Consequently, the problems of academic leadership were decided by central authorities, and not by basic academic units themselves. These trends can still be seen in the contem-
porary structural adjustments, mergers, and increasing co-operation within and between universities. As Tirronen & Nokkala (2009) note, the new legal status of universities brings with it major changes in the leadership and governance of higher education institutions. Consequently, decision-making and the role of leaders such as rectors and deans become more professional and strategic. Leadership also becomes more output-oriented, with an emphasis placed on the financial and profit responsibility of leaders. The change in governance structures also affects the relations between collegial governance and individual leadership. This is so because the emphasis on individual leadership seems to displace collegial decision-making, especially on matters concerning operational decision-making (Tirronen & Nokkala 2009).

3.2. Quality assurance and quality audits of Finnish higher education institutions

In Finland, one of the most crucial phenomena with today’s university teaching and research is the increasing demand for quality (Kallio 2001). Universities compete with each other with regards to the quality of their teaching. Since part of the allocation of resources depends on the findings of evaluation, more evaluation is taking place in universities. To survive, universities have to improve the quality of their teaching and research. Aittola (2001) argues that, efficiency and quality are the most compelling guidelines steering the operation of the university system nowadays. An improved quality of higher education institutions is a factor in international and national competition. High quality enhances the competitiveness of the Finnish society and the international attractiveness of education provided in the country (Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) 2007). Using various means, the aim is to enhance the Finnish position in the international division of labour. At the same time, internationalisation is a prerequisite for higher quality and improved innovations. On a European level, the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Process include major efforts for improved competitiveness. The challenge of the Lisbon Strategy is for Europe to become the world’s most dynamic economic area. The Bologna Process supports this aim in the realm of higher education, and the objective is the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

According to FINHEEC (2007), quality could be defined in terms of excellence, standards, customer quality, and cost efficiency. For the purpose of audits of quality assurance systems, quality refers to fitness for purpose of quality assurance methods with respect to set
objectives or aims. According to FINHEEC, quality is therefore a verified achievement of objectives. FINHEEC defines quality assurance as the procedures, processes, and systems used by higher education institutions to improve and safeguard the quality of their education and other activities. As a signatory country, Finland is committed to the Bologna process (FINHEEC 2007). An important element of the future European higher education area is the quality assurance of higher education, as European higher education competes in the global education market (FINHEEC 2007). Competition and the surpassing of national borders have led to a situation where it is no longer sufficient to have national confidence in the uniform level of a country’s higher education. Today, higher education must also be internationally comprehensible and reliable. In particular, the mobility of students and labour emphasise the need to be able to demonstrate the quality of education and degrees in international terms. It is up to the higher education institutions to continuously develop their own operations, to improve, and assure quality (FINHEEC 2007). There are also other national development needs of quality assurance (FINHEEC 2007). These needs for quality assurance are related to higher education institutions’ financers and stakeholders who need new tools to assess whether the higher education institutions have been suitably efficient and of high quality operations. Stakeholders also need to know how these operations are developed.

The European higher education system and the Finnish higher education in particular, have undergone great changes over the past two decades (FINHEEC 2007). Several countries have been faced with serious quality problems and have found it necessary to adopt accreditation procedures. In accreditation, the minimum quality criteria are set by a party outside the higher education institutions. The purpose of the evaluation is to provide a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer as to whether the minimum quality criteria are met. Quality assessment has traditionally taken the form of self-evaluation in Finnish universities with the objective of improving academic practices, especially in teaching and educational provision (Huusko & Ursin 2010). Currently, the focus is being shifted towards more systematic forms of evaluation known as Quality Assurance systems. In line with the principle of the autonomy of higher education institutions, the Finnish system starts with the premise that higher education institutions are solely responsible for the quality of their own education and other operations. Finnish higher education institutions can set up a Quality Assurance (QA) system that best suits them (Kettunen 2008). The higher education institutions are also responsible for the quality of their operations, special quality assurance objectives and methods, and
their own development. The reason for the universities making individual choices of how to implement a Quality Assurance system lies in the fact that Finnish evaluation tradition has its roots in, and lies in the Humboldtian idea of the university (Huusko & Ursin 2010).

According to FINHEEC (2007), the concept of ‘Quality Assurance system’ embodies both quality enhancement and quality management. The term can be used in two ways: to refer to the Quality Assurance system of individual higher education institutions, or to the national system for assuring the quality of higher education. The Quality Assurance system of a higher education institution refers to the entity constituted by the quality assurance organisation, the division of procedures, responsibilities, resources, and processes. The Quality Assurance system of the higher education institution must cover all its operations. Each higher education institution determines the objectives, structure, operating principles, methods used, and ways to improve its own Quality Assurance system (FINHEEC 2007).

In the Finnish audit model, the higher education institution can decide on its own Quality Assurance system, and FINHEEC on the basis of respective legislation is mainly in charge of the external evaluation of the performance of higher education institutions. The task of FINHEEC is to assist the Ministry of Education and higher education institutions in evaluation-related issues. It also performs auditing of Quality Assurance systems. The audit operations have been developed to not only support quality work at the higher education institutions, but also to demonstrate that Finland has a competent and coherent national Quality Assurance in place (FINHEEC 2007). This buffer body (FINHEEC) with the responsibility for the development and co-ordination of the Quality Assurance system was established in 1996 (Hölttä 2000).

The audit model promotes the adoption and application of the European principles in the Quality Assurance of Finnish higher education institutions (FINHEEC 2007). The FINHEEC audit model for Quality Assurance systems is based on the corresponding European guidelines and recommendations which underline the significance of Quality Assurance systems as management and steering tools. The FINHEEC audit model also follows the European guidelines which emphasise the role played by the students and staff, and the commitment of the higher education institution in the continuous improvement of its Quality Assurance system. The audit equally focuses on procedures and processes which the higher education institution uses to develop the quality of its educational and other activities (FINHEEC 2007). Results assessment is performed by the Ministry of Education in
the framework of its management by objectives and performance. It is also the domain of the higher education institution itself. The main premise for the audits of the Quality Assurance systems is the autonomy of the higher education institutions, which comprises the principles of openness, and the recognition and identification of the higher education institutions’ social responsibility. An inherent element of the autonomy is to implement the Quality Assurance in line with the peer review principle (FINHEEC 2007). In this context, the higher education institutions assume the main expert responsibility for the evaluations of Quality Assurance at the national level (FINHEEC 2007). The objective of the audits is to collect and disseminate best Quality Assurance practices, and promote their adoption within the higher education institutions. The audits also seek to activate a quality debate and interaction between the higher education institutions and stakeholders through public reporting on the higher education institutions’ Quality Assurance systems. Auditing focuses on the higher education institution’s Quality Assurance system as a whole, its comprehensiveness, performance, transparency, and effectiveness with respect to the higher education institution’s basic mission. Auditing also focuses on the participation of the higher education institutions’ staff, students, and external stakeholders in Quality Assurance, the relevance of, and access to the information generated by Quality Assurance systems within higher education (FINHEEC 2007).

In this section, I found it important to describe the context in which this study is carried out. This section explores the origin of Finnish higher education, how quality is defined by FINHEEC, and for what purpose quality audits of the higher education institutions are carried out. A contextualisation of the research equally allows me to narrow the scope of this study. Read in connection with the theoretical framework of the research which looks at higher education’s tasks, quality and quality assessment through a neoliberal lens, this section enables a better understanding of how neoliberal market values shape national conceptions of higher education’s tasks, quality, and the purpose quality audits. Also, this section of the thesis provided a “thick description” of the context in which this study is carried out. The importance of this “thick description” is in connection with the transferability of findings to other contexts. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), the burden of transfer of findings to another context lies less with the original investigator, than it lies with the investigator seeking to make the transfer. The investigator seeking transfer should gather empirical evidence with respect to contextual similarity. However, Lincoln & Guba posit that the responsibility rests on the original investigator to provide a “thick description” necessary to
enable an investigator interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion as to whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility. In this respect, this section presented a “thick description” of context, which enables an investigator seeking to make a transfer to reach a conclusion as to whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility on the basis of contextual similarity.
4. Methodological choices of the research

This part of the thesis looks at the epistemological and ontological issues that have informed my own thinking about knowledge and ‘what is’. It also looks at the approach and method that have been chosen for the purpose of data collection and analysis. In this chapter, I discuss my ontological and epistemological standpoints, my perception of how we know, what is there to be known, my preference for qualitative research, and the research participants. It is important for the reader to know that my worldviews and beliefs, research questions, aims, and the empirical material in this study have informed my choice of a qualitative research, a phenomenographical approach, and the number of research participants.

4.1. Epistemological and ontological position

According to Guba & Lincoln (1998), paradigms are the basic systems of beliefs and worldviews that guide researchers not only in their choice of method, but also in epistemologically and ontologically fundamental ways. In recent years, the strong belief in the superiority of quantification has been questioned. Quantitative approaches are context stripping; through control, quantitative approaches strip from the context other variables which could alter findings if allowed to exert their influence. Due to such exclusionary designs, quantitative approaches limit the generalisability or applicability of their outcomes only to similarly contextually stripped contexts. Qualitative data can redress this imbalance by providing contextual information (Guba & Lincoln 1998).

This research is qualitative. Qualitative research takes a position that there is no single reality, but multiple realities which are contingent on intersubjective understanding (Ely 1991; Heaton 2004). Blaxter et al. (2010) argue that methodology is philosophical, and refers to the paradigm that underpins one’s research. This research is informed by qualitative methodologies. The aim is not to generalise, but to find out the perceptions of the research participants with respect to the topic under investigation. As Guba & Lincoln (1998) argue, although generalisations can be statistically meaningful, the ambiguity involved in this is that it may have no applicability in individual cases. The methodological question cannot be reduced to a question of methods, as methods must be fitted to a pre-determined methodology. In the question of methodology are issues of ontology and epistemology. The
former refers to the issues of what the nature and form of reality is, and what is it that can be known about it, while the latter attends to the nature of the relationship between the knower, would-be knower, or what can be known. It follows that if a ‘real’ reality or world is assumed, then the posture of the knower must be a value freedom or objective detachment so as to be able to discover ‘how things are’, or how they work. This manipulative methodology implies not only the ability to be objective, but equally an objective world to know about (Guba & Lincoln 1998). I do not believe in a real world out there to be known about, neither do I believe that the knower’s position is value-free; because I believe the knower’s position is influenced by his/her background and experiences. I align my thoughts with Mason (1996), who argues that our epistemology helps us to decide how social phenomena can be understood and knowledge demonstrated. Mason also argues that our epistemology helps us generate knowledge about the ontological component of the social world, be they social action, social processes, understandings, or meanings. I also agree and take the same standpoint as Creswell (1998), who argues that knowledge is within the meanings that people make of it, and it is gained through talking to people about their meaning which is laced with personal biases and values. According to Creswell, knowledge also evolves, emerges, and is inextricably tied to the context in which it is studied.

Guba & Lincoln (1998) argue that subjectivist ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies acknowledge the value-determined nature of inquiry. The etic outsider theory, although it informs the investigator, it may have little or no meaning for the insider view of the subjects, societies, or cultures being studied. In this sense, qualititative data is useful for uncovering emic views of the subjects or group of the study. My position is the belief in the insider perspective. In this study, I use subjective epistemologies and ontologies which take the position that what can be known is intertwined with the interaction between the researcher and research participants. This paradigm has informed the approach I use in this research, and my preference for individual interviews. Although this is the paradigm that underpins this study, I agree with Guba & Lincoln (1998) that no construction of a paradigm is incontrovertibly right, but it must rely on persuasiveness and utility, rather than proof to argue its position. The reason for aligning my thoughts to Lincoln & Guba’s is that this study is context-bound, and focuses on the perceptions of a particular group of people whose perceptions are informed by their experiences and background. In this sense, attempting to make these perceptions compel, or make them proof of the existence of a
“reality”, would go contrary to the aims of a qualitative study, as well as my epistemological and ontological position. The aim of this research is to get a better understanding of a phenomenon, and not to make the findings of the study compelling. With this in mind, I side with Guba & Lincoln (1998) that our readers cannot be compelled to accept our analysis or argument on the basis of incontestable logic or indisputable evidence. I preferred to use qualitative data in this study because of its potential to provide insights to human perceptions. This is so because unlike physical objects, human behaviour or perceptions cannot be understood without looking at the purpose and meanings that humans make of the world around them or attach to their activity. As Greene (1988) points out, qualitative research is concerned with meanings as they appear to, or are perceived by persons.

Creswell (1998) argues that qualitative research is undertaken in a natural setting where the researcher is an instrument of data collection. Qualitative researchers gather words or pictures, carry out inductive analysis, and report the views of participants. Qualitative researchers focus on the meanings of the participants and describe a process in an expressive and persuasive language. I really liked the point of departure of qualitative research. The point of departure is the quest for the insider perspective, and to make sense of, and interpret phenomena in the light of the meaning that people give to them. Qualitative research involves the collection and studied use of a variety of empirical materials such as case study, experiences, interviews, life stories and personal experience, introspective, observational, historical, interactional or visual texts (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, as cited in Creswell 1998). For the purpose of this research, I chose to collect data through individual interviews. This would enable me to get a better, richer, and deeper understanding of the perceptions of the research participants.

4.2. Academics as research participants

The question regarding the number of people an investigator has to involve as research participants has always been raised. According to Kvale (1996), the number of interviewees required depends on the purpose of the study. It would not be possible to test a hypothesis or make statistical generalisations if the number is too small. On the other hand, if the purpose is to understand the world as experienced by one specific person, then this one person is sufficient. A general impression from current interview studies is that investigators would have profited from having fewer interviews and have more time for preparation and
analysis (Kvale 1996). The aim of this study is not to have a quantitatively huge number of participants, as that would not only challenge my epistemological and ontological standpoint, but also defeat the purpose of my choice of a qualitative research. Hence, the main interest of this study is not on huge numbers of research participants, but on getting a deep conversation and understanding the perceptions of the academics who comprises the research participants. An academic is a teacher or scholar in a university or a higher education institution. My considerations on the number of research participants in this study are tied to Blaxter et al.’s (2010) argument that qualitative research aims at exploring fewer instances in as much detail as possible with an aim to achieve “depth” and not “breadth”. Drawing from this, it is may be important for me to reiterate that this research is neither predictive, nor does it aim at making statistical generalisations.

The research participants in this study comprises of five academics from a Finnish education institution. The academics participated in this research on the basis of willingness and availability to participate in this study. The snow-ball technique, which Blaxter et al. (2010) define as the building up one’s research participants through informants, was also used to make up the research participants in this study. The research participants are from the academe and comprises of one teacher, one professor, one professor emeritus, one academic in a managerial position, and one junior researcher. The research participants are also from different departments and disciplines. These academics comprises the research participants because, given that they exercise their profession in the academic arena in higher education, talking to them presents the opportunity for me to get an “insider” perspective on the topic under investigation.

4.3. Phenomenographical approach

This research uses a phenomenographical approach. Phenomenography developed in the early 1970s in the University of Göteborg where a study was carried out to find out students’ differential views on learning. Phenomenography is not a method, or theory in itself, although there are both methodical elements linked to it, and theoretical elements to be derived from it (Marton & Booth 1997). Phenomenography is the empirical study of the limited number of the qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of the world around us are perceived (Marton 1997; Marton 1980; Marton 1990). It takes a “second order” perspective in the sense that it focuses on, and studies the perceptions of
others. Phenomenography is a research approach directed towards experiential description. Terms such as ‘conceive’ or ‘perceive’ are used interchangeably to suggest that whether they are embedded in immediate experience or a reflected thought of a phenomenon, the different ways of perceiving a phenomenon can be found. As Marton & Booth (1997) argue, describing the world as others see it, and describing the variations therein is the root of phenomenography. Phenomenographers do not describe things as they are, and they do not set out to find out whether or not things can be described. Phenomenographers characterise how things appear to other people. The aim is to find the architecture and variations in terms of the different aspects that define the phenomenon, and not to find a singular essence. I liked the subjective character inherent in phenomenography, and the fact that the object of research is the perceptions of others.

I also liked the inherent notion of “perceived reality”, rather than statements and facts about “reality”. It reflects my own epistemological and ontological position that there is not just one “reality” or “truth”, but several. My thoughts are sided with the qualitative position that ideas about reality, and ‘what is’ cannot be detached from the subject experiencing, talking about, or perceiving the object. As Marton & Booth (1997) argue, the experiencing cannot be taken for granted or seen as a generalised being with no intrinsic interest. The point of departure of phenomenography is always relational (Marton 1990; Marton 1980). The basic principle of phenomenography is that no matter the experience that we encounter, it is experienced qualitatively in different ways. I equally liked the focus and emphasis in a phenomenographic study; it is clear and unambiguous. As Marton & Booth (1997) point out, the focus of phenomenography is variation, with an objective to reveal and capture in distinctively qualitative categories variations in the ways of perceiving a phenomenon, regardless of whether these differences are between or within individuals. The way in which a person experiences a phenomenon does not constitute the phenomenon itself; rather, it constitutes just one facet of the phenomenon seen from the perspectives of the person’s biography and background. Similarly, the researcher is describing no more than partially the inferences or reports of the research participants. And this partial constitution of the phenomenon is the researcher’s description (Marton & Booth 1997). In phenomenographic research, the primary and fundamental outcome constitutes of the second order categories of description which capture the different ways of perceiving the phenomenon under investigation (Marton 1990; Marton & Booth 1997). There are two things involved in this case. The first is that the main results of phenomenography are the categories
of description, and the second is the contention that these categories of description are the most important results of the phenomenographic research.

4.4. Phenomenographical interviews

This research uses a qualitative research method, which according to Maanen (1983), is an umbrella term covering a range of techniques which seek to either describe, interpret, and come to terms not with the frequency, but the meaning of a phenomenon in the social world. In this study, I collect data through individual interviews with the participants. According to Kvale (1996), interviews may be discarded as a research method on the grounds that knowledge obtained through interviews is not objective but subjective, as it depends on the subject being interviewed. I concur with Kvale who argues further that, the subjective nature of interviews is in actual fact the strength and essence of interview conversations; to capture the multitude of participants’ views of a theme, and to picture a manifold and controversial world. The mode of understanding implied by qualitative research involves alternative conceptions of social knowledge, meaning, reality, and truth in social science research. The basic subject matter is no longer objective data to be quantified, but meaningful relations to be interpreted. There is a move away from obtaining knowledge through external observation and experimental manipulation of human subjects, towards an understanding by means of conversation with the human beings to be understood (Kvale 1996).

Although there are different methods of data collection, the dominant and preferred method of collecting data in phenomenographic studies is through individual interviews (Marton 1997). In this research, I collect data through semi-structured thematic interviews. Marton also points out that the interview should take the form of a dialogue, with experiences and understandings constructed by the interviewer and the interviewee. In reality, this was a bit difficult to achieve in this research. The interviews were not so much of a dialog. Firstly, this is so because I did not want to be overly intrusive and probably abusive of the time that the participants voluntarily offered to me. Secondly, I had interview themes that had to be discussed within the time the participants offered to me. For these two reasons, for the most part of the interviews, I let the participants tell me about their perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation. Although I am not an expert in interviewing, I felt that the relaxed interview atmosphere helped to minimise the excitement and anxiety a
novice interviewer like me would ordinarily experience. On average, each interview lasted about 40 minutes and was audio-recorded. The interviews were held on the basis of a voluntary participation on the part of the research participants, and at the time and venue of their convenience.

4.5. Phenomenographical data analysis

Qualitative data can take a variety of forms such as interview transcripts, field notes, documents, transcribed recording of naturally occurring interaction, pictures, and other graphical representations (Coffey & Atkinson 1996). For the purpose of this study, the data to be analysed was in the form of interview transcripts. After the individual interviews, the interview conversations were transcribed word for word. In phenomenographic research, there is no particular or correct way of analysing data. Among researchers, there are different suggestions of what follows after transcription (Reed 2006). In this research, the classical steps developed by Ference Marton were followed. In phenomenographical data analysis, once the interviews have been transcribed, analysis begins. The researcher’s focus is on the differences and similarities between the ways in which the participants perceive phenomena, not whether participants’ perceptions are similar to the researcher’s (Marton 1997). After transcription, I read through each transcript a couple of times in order to get an overall understanding of them. After that, I proceeded to put asterisks on the section of the transcripts that were relevant. As Marton (1994) suggests, distinguishing what is relevant from the data from the point of view of expressing a perception would make the data analysis process less challenging. Once this was done and with the research questions in mind, I proceeded to look for relevant meaning units in the transcripts. My interest was on main ideas, not separate words. As Marton (1994) points out, in looking for meaning units, the focus is on main ideas, not separate words. Firstly, I highlighted from the transcripts all the meaning units. Usually, the meaning units were excerpts that exemplified meaning and contained ideas in the participants’ expression of their perception of the topic under study. After that, I literally cut out these meaning units from all the transcripts and created a pool of meanings. The pool of meanings contained all the possible perceptions with regards to the topic this study investigated. The assumption in a phenomenographic study is that these fragments from individual interview transcripts have provided fragments of the different ways of perceiving which at the collective level, represent the variations in the ways a phe-
nomenon is perceived (Reed 2006). The section of the texts or excerpts containing the meaning units could either be a single answer to a specific question or part of a longer conversation (Reed 2006). In this research, the meaning units were mostly part of a longer conversation. At this point, I shifted my attention from the individual transcripts from which the quotes were abstracted, to looking at the meaning embedded in the quotes themselves. I started by giving the meaning units labels in order to understand the similarities and variations between them. For this to be possible, it is necessary to get an understanding of not only what was said, but most importantly, what was meant (Marton 1994).

Once I had given the meaning units labels or codes, I created the first level description categories on the basis of the first level coding or labelling. In phenomenographical data analysis, it is inconsequential how many meaning units support the creation of the same category, neither does it matter whether the variations are between or within individuals (Marton & Booth 1997). After creating the first level description categories, I engaged in a process of finding the sameness in the first level categories. Once that was done, I grouped and put them together under different themes that formed the second level categories. After creating the second level description categories, I created the third level description categories through a process of further abstracting the second level description categories. I chose to do a phenomenographic data analysis in this research because it particularly deals with the description of people’s perceptions and the variations therein; which is what this research set to find out. Also, the subjective ontological and epistemological underpinnings of phenomenographical data analysis which are inherent in the emphasis on the notion and description of “perceived reality” made this method of data analysis suitable for the purpose of this research. The fact that phenomenographical data analysis takes a second order perspective by describing reality/phenomenon as they appear to others supports my theoretical standpoint that there is not just one reality, but multiple realities. It also supports my belief that our perceptions of reality are informed by our background, beliefs, and experiences. Also, given that the description categories derived from a phenomenographical data analysis represent reality as they appear to people and not reality itself, phenomenographical data analysis acknowledges the subjective nature of reality. The notion of perceived reality is in line with my own epistemological standpoint. For the reasons mentioned above, phenomenographical data analysis was the preferred method of data analysis in this research. I have to admit that phenomenographical data analysis is challenging and time-
Research and research publication. Less focus on teaching/understanding. Societal tasks

Figure 1: First, second and third level description categories of participants’ perceptions of the University of X’s tasks

The figure above (1) shows the first, second, and third level description categories of the participants’ perceptions of the University of X’s tasks. The first level description categories represent the variation in the whole data with respect to the first research question which sought to find out how the participants perceive the tasks of the University of X. The second level description categories represent the thematisation of the first level description categories, while the third level categories, a greater abstraction of the second level categories, represent the main findings with respect to the first research question. The participants perceived the University of X’s tasks as having: a) focus on research and international reputation b) less focus on self-cultivation and education c) focus business environmental co-operation. These categories were qualitatively different in the sense that they portrayed different perceptions with regards to the focus, emphasis, and orientation with respect the University of X’s tasks. These findings will be presented more elaborately in Chapter 5. In the figure (2) below, I show how I created the first level categories from the meaning units (first level categories which were thematised to create the second level category; less focus on teaching/understanding in the Figure (1) above).
On the basis of the meaning units, the first level categories were created (Figure 2 above). At the second level, the first level description categories: a) less focus on cultivation b) less contact teaching c) less resource for teaching and d) less time for teaching were thematised.
5. Presentation of findings

After presenting how I analysed the data collected in this study, and showing more figuratively how the description categories which form the outcome space and main findings of this research were created, I now present the findings in this chapter more literally and elaborately. For the two research questions, I will present the third level categories which represent the main findings of this research. In the presentation of the findings of this study, I will incorporate excerpts (meaning units) so that the reader can engage better with the meaning units that have supported my interpretations of the data, creation of the description categories, and the findings of this study. This chapter starts by presenting the findings with respect to the first research question, followed by the presentation of the findings with respect to the second question this study investigates. Just as a reminder, the research questions this study investigates are:

1. How do the research participants perceive the tasks of the University of X?
2. How do the research participants perceive quality and quality assessment at the University of X?

5.1. Findings on participants’ perceptions of the University of X’s tasks

Here, I present the findings with respect to the first research question. The third level description categories (findings) on this question were in terms of: a) Focus on research and international reputation b) Less focus on self-cultivation and education c) Focus on business environmental co-operation (Figure (1) in the previous chapter).

5.1.1. The University of X’s tasks perceived as focusing on research and international reputation

One of the findings of this research is that, the academics perceived that research and research publication, in the pursuit of international reputation, is cherished more than any other task the University of X has. The participants saw that the University of X’s primary focus is to be research-led and internationally renowned. The perception that the University of X places an emphasis on a particular kind of knowledge and research publication was also mentioned by the participants. On the question of the tasks of the University of X, the
participants outlined the three main domains in which the University of X’s tasks lie: research, teaching, and co-operation with the environment. Of these three tasks, the participants perceived that teaching and co-operation with social and non-profit organisations are not at the forefront of the University of X’s tasks. Research is the area receiving greater attention at the moment, with an underlying ambition to become a prestigious and reputable university not only at the national, but also at the international level. One participant pointed out that:

“The tasks of the University of X consist of three areas: research, academic education, and co-operation with the environment. And for the time being, research is the main focus. I am a little bit worried that professional training is getting little attention at the moment; because of the funding criteria, research is very much emphasised…… Of course, the main mission is to become an internationally well-known higher education institution...”

The participants noted that the emphasis on research and article publication is a very clear one. The participants also mentioned that they have experienced clear changes in the emphasis on research and the publication of articles in international journals. One participant noted that:

“I have experienced, at least in our faculty, that nowadays there is more focus on research than any of the other tasks. Nowadays, research is seen as very important. Even more than that, is now very important to produce journal articles. So it seems at the moment that the most important task here in our faculty is to produce articles for international journals. So that is a very clear emphasis”

The participants also pointed out that the University of X has an official vision. It strives to become internationally renowned in particular fields such as information technology. As a result, there is a clear emphasis as to which research sectors at the University of X should be at a high international level, and which research sectors could be renowned at the national level. A participant pointed out that:

“The University of X has some kind of official vision. The vision is that it becomes internationally known in some specific sectors such as information technology. The vision is that research sectors like information technology should be on a high international level, and then all the other research sectors should, or could be on a
The University of X wants to be well-known, valued, and respected in a way, and be considered as a high quality university on a national, and an international level.”

With research and research publication as the University of X’s priority tasks and its mission to become internationally renowned, the participants expressed an increased emphasis to focus more on publishing journal articles in reputable international journals. The participants pointed out that it is not enough to simply publish articles anymore, and academics have clear rating lists which stipulate highly rated international journals in which they should publish their articles. According to the participants, the idea is that publishing journal articles in highly rated internationally journals will positively affect international reputation and comparative competitiveness. At faculty level, the participants mentioned, it means the acquisition of points to add to its credit. Another participant stated that:

“And also thinking about research and publication, much more focus is now placed on international publications, and there are rating lists about what journal for example is the best journal and in what journal you should publish your articles in order for your faculty to get more points”

The participants recounted that the focus on research and publication has brought about clear pressures on academics. To the participants, the mounting pressure on academics to publish journal articles is a direct result of the University of X’s mission to become an internationally reputable higher education institution. One participant noted that:

“During the past years, the University of X made a decision that it wants to be a research-focused university, and I can see that we have had this kind of emphasis to make our research internationally known. Staff members are pushed to publish on international journals with impact factors. So that is a very concrete example of what it has meant that we want to become more and more known as a research university”

Another dimension to research and research publication at the University of X which the participants perceived relates to fact that there is an emphasis on knowledge that has some kind of instrumental value. According to the participants, seeking knowledge as an end in its own right is not important anymore, but academics have to think of knowledge as stuff that could be easily written down. The participants also saw that the University of X’s
presses for the production of knowledge and journal articles fit for international publication. Another participant noted that:

“....More emphasis is on knowledge that has some kind of instrumental value; that it promotes the development of society especially in economic terms. So, not all knowledge is important anymore, as it was earlier thought in the university that all knowledge is important as such. If thinking of research, we have to produce knowledge that is easily written down into articles, and knowledge that can accepted to be published somewhere. We can’t just think that it is important to do research because doing research is important, but we also have to think of something else as well. It changes the nature of research and doing research. It becomes somehow, a short term activity, and we should be able to produce a lot in a short time”

The participants also pointed out that the need to focus on research publication is overemphasised such that at the University of X, the number of journal article publications has become a factor that makes academics eligible to get an open job in the institution. The participants noted that, merits in teaching or other areas of the University of X’s educational tasks would not qualify an academic for an open job in the institution as much as merits in the number of journal article publication would. A participant pointed out that:

“There is a strong discourse in our faculty that we have to produce journal articles. And if there are open jobs in our faculty, what is important here in order to get the job is that you have published a lot; you need to have published a lot of journal articles. This is more important than if you have merits in teaching and other educational tasks”

5.1.2. The University of X’s tasks perceived as focusing less on self-cultivation and education

Another finding of this research is that, according to the participants, teaching, the idea of self-cultivation, the process of education, the importance of small class sizes, understanding, and room to identify students’ learning difficulties, are not the prime tasks of the University of X. The participants did not deny the importance of research because teaching in higher education should be based on research. They however re-iterated the fact that research and research publication is getting way too much attention to the relegation of
teaching. The participants also perceived that there is a lack of unity in the University of X’s tasks of teaching and research. One participant noted that:

“...Of course, the two go together, teaching is based on research, but I still see that research has got more focus than the University of X’s other tasks”

According to the participants, contact teaching hours are being reduced in favour of mass lectures and effective teaching. The participants viewed the diminishing focus on teaching at the University of X as a change in ethos, compared to the holistic way in which teaching used to be viewed. Another participant said that:

“We used to like good teaching, and there were lots of contact hours for teaching and the idea that you can’t just do some distance teaching. Nowadays, there is more pressure to change teaching to be more effective, studying in large groups, and have less contact teaching. So I think the whole ethos has changed”

Also, it was the participants’ perception that the diminished focus on teaching has also been accompanied by diminishing resources for teaching. The participants pointed out that the focus on research has led to an unequal distribution of resources between research and teaching. According to the participants, resources for teaching are often reduced and used for research, and academics are explicitly made to understand that there are no resources for teaching. A participant mentioned that:

“We are always told everywhere that we have to produce a lot of journal articles, and that we do not have resources for teaching. So now it is important to use resources for research and producing articles”

In a similar way, the participants perceived that the time for teaching, for preparing and planning lectures is also reduced due to the pressure to focus on publishing articles in international journals. In addition to the emphasis to pay more attention to research and publication which reduces time for teaching and preparing lectures, the participants attributed this reduction to new bureaucratic and managerial tendencies at the University of X. According to the participants, managerialism is exercised through the demand for academics to fill forms and papers, and write reports on a daily basis. The participants perceived that these tendencies take a lot of their time, so much so that they cannot focus on teaching.
They also perceived this situation as disturbing, given the fact that teaching is an integral part of their profession. Another participant pointed out that:

“I have seen an increase in bureaucracy, and it is just about daily. There is this kind of thing that somebody somewhere in the office and decides. And this means that it is taking more of my teaching time, and it is a little bit worrying because I really love teaching”

Also, the participants perceived that technological equipment cannot replace the education that takes place face-to-face. The idea of a community of learners was thought of as indispensable for education to take place. To the participants, the importance of contact teaching and the importance of human relations in the educational process cannot be over emphasised. A participant noted that:

“When we talk about teaching, I don’t think that technological equipment should ever replace communication that takes place face-to-face. There is no education without relation. Human relations are needed for anything positive to take place. We need a community of learners who co-create knowledge...as well as the idea of community; that we are in this together with the students. Students are not customers or clients, but students are like co-workers or colleagues”

In contrast to hard facts, the participants perceived the self-cultivation task of the university as embedded in humanitarianism, and directed towards the development of humankind. This task was described as a task that goes beyond research and hard facts, to one that is interested in the understanding, knowledge, and the civilisation of the heart of the student. This task was also seen as placing the experiences, education, self-cultivation, and personal development of the student at the heart of the university’s tasks. The participants perceived that this task is presently given less attention at the University of X. They also perceived that, relegating education and understanding to the background defeats the very purpose of an academic institution. Another participant stated that:

“The primary task of an academic institution is not just to provide professional knowledge. It is not about the knowledge economy. If you are familiar with the concept of Bildung, this means that the task of an academic institution is more than just facts and the knowledge economy, but it should also think of humanity and devel-
opment. This concept should not be forgotten these days in academia…..the task of understanding or civilisation of the heart”

5.1.3. The University of X’s tasks perceived as focusing more on business environmental co-operation.

The participants perceived that the University of X has a task towards society in its co-operation with the environment. Although the participants identified environmental co-operation as one of the tasks of the University of X, there was a perception that it is not clearly defined and still a little vague. One participant pointed out that:

“The academic or scientific tasks are clearer, how you contribute to an academic discussion and disseminate your findings. But the societal part is a little vague; how universities should participate in general discussions is society, in political and cultural ones, and in debates. Should universities have an active role in discussing and debating, or should they stay more as neutral academic institutions? I feel that the university has a task, or should have one to actively engage in societal, political, and cultural debates, and not just stay back and focus on academics…”

In this sense, the task of the University of X was perceived as extending beyond academia to an involvement in multi-level discourses, and having a task to actively contribute to, and participate in a wide array of societal issues. Also, the participants perceived that the University of X’s task of co-operation with the environment gears more towards co-operation with businesses and firms, rather than with non-profit or public service organisations. There was equally an expression of the perception that the University of X is encouraged to preferably develop close ties and connections with firms and businesses. A participant stated that:

“Thinking of the main tasks given by the acts and statutes about doing research, taking care of higher professional education, and then working together with environment and societies, what environment are we supposed to work with? Very often, it is emphasised that we should build connections with firms and businesses, but why only them? Why not the health sector, service sector, legal sector and so on? Why are the firms and businesses so important?”
Also, the participants expressed the idea that the university should be free as much as possible from commercial and private sectors that have clear and defined interests with the potential to direct the course of the university’s actions. The participants perceived that Finnish universities are vulnerable to the private sector in the wake of cuts in state funding and the institution of a performance-based funding system by the Finnish government. The participants equally saw that the new performance-based funding scheme partly explains the University of X’s inclination towards the private sector, and the emphasis on commercial forms of research. The participants also highlighted that the change in Finnish universities’ status, which although state-owned, are only partly state-subsidised, equally explains Finnish universities’ focus on developing close ties with firms and businesses. This is so because the amount of state subsidy is dependent on how much funding universities have managed to find by themselves by turning to firms and businesses. To the participants, this competitive funding scheme has led Finnish universities to heavily engage in fundraising campaigns to generate enough funds from the private sector so as to get a proportional subsidy from the state. The new competitive funding scheme was perceived to play a role in directing the course of the University of X’s activities by lending it to the private sector that has clear interests. The idea that funding is apolitical, and that universities may use funding as they please no matter its source, was perceived to be more of a theoretical principle compared to what the case actually is in practice. One participant noted that:

“...when a really big industry gives money to the university, the university of course wants to keep getting the money next year, and so will try to please that instance. So the university steers some of the money towards research that is good for, and directly relevant to the funder..... It is written that funding is neutral no matter where it came from, and we can do whatever we want with it. But the university has to be strategic in what it does in order to get funding. So funding becomes really political, and the tasks are to produce scientific knowledge and innovation that serves the funders as well, and keeps both sides happy”

The participants also highlighted that the in order to maintain private sector funding, the University of X emphasises and focuses on commercial forms research that directly benefit the private sector. Such an emphasis on commercial research was perceived by the participants as overlooking and impinging on one dimension of the University of X’s environ-
mental/societal task: democracy. Democracy was perceived as keeping people informed and involved in issues of society at a discursive level. The production of neutral and interest-free knowledge was equally perceived as another dimension of democracy. However, with the focus on producing commercial knowledge and information for the benefit of businesses in order to maintain private sector funding, the participants perceived that producing interest-free knowledge would be difficult. One participant mentioned that:

“I think the University of X has a task for democracy, which would be to produce neutral and interest-free information as possible for the use of ordinary citizens, taking into account all the parties, not just the loudest ones. But it becomes difficult to produce any neutral knowledge when knowledge, or information production that the university does is tied to private funding….Promoting democracy I don’t think is very high on the public relation or public image list of the University of X, I am afraid so”

The strategic focus on technology and medical innovation was seen as seemingly simplistic and can easily be assumed to be for the benefit of all. However, questions pertaining to the basis, point of departure, motives, and interests informing such a focus on technology and medical innovation were perceived as embodying complexities.

5.2. Participants’ perceptions of quality and quality assessment at the University of X.

Below, I will present the findings with respect to the second research question which set out to investigate participants’ perception of quality and quality assessment at the University of X. Participants’ perception on this were in terms of: a) Productivity b) Prestige c) Less focus on educational values.

5.2.1. Quality perceived as conceived of as, and assessed in terms of productivity at the University of X

The participants perceived that the University of X’s conception of quality and quality assessment is narrow and exclusive. Quality at the University of X was perceived by the participants as conceived of in terms of narrow and quantitative performance indicators. Numbers were perceived as the key indicator of quality and a vital subject matter in quality assessment. To the participants, quality at the University of X is mainly conceived of as,
and assessed in terms of quantitative performance indicators, productivity, results, and numbers. The participants also perceived that quality and quality assessment at the University of X are defined by easily quantifiable and measurable numeric criteria. One participant pointed out that:

“Quality is very much defined by easily measurable criteria which are numbers: how many graduates, how many Master’s thesis, PhD thesis, and journal articles. And still in terms of articles, it depends on what sort of journal the article is published in, but it is still very much based on quantitative criteria, which is unfortunate……Quality is much more measured very clearly on quantitative terms and criteria, which is unfortunate”

The participants also saw that because of the new performance-based funding model, outcome and effectiveness have become equated with quality at the University of X. There is a clear emphasis to produce results and to be effective. One participant noted that:

“Effectiveness is something that is more emphasised now. It is related to the new funding model, and because the emphasis is on the end results and on outcome, then quality is also defined more on the basis of those outcomes. There is more emphasis on being effective and producing a lot of articles, and it is these sorts of indicators that tell something about quality now more than before, definitely”

Also, the participants perceived that quality at the University of X is equally conceived of, and assessed in terms of how soon students graduate. The understanding is that, the fact that students graduate sooner is indicative of quality. Efficiency therefore becomes a measure of quality, as well as a criterion for funding. One participant mentioned that:

“I am afraid that it is the efficiency and the quantity, for example, the number of degrees that is emphasised…So our students must graduate within two years; that is the requirement”

According to the participants, such conception of quality and the assessment of quality in narrow quantitative terms are linked to the new competitive performance-based funding model put in place by the state. The amount of state subsidy not only depends on how much funding universities get from the private sector, but it is also dependent on the results and performance of universities. The participants revealed that, focusing on quantitative
quality criteria and assessing quality in productivity terms is a means to secure state funding. Finnish universities must quantitatively demonstrate that they can produce results and outcome. A participant pointed out that:

“The funding system has changed. Funding is no longer given according to how many students enter the program….It is no longer on the basis of intake, but on how many students that get out of the system, and how many Master’s thesis, Doctoral thesis and so on……. that is definitely one of the reasons why people pay attention to the so called results”

As a result of the change in the basis of university funding from intake to results and productivity, the participants noted that competition between universities is heavier than before. The participants also perceived that as a result of the change in universities’ funding system and legal status, universities have adopted a business language and conception of quality and quality assessment. The purpose for adopting a business language and conception of quality and quality assessment is to look good in the eyes of businesses and secure private sector funding. A participant noted that:

“My experience is that there is an emphasis on measuring outcome, rather than looking a quality in ways that cannot easily be measured……Because universities are no longer completely state-funded, but state-supported, universities have to become more accountable. They have to look good in the eyes of business, learn to do things and speak the language of business which is then profit and accountability. Universities have to start measuring their quality in hard numbers, in order to justify their existence and get funding”

The participants also perceived that quality at the University of X is mechanical and quantitative. It is understood in terms of amount, and how much one produces. This research revealed that there are very clear models given for universities to follow and comply with if they want to secure funding from the state. Faculties have very clear guidelines and quality criteria against which they will be assessed and their funding level ascertained. Another participant pointed out that:

“Here in our faculty, I have seen some tables and figures on how funding is divided and what affects the amount of funding we get. For example, they count degrees, how many credits, how much we get for producing a certain amount of credit, how
much we get from our international students, exchange students, doctoral students, for articles, and so on. So it is a very clear model for funding, and I think it is very much focusing on outcome and numbers; that we show that we are able to produce a certain amount of numbers every year...I think that quality is not the same as producing big numbers and volumes”

The demand to produce results, to be efficient, and the competitive funding scheme was perceived as leading to a performativity culture whereby there is the need to always demonstrate and show that one can produce results and perform well in order to get enough funding. According to the participants, this performativity and productivity culture is also targeted at teachers. For teachers, this research revealed, there is a need for them to demonstrate how productive and profitable they are to the faculty by publishing a lot of journal articles. Salary schemes have also changed; nowadays, salaries are negotiated on the basis of quantitative merits. Another participant stated that:

“....... people are beginning to think on the financial terms of their work because there are certain quality criteria and certain ways of calculating how profitable you have been.....if you were employed as a university lecturer for example, you could easily say teaching is your main task and focus on being a very good teacher to your students. But nowadays, it is not enough because you are not being profitable to the faculty if you do not publish anything. Nowadays, you negotiate your salary on the basis of merits where you have three tasks: research, teaching, and cooperation with the environment. Here again, you have to perpetuate this performativity culture and show that you are good enough to reach that level of salary; which is not necessarily a good atmosphere for the university that people are rated differently according to how they perform. You have to show that you perform well all the time, and that you are efficient.... You do this to your boss, your boss does it to the faculty, the faculty does it to the university, and the university does the same thing to the ministry.”

According to the participants, questions regarding such a performativity culture pertain to what is considered valuable. The participants perceived that at the moment, what is considered valuable is thought of more in terms of funding.
5.2.2. Quality perceived as conceived of as, and assessed in terms of prestige at the University of X

The participants perceived that, international reputation, standing, and ranking also symbolise quality at the University of X. According to the participants, a university’s comparative standing in national and international league tables is also conceived of as an indicator of quality, and a yardstick in the assessment of quality. Another participant said:

“Quality is standardisation, ranking list, and so on..... Ranking now seems to be more important than life itself”

Also, the participants showed an awareness of the possible causes or origins of the pressures to be competitive, to standardise, and be productive. According to the participants, the pressure to produce results comes politically from outside, and from within the university, it comes from the hierarchy of the university. The participants saw that the Finnish government’s emphasis on issues concerning productivity and the institution of performance-based funding schemes comes from wider political trends. One participant noted that:

“Globalisation, increasing internationalisation, huge political trends, and neoliberalism have swept all over Europe. So it is a political course as well. And thinking of neoliberalism, it has led to a huge increase in competition and standardization”

According to the participants, being a university with a reputation that attracts students and high quality teachers equally constitutes a quality indicator at the University of X. One participant said:

“Reputation is a funny word, but yes, quality also has to do with being an attractive university, attracting students and high quality teachers”

Apart from showing an awareness of the possible causes of competition between, and the ranking of universities, the participants also envisaged the possible implications that these trends might have on Finnish national ethos. To the participants, competition and ranking might have implications for equity in the distribution of resources, as well as equality in access to higher education. One participant pointed out that:

“What is a bit worrying is that we have a lot of these neoliberal ideas coming into the university. We already have fees for some students. Basically, this whole idea of
being competitive and being effective are all characteristics of the neoliberal policy, and it may not have very good consequences in the long term; universities for example may not even be a possibility for everyone in the future. It has been rather equal in Finland, and people from different backgrounds have been able to come to the university and study here. So I think that there is a possibility that the gap between the rich and the poor will be strengthened.”

5.2.3. Quality and quality assessment at the University of X perceived as having less consideration for educational values

The participants also perceived that because quality at the University of X is conceived of mainly in quantitative terms and easily measurable criteria, quality also becomes assessed along these lines. Also, the participants perceived that qualitative criteria which are not easily measurable or assessed are ignored. Some of the qualitative criteria the participants highlighted include: content, how research improves the quality of life, humanity, the learning process, the quality of teaching, students’ thought processes, maturation, and motivation. A participant noted that:

“If the highest value is how you perform and how you show that you publish a lot, and very little attention is paid to the content of what you write, or what you teach, the program, or research publication, then it is rather problematic….thinking of the quality criteria, too little attention is paid to the content and value basis of education at the end; whether the aim is to get as many people out without asking what has happened in their hearts and brains, whether they have learned anything, whether they have become motivated about life…..?”

Also, the participants saw the University of X’s quality criteria are shallow and less focused on humanity. One of the participants used an analogy of computer games to make her point. She noted:

“Let’s say a well known firm develops computer games, and of course, they could be very productive and making diverse ways of playing the game which will be bought in Finland and abroad…..but just looking at how they sell, the quantity, creativity, or the sense of mechanism is not enough. How it really contributes to the quality of life or the quality of society as a whole is a big question…..the quality
criteria can be very superficial, if one thinks of the basic question of human well-being, the development of human beings, sustainability of the globe, and so on...”

The participants also perceived that the processes relating to students’ growth and matur-ation, and exposing students to inspiring teaching are not within the University of X’s con-ception of quality. One participant said that:

“When we are dealing with humans, and if education is about learning, we need to think of learning as a process, not as a product like counting master’s thesis, or how many we receive. We should think of the process of maturation.....”

The participants also perceived that with an emphasis on results and productivity, the quality criterion that pertains to the quality of learning is ignored. An acknowledgement of the difficulty inherent in the assessment of learning was expressed by the participants. However, they pointed out that this difficulty has got less to do with the fact that it is not easy to assess the quality of learning, and more to do with the fact that the quality of learning falls without the quality criteria against which the university is assessed in order to as-sertain funding levels. Another participant stated that:

“When the criteria for funding is now on the basis of what the results are, and how many students finish their degree program on time, there is little focus on what the quality of learning has been”

In the light of the quality of research, this study revealed that the quality of research is con-ceived of, and assessed more in terms of the number of research publications, and not in terms of what effects research has when its findings are published. A participant mentioned that:

“Quality is less understood in terms of what the research results produce after they leave the university. Say the university gives you a piece of research to do, and your result is something, then the research, research funding, and publications are measured as quality. But what the research does when it gets out into the society, and how people work with it is a sort of quality indicator that I think is not taken into consideration”
5.3. Participants’ perceptions of possible ways of widening the University of X’s tasks, and its conception of quality and quality assessment.

In expressing their perceptions about the University of X’s tasks, its conception of quality and quality assessment, the participants also expressed their perceptions as to how these themes could be broadened or widened. One of the aspects that the participants pointed out with respect to the University of X’s tasks is the idea of conflict. The participants perceived that within the University of X, there is little consensus as to what the tasks of the university are, should, or could be. According to the participants, although there could be consensus at the managerial level with respect to what the tasks of the University of X are, opinion is divided beneath management. There was also an expression of the perception that the University of X’s management places emphasis on hard facts and science. To the participants, the limited focus on the University of X’s democratic task is reflected in the absence of a social science faculty at the University of X.

To the participants, in order to bring into, and keep alive the importance of the social dimension of the University of X’s tasks, there is need for a social science faculty at the University of X. Although there are a few departments in the humanities, the participants perceived that a social science faculty could bring into discussions critical perspectives that could look into the societal and democratic aspects of the University of X’s tasks. The implication of the lack of the contribution of such a social science faculty was perceived as evident in the side-lining of the social in discussions regarding the University of X’s tasks. To the participants, the importance of the role of such a faculty in politicising and widening the scope of the University of X’s tasks cannot be overemphasised. One participant stated that:

“*The University of X is so huge that there are interesting discussions going on and there is no consensus on what the tasks are, or should be. There is consensus may be of this board of 10 people, but underneath, between faculties, and between research groups, people have very different ideas about what universities are for, and what their tasks are, should, or could be. So to keep this kind of discussion alive, we are clearly missing that kind of political and social actor within the university. And I think that this shows in the emphasis on technology, hard natural sciences, mining, and medicine…..You can put democracy as a nice word there that it is for the good of everyone, but then, as a political notion, there is need to discuss de-*
mocracy for whom, for what purposes, in what ways, and for what cause? There are many kinds of ways and modules of how democracy works. So, some instance within the university that would address just this is missing; which is the social science part”

Also, the participants expressed the notion that there is the need for a synthesis in teaching and research, the need to pay attention to the curriculum, and the kind of teaching experiences students are exposed to. To the participants, exposing students to inspiring and motivating teaching by teachers who have pedagogical skills and interested in both teaching and research is also an important way of looking at the process of education and maturation. In this sense, the importance of teaching that is not stripped of human relations was highlighted.

“The processes of growth should not just be regarded as a product to be counted, but it should be thought of as a process. And looking at the curriculum is important, whatever the faculty. Thinking of the quality of teaching at the University of X, I think it is important to pay attention to the basic courses when the students start their studies in a program. It is important that from the beginning, students receive quality teaching; I mean inspiring teaching by teachers who enjoy their work and who have pedagogical skills. I don’t think teaching and research should be two separate things. Basically, we should have professionals who want to do both, and are capable of doing it.”

The participants felt that it would be rewarding that the University of X represents the values and ideas for which it is a watchtower. They saw that there are fewer resources for research in the fields of social sciences. The participants also felt that certain vital areas of human life such as conflict resolution and peace are under-researched, compared to economics or information technology, for example. While the participants agreed that areas such as economics and information technology are equally important, they saw that having some kind of balance in the funding of different research fields could help foster research in human life. One participant said that:

“There is way too little funding for peace education, conflict resolution, human rights, and many areas that are dealing with the social sciences. There is more funding for information technology, which could be used wisely, but does not nec-
necessary increase equity. There should be a possibility for additional research, but also a balance in the funding of different fields of research. Funding for economics or information technology is important, but thinking of human life, it is very important to research in the different fields of social science”

In contrast to segmentation between programs or disciplines, the participants felt that a connection between them could help better achieve the societal tasks of the University of X. The perception that there is way too much segmentation between the human and natural sciences was expressed. To the participants, vital societal questions should be the converging point between programs, faculties, or disciplines. The connection of every field of study to vital societal issues and questions could, in a way, incorporate the University of X’s societal tasks within the institution itself. For this to be possible, the participants saw that flexibility, rather than rigidity of the borders of disciplines or programs would be needed. The importance of program content and dialog between programs, disciplines, and faculties in achieving the University of X’s societal tasks was also expressed. A participant said that:

“……the university should represent the values for which it should be the watchtower. That is why these subjects are supposed to be taught in the university, and that is why I specify content. Thinking about human rights, sustainability, and so on, faculties could have courses in these areas, and talk about how their respective fields could increase equity, or how it could help develop these areas. This would help promote the basic values we are supposed to be working for. I think that one of the problems in universities is that, human sciences focus on human sciences, and natural sciences focus on natural sciences; it is too segmented. In economics, for example, they could ask: economics for what, for what values, or for what aims? There should be flexibility and dialog between programs and faculties. No faculty should forget the basic ideas about how society should be run, or could be run, and what their area could do to promote these ideas”

The participants saw that in the conception of quality and quality assessment of the University of X, it is important to re-conceptualise the purpose of quality assessment; whether the findings of assessment are for punishing, or for improvement purposes. To the participants, the competitive funding model brings to question the fundamental purpose of assessment; whether the purpose is to name or shame, to reward or punish. To the partici-
pants, quality assessment should aim at identifying problem areas and improving quality in higher education. The participants also pointed out that quality assessment at the University of X could be perceived otherwise; as an exercise that supports higher education institutions, rather than an exercise that serves as a means of producing hierarchical rankings of higher education institutions, or placing higher education institutions’ existence or academics’ profession at the verge of termination. While quality assessment was seen as important, the participants felt that the conception of quality assessment at the University of X is narrow. The participants saw that, widening the scope of the purpose and subject matter of quality assessment could be a meaningful way of looking at quality and quality assessment at the University of X. Also, there was an expression of the perception that crucial questions that could make quality assessment more rewarding and meaningful are seldom asked. Another participant stated that:

“Of course in any process, we have to evaluate whether we attained the aims, and what we should do differently to achieve those aims. So assessment, or rather, evaluation of higher education is needed, but the essential questions are: Why do we do it? What is the purpose for evaluating? And we must also ask: What are we evaluating? How do we evaluate? So it is not a random activity, but all these questions must be asked before we start evaluation. We need to ask what the purpose of the activity we are having is, and for what purpose the information would be used: Is it for our development, or is it going to be used by some outside agency for rating institutions and maybe closing some universities and opening new ones? I prefer the term evaluation because you can evaluate anything: the atmosphere, the premises, the aesthetic elements, the well-being of staff and students, and the whole university culture. We could evaluate whether there is a good balance between well-being and studies, which is of course quality, but these aspects are seldom looked at. If we say that our quality is the well-being of staff and students, and how eagerly and enthusiastically we work and search for new knowledge, it is a totally different way of looking at what is important, compared to looking at how many graduates, how many publications, or how much funding we got”

Rather than being conceived of as a product, the participants saw that quality at the University of X could be alternatively be conceived of as something in the academics’ state of mind; that they need to do their best in any task or activity they carry out. To the partici-
pants, quality is not something that is reviewed annually or during evaluations; rather, it is a process and an idea that informs and is reflected in the way academics do their work daily. Rather than asking for this to be the case, the participants pointed out that the University of X simply has to put into practice this theoretical starting point or understanding of quality that it already has; a theoretical starting point that conceptualises quality as a process, not a product. To the participants, the discord between theory and practice needs to be bridged. A participant noted that:

“If I think about this quality assessment ideology at the University of X, I like the theoretical starting points. Actually, we are not talking about assessment, but we are talking about a model of developing our work, and we do so because we want to pay attention to process. Quality is not something like fact which is present, rather, quality is more like a process, and we should pay attention to the whole process and see whether there is some kind of meaning. And the meaning is that we try to develop our daily work. This is more like theory so far; it is not so in practice maybe. The theoretical staring point is also this kind of ideology that sensitivity towards quality should be like inside our daily work; that it is not something which is done sometimes, but an idea that we do things in a certain or proper way in order to guarantee quality. So I like the that idea, but to put it into practice is of course a more complicated situation”

Moreover, the participants also perceived it is important that the university faculties be granted autonomy to pursue their own conception of quality and quality assessment. The participants pointed out that in theory, university faculties could develop the quality criteria against which they would be evaluated. In practice however, because of the performance-based funding policy, faculties are evaluated against the Ministry of Education’s quality criteria in order to determine funding levels. According to the participants, the quality criteria of the Ministry of Education are generally quantitative. The performance-based funding policy downplays the university faculties’ autonomy to develop or broaden their conception of quality and quality assessment beyond hard facts and numbers; because quantity is what determines funding levels during funding negotiations with the Ministry of Education. Another participant noted that:

“In principle, the faculty could decide its quality criteria differently. But I do not know how much it counts when you go to the Ministry for funding and say that we
do not have many Master’s thesis and many students have not graduated, but we have all this data saying that the atmosphere in the faculty is better than it used to be, or that students enjoyed being here. In principle, there is a lot of freedom to say what quality is, but in practice, it is hard facts about certain easily measurable issues that count; numbers”

The participants also pointed out that the University of X has been pioneering and progressive in developing a wide spectrum of quality criteria, but unfortunately, the performance-based-funding system has compelled it to implement a narrow definition of what quality is. One participant pointed out that:

“The University of X has been very progressive in developing many kinds of self-evaluation policies. And thinking of the evaluation of quality itself, it has been pioneering in that area. It is only that the present funding system has forced it to implement a very narrow interpretation of what quality really means”

This section of the thesis shows the findings of this research with respect to the participants’ perceptions of the University of X’s tasks, and its conception of quality and quality assessment. With respect to the University of X’s tasks, the participants perceived that research and research publication are the major focus, while other tasks such as teaching and the University of X’s tasks directed towards the society are not focal points. With respect to quality and quality assessment, the participants perceived that quality at the University of X is mainly conceived of, and assessment in quantitative terms. The participants also noted that the new competitive performance-based funding clearly stipulates numeric outcomes as the quality criteria against which higher education institutions are assessed and funding levels determined. To the participants, this new funding scheme explains the University of X’s focus on a quantitative conception of quality and quality assessment. Also, this section shows the participants’ perceptions of the possible ways in which the University of X’s tasks and its conception of quality and quality assessment could be widened. To the participants, granting the university faculties autonomy (in practice) to determine its quality criteria, and carrying out assessment for the purpose of improvement and not punishment could widen the University of X’s conception of quality and quality assessment. To the participants, flexibility in the borders of disciplines and programs, the incorporation of basic social values into program content, and the establishment of a social science facul-
ty to act as a political and social actor in the institution could help broaden the scope of the University of X’s tasks.
6. Discussion

In this section, the findings of this study are going to be discussed further, and also discussed in the light of the theoretical framework of this research. The first part of this section discusses the findings with respect to the participants’ perceptions University of X’s tasks, while the second part discusses the participants’ perceptions of quality and quality assessment at the University of X, all in the light of theory. The third part draws some conclusions on the basis of the participants’ perceptions.

6.1. Discussion on participants’ perceptions of the University of X’s tasks in the light of findings and theoretical framework

In order to understand the tasks of higher education nowadays, I developed a theoretical framework that conceptualised higher education with regards to the four major ‘archetypal models’ of the medieval university. These four ‘archetypal models’ provided a historical and structural development of the university, what its tasks were, and what the university was for. These four ‘archetypal models’ also served as an analytical tool in this study, which according to Zgaga (2009), helps us to see how the tasks of higher education may have shifted from what they used to be. The theoretical framework of this research also looked at the idea of the emergence of the “entrepreneurial university”, which showed the current trends in higher education. Also, neoliberalism, the umbrella concept and lens through which the topic under investigation is looked at, was conceptualised in the context of higher education. The theoretical framework of this research also conceptualised higher education beyond the neoliberal agenda for higher education. In what follows below, I discuss the findings of this study in the light of theory.

The participants perceived that other tasks of the University of X such as teaching and cooperation with public or social organisations, compared to research, receive less attention. There was also an expression of the perception that the emphasis is mostly on commercial forms of research in order to secure external funding and increase international competitive edge and reputation. The participants pointed out that it is not just any kind of research or publication that is required of academics; academics have to do research and publish articles that have some kind of instrumental value and with the capacity to positively affect the institution’s international competitiveness. The neoliberal knowledge economy agenda for
higher education which urges higher education to produce knowledge that triggers economic development can be identified in the participants’ perceptions. In the neoliberal ideology, knowledge is considered a key driver of economic development (Levidow 2002). The neoliberal campaign has been to encourage nation-states to withdraw themselves from areas of social provision, including higher education (Harvey 2005). Performance-based funding has been a strategy of the Finnish government to sway universities into the neoliberal free market and to make them compete and campaign for external funding. According to the participants, this performance-based funding system put in place by the Finnish government has led to the University of X engaging in mostly commercial and industrial forms of research that is directly beneficial to the private sector funding body in order to secure a steady flow of external funding. In this light, what readily comes to mind pertains to whether a university’s task of research is exhausted by commercial and industrial forms of research. To the participants, engaging in the process of buying and selling knowledge through focusing on commercial research commoditis knowledge by giving it an economic value. Rather than being a question of whether the commercial research leads to an industry inventing a medicine to heal humanity of some ailment, one could still argue that such an invention for humanity developed as a by-product of the quest for profit and does not therefore amount to fulfilling a task to society. Research in this sense, it could be argued, is not motivated by, or devoted to improving human wellbeing, rather, research for humanity is subordinated to the desire for profit maximisation. The question therefore boils down to the rationale behind the research, what informs research, for what, for whom, for whose benefit, and for what cause.

While universities cannot be completely dissociated or divorced from economics, the bone of contention seems to be how forces outside the university determine or shape its course, and sway its focus towards fulfilling immediate utilitarian pressures and demands. This argument is better captured by Anderson (2009). Anderson argues that, while expecting universities to serve economic needs, the crucial questions pertains to how far research or the response to economic needs is driven by demands and priorities outside the university, rather than by curiosity, originality, or the internal development of university disciplines. Biesta (2007) also argues that it is important to note that the tasks of the university cannot be exhausted by its economic function. Following the participants’ perception that the emphasis at the University of X is on commercial forms of research in order to satisfy private sector funding bodies and secure external funding, it could be argued that focusing on
commercial forms of research to satisfy funding bodies’ demands in exchange for funding might have implications for intellectual creativity. As Anderson (2009) argues, the intellect can only be creative when it is free. This brings to mind the question of the autonomy of universities. It also brings to mind the question as to how universities can pursue interest-free knowledge/research without facing the possibility of losing state funding on the grounds of not producing research with the capacity to positively affect economic development. According to the participants, the tasks of producing interest-free knowledge would be a difficult one for the University of X to achieve since the emphasis is on commercial research that is directly beneficial to private sector funding bodies. Taking from the four archetypal models of the university as an analytical tool, and from the participants’ perception that the University of X focuses more on commercial forms of research for funding reasons, it could be argued that Cardinal Newman’s argument for the freedom of the intellect from utilitarian demands is still a valid one nowadays.

With regards to the University of X’s task regarding co-operation with the environment, the participants perceived that compared to co-operation with the public or social sector, the University of X, for funding reasons, focuses more on profitable business ties and co-operation. This could be seen as a facet of the neoliberal project for higher education: to subordinate it to the force of the market. According to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism urges governments to withdraw from areas of social provision, put in place competitive regimes of resource allocation, as well as market-friendly institutional frameworks. From the participants’ perception that the University of X’s focus on commercial forms of research and business co-operation for funding reasons, the idea of academic capitalism could be identified. Academic capitalism refers to academics and organisations engaging in market and market-like activities such as commercial forms of research and research contracts in order to boost or generate external funding. The issue inherent in academic capitalism is the implication it has for the university’s political and critical role. Välimaa (2007) argues that the social context of Finnish higher education could be seen as academic capitalism due to the change in funding structure and decreasing public funding which changes the social dynamics in universities by increasing market-like behaviours. According to the participants, democracy could take many forms and one of them is the provision of interest-free knowledge to all; knowledge that does not serve the interests of a particular group of people, but one that serves collective interests. The participants also perceived that with the commoditisation of knowledge, providing ordinary citizens with interest-free knowledge
and information that enables them to be actively involved in political and cultural discus-
sions in society becomes difficult. As Biesta (2011), with increased commodisation of
knowledge, it becomes difficult for universities to be committed to a political and critical
form of citizenship. From the participants’ perception of democracy and the University of
X’s focus on commercial research, the possible implications of academic capitalism on the
production of interest-free research cannot be undermined.

The participants also perceived that the University of X focuses more on research than on
teaching, and that there is diminishing contact teaching hours. The participants stressed
that although teaching and contact teaching is diminished at the University of X, teaching
is as important as research and its importance cannot be overemphasised. The participants
also pointed out that there is no education without human relations; education cannot be
void of interaction with others. In this light, two questions quickly come to mind: What it
is that students personally get from a university education? What is” higher” about higher
education (Barnett 1992)? Biesta (2007) argues that it is important not to forget the aspect
of personal fulfilment and intrinsic value inherent in higher education. In 1996, John Rad-
ford and Leonard Holdstock carried out two studies in which participants were asked what
the tasks of the university are, and what students might gain from them. The ability to think
clearly, which is associated with subject knowledge and discipline methodology, personal
development, learning to learn, communication skills, wider perspectives, and leadership
qualities were put forth by the research participants (Radford 1997).

In a similar research carried out by Brennan & McGeevor in 1988, graduates, when asked
directly about what they had gained from their university education pointed out: critical
thinking, political consciousness, understanding, co-operation, and understanding of others
(Brennan & McGeevor 1988, as cited in Radford 1997). What is important to note in the
studies above is a re-occurrence of the notion of active citizenship, encountering and deal-
ing with “otherness”, or coming into presence with subjectivity. According to Biesta
(2005), “otherness” is one of the central ideas of what it means to learn. Biesta argues that
this however takes coming together, and the teacher confronting students with difficult
questions of otherness and difference, and helping them through such turbulent and diffi-
cult processes. Following the participants’ perception that education cannot be void of hu-
man relations, and Biesta’s (2007) argument that education is equally about the teacher
confronting students with difficult questions of subjectivity, one would rightly think that
the diversity brought about by the internationalisation of Finnish higher education provides a suitable platform for this to happen.

The discussion pertaining to the education of critical thinkers and active citizens is a crucial one, as this is an important democratic task and focal point of the university (Biesta 2007). As Weber (2008) also argues, universities have a democratic role to play in society. Central to this idea is a strong emphasis on teaching and teaching practices that help students develop a critical and questioning attitude. Massy et al. (2007) posit that teaching is not any less important than research. According to Raheeim (1997), although teaching is important, the whole environment necessary for education is seldom created nowadays. The participants perceived that teaching at the university is, and should be based on research. According to the participants, it is not a bad idea that the University of X focuses on research, rather, they found it important that time and space be created so that knowledge from research could be taught and shared. The more crucial is education and how education takes place. To the participants, cutting down on contact teaching and teaching hours in favour of uploading course materials to online workspaces cannot replace the importance of human interaction in the process of education. The participants also perceived that delivering “express” knowledge through online workspaces helps to commoditise knowledge. As Välimaa (2007) puts it, there is increasing commoditisation of knowledge and teaching, and knowledge in Finnish higher education has become something that can be exchanged and sold.

6.2. Discussion on participants’ perceptions of quality and quality assessment at the University of X in the light of findings and theoretical framework

For the purpose of getting an understanding of the idea of quality in higher education, I built up a framework that conceptualised quality and quality assessment in the context of higher education. The theoretical framework of this research also looked at the neoliberal understanding of quality, which lies mostly along the lines of quantity, productivity, and efficiency. Neoliberalism also has its own imaginary of the role of higher education teachers: to produce compliant and pro-capitalist graduates. In what follows below, I am going to discuss the findings in combination, and in the light of theory.

The participants perceived that quality at the University of X is mostly conceived of as, and assessment in terms of quantity, numbers, and figures. The participants saw that
productivity, efficiency, outcome, and effectiveness are the quality watchwords at the University of X. In this respect, it becomes important to ascertain whether quality is the same as quantity, or whether numerical outcomes are the same as substance. The participants also perceived that the mass production of students and the publication of huge volumes of journal articles in international journals also represent quality at the University of X. According to the participants, compared to quantitative indices, qualitative indices such as human-wellbeing, learning, content, and processes are not an integral part of the University of X’s conception of quality, and quality is therefore seldom assessed along such qualitative terms. Radford (1997) argues that, the distinction between quality and quantity needs to be made, and that quality is more problematic; quality is not simply a question of quality indices, figures, or measurements. For Radford, quality is a question of educational value, the content of higher education, what higher education ought to be about, and what graduates ought to know.

Barnett (1992) argues that there is a logical connection between what we take higher education to be, what we conceive of as quality, and how it could be assessed or improved. The participants perceived that the University of X places an emphasis on research and research publication as its main tasks, with a clear mission to achieve international reputation. Following Barnett's contention, a connection can be seen between the participants’ perception that the University of X focuses on research and research publication as its main tasks, and its conception of quality and the assessment of quality along the lines of the number of research publication, prestige, productivity, and efficiency. According to the participants, vital quality indices such as learning, content, and human wellbeing are not given much regard in the University of X’s conception of quality, and quality is hardly assessed along these qualitative lines. The participants also pointed out that although assessing the quality of these areas could be difficult, it is still important to know whether students have gained something from their encounter with higher education, whether their world views have changed, and how they view otherness. To the participants, in quality assessment, it is equally important to find out how students would use their knowledge; whether they would use it to produce more war games and pay no attention to the content as long as they make profit, or whether they would pay attention to the educational values the games bear. To me, this is an argument that is particularly important in an age of the profit logic. This is so because a sense of humanity, collective good, ethics, and values of
equality, equity, and democracy are not very compatible with the quest for profit maximisation.

The problem with figures and numbers, perhaps, is that it gives us only a partial view of what actually is, so much that we lose touch and sight of what is important. According to Boyle (2001), we live in a world in which the watchwords are figures and numbers, and the problem inherent in focusing on these is that we lose sight of, ignore, and do not see what is crucial and important. To Boyle, the more we concentrate on figures, the more the great truths slip through our fingers. The infiltration of quality assessment into higher education institutions in terms of productivity and efficiency has its roots from the manufacturing and industry sector. According to Radford (1997), quality assessment is a routine in the manufacturing industry where efficiency and productivity count, and this knowledge has found its way into higher education. According to the participants’ perception, quality assessment at the University of X revolves around productivity, effectiveness, and efficiency. According to Levidow (2002), efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity are central concepts in the neoliberal ideology. In this regard, probably, the implication of neoliberal market values in influencing higher education institutions’ conception of quality and quality assessment cannot be undermined. According to Filippakou (2011), neoliberalism is an ideology and as an ideology, one thing that is inherent in it is that it provides only a partial view of what higher education is for: economic utility. To Filippakou, neoliberalism also limits space for the existence of alternative conceptions of quality in higher education. Working from a premise that the idea of quality in higher education is ideologically constructed and evident in higher education quality regimes and practices which naturalise “quality” and provide a narrow reading of higher education, Filippakou carried out an empirical research in 2011.

In order to ground her argument and develop an analytical language on “quality”, Filippakou used semi-structured interviews to elicit the perceptions of academics with regards to the idea of quality in higher education. Filippakou argues that, current quality systems provide a monolithic view of higher education, which results in partiality and exclusion. The research carried out by Filippakou found out that in British higher education, the dominant ideology embedded in current quality mechanisms have become internalised and considered a natural part of university life. A quality system in a context of a marketised higher education could be substantially different from one in which the markets are non-existent.
The understanding of quality in higher education has an ideological character, and which influences higher education (Filippakou 2011).

Filippakou (2011) further argues in her research that ideologies represent particular sets of social interests and only a partial view of reality, of what is, or could be. When an ideology is present, there are power conflicts and social interests. Power and institutional struggles are key issues in the quality debate in higher education. Social struggle, unequal distribution of power, partiality, naturalness, and loss of voice, represent the five elements that indicate the presence of an ideology in the idea of quality in higher education (Maclellan 1986, as cited in Filippakou 2011). Looking at the findings of this research, the participants clearly expressed perceived partiality in the conception of quality at the University of X; mostly conceived of in terms of productivity, numbers, and efficiency, and not human well-being or students’ personal development. The data collected in this study also revealed an unequal distribution of power as the participants perceived that as a means of quality control, the University of X’s management exercises power and control through forms and papers for academics to fill, and reports to write on a daily basis. The data also revealed struggle as the participants also pointed out that apart from the probable consensus at the level of the University of X’s Board as to what higher education is for, between faculties and between research groups, people have different ideas of what these tasks are, could, or should be.

According to Filippakou (2011), some conceptions of quality are dominant and represent the interests of powerful groups within the wider social framework and such conceptions may become accepted as natural or “common sense”. Filippakou notes that when this happens, it becomes impossible to create space for analysis, to imagine otherwise, or conceive alternative modes of thought. According to the participants, neoliberalism has swept all over Europe and it partly explains the Finnish government’s performance-based funding scheme and the conception of, and assessment of quality in quantitative terms. This performance-based funding scheme serves as a basis to facilitate financial reward or punishment, and paradoxically, to improve quality by boosting competition for private sector funding in order to secure state funding.

According to Ball (2003), the three policy technologies of the market, managerialism, and peformativity, which seem unstoppable are permeating higher education and re-orienting educational systems around the world. These policy technologies could be identified in the
participants’ perceptions of quality at the University of X. According to Ball, these policy technologies reform play an important role in bringing the ethical systems and culture of the private sector into the public sector. Ball defines performativity as a mode of regulation, which employs comparisons, and deploys control based on rewards and sanctions, and the performance of individual subjects or organisations become a measure of productivity, output, or symbol of “quality”. According to Ball, the ideological connotations inherent in performativity are revealed when questions pertaining to power are brought to light, such as: who determines what counts as satisfactory and effective performance? Who decides what measures or indicators count as valid? The data collected in this study also revealed tension among academics with respect to the University of X’s quality criteria that focus on numbers and figures, and the need for academics in their respective faculties to prove their worth, demonstrate how profitable and productive they are by publishing a lot of journal articles.

The participants also pointed out a whole shift of ethos, an increase in managerialism, and the need for academics to show they deserve the salary they get. In this sense, it becomes important to ascertain whether academics’ roles are exhausted by a quantitative demonstration of performance through the publication of journal articles. It equally becomes important to ascertain whether the publication of huge volumes of journal articles is what makes a good university or a good academic. According to Radford (1997), the areas in which teachers have a significant role to play is in the minds of students, to teach them how to see, and quality could also mean looking into what teaching or courses leave behind in students’ minds. Perhaps, Hill & Kumar’s (2009) argument that the neoliberal agenda for universities is to produce compliant, pro-capitalist, and effective workers by extension applies to academics as well through an equation of academics’ quality with performativity. The demand for performativity as an indicator of quality, it could be argued, is a neoliberal agenda to reform teachers’ identities, to change their subjectivities and make them see their profession otherwise (Ball 2003). According to Ball, teachers are encouraged to think about themselves as those who calculate about themselves, who improve their productivity, who add value to themselves, live a life of calculation, and strive for excellence. To Ball, behind the neoliberal idea of performativity is the agenda to make of teachers “neoliberal professionals”. The participants also revealed this performativity culture and expressed the idea of the “neoliberal professionals” in their perception that there is increasing pressure and emphasis levied on teachers to prove their worth and focus on being
profitable and productive. In this sense, teachers’ identity as focusing on and facilitating students’ education, maturation, and personal development is side-lined by the demand to demonstrate productivity and profitability in quantitative terms.

One thing that is also inherent in the understanding of quality on performative terms, productivity, league tables, national and international reputation, and the tying of such performance indicators to funding is the issue of competition. Universities compete for private and public sector funding, as well as they compete for students. One thing that is different in this mode of operation is the ethic of co-operation. As a result of the performance-based funding scheme, universities compete against each other and strive to outshine one another in league tables and ranking lists. According to Ball (2003), the ethic of competition and performance differ from the older ethic of co-operation and professional judgment, and performance becomes a new ethical basis for decision-making. These trends redefine what it means to teach, and what it means to be an academic; researcher or teacher. Ball further argues that, the ethic of competition and performance reduces complex processes into simplistic figures and performance indices. According to the participants, questions relating to whether students have learned anything, whether they have become mature in thinking critically, whether their world views have changed, their perceptions about ethical relations, otherness and difference, are not captured by quantitative performance indicators and numbers.

An important means by which neoliberal market-like behaviours infiltrate into higher education is through the neoliberal projection of commercial forms of research, scientific and technological knowledge as the best knowledge. According to the participants, at the University of X, this neoliberal ideology has led to greater pressures on academics to focus on producing “valuable” knowledge and research, rather than focusing on teaching, preparing lessons, or doing research motivated by societal problems. Massy et al. (2007) argue that it is erroneous to think that the best research is the one that is most divorced from societal problems. However, Massy et al.‘s call for academics to “cast their nets widely” could fairly be seen as a far cry from the current position in which the participants perceived academics find themselves; the participants expressed the pressure to demonstrate productivity by carrying out research and publishing journal articles. Perhaps, this also supports Ball’s (2003) argument that performativity is all about transforming teachers and the way they view their profession. As the participants pointed out, research is no longer done for its
own sake or because it is important rather, they stressed that there is a particular kind of research/ knowledge production required to prove one’s productivity and profitability. In such a sense, it could be argued that the demand for performativity also brings with it changes at an epistemological level. As Filippakou (2011) notes, the need to ensure quality has not only become a central practice in higher education nowadays, but it has come with profound epistemological consequences. What is problematic in this situation is that it leads to the subordination of other forms of research or knowledge that do not produce immediate economic consequences. The participants noted that, the quality criterion of the number of “acceptable” journal article publication in international journals has changed the way they have to think of doing research, and what counts as “acceptable” knowledge. According to the participants, the assumption that certain research are not as productive as others is evident in the fact that there is less funding to research in areas such as peace, conflict resolution, and human rights compared to funding to research in information technology, for example. Apart from arguing that the best research is not the one most dissociated from societal problems, Massy et al. (2007) posit that the quest for economic development should not blindfold one to wider problems of society.

While quality assessment is not a bad idea as one would reasonably want to know if aims are met or what areas or aspects need improvement, there is certainly an issue with not having a comprehensive quality assessment framework that looks into qualitative quality criteria as well. The participants perceived that the University of X, which conceives of quality as, and assesses it along the lines of productivity, clearly misses out other important non-quantitative dimensions of quality. The participants pointed out that these missing dimensions pertain to whether students have learned anything, or whether their world views have changed, the content of a Master’s or PhD thesis, and how people interact with knowledge when it leaves the university. Although the participants acknowledged that assessing the quality of these areas may be difficult, they also perceived that acknowledging their relevance could be a starting point. However, one could argue that since higher education nowadays is under an economic spell (Biesta 2007), coupled with the neoliberal strategy of guaranteeing productivity by encouraging governments to adopt performance-based-funding schemes (Harvey 2005), the possibility that higher education institutions conceive of quality and quality assessment in qualitative terms is constrained. The argument that reputation ratings constitute academic “beauty contests” where appearance not only matters more than substance but also casts out the possibility of knowing the educa-
tional experiences that students go through (Volkwein & Grunig 2005), cannot be overlooked. According to the participants, “looks”, and reputation to the outside world is an important aspect in the University of X’s conception of quality.

6.3. Conclusion on participants’ perceptions of the tasks of, quality and quality assessment at the University of X

In this research, I have collected data from academics in a Finnish education institution in order to find out their perceptions about the University of X’s tasks, and also their perception quality and quality assessment at the University of X. These elicited perceptions gave insights with regards to these themes. I also developed a theoretical framework which conceptualised higher education, and the idea of quality and quality assessment in the context of higher education. The theoretical framework also looked at the tasks of the ‘four archetypal models’ of the medieval university in order to better understand the tasks of the university nowadays. The framework equally conceptualised neoliberalism in the context of higher education, its understanding of quality, and its agenda for higher education. Neoliberalism conceives of higher education as mainly for economic purposes, and conceives of quality mainly in terms of productivity and efficiency. Its ethic is one of competition, not co-operation. Students’ experiences, the process of maturation, and wider societal concerns are not within the neoliberal conception of what higher education’s tasks are. These qualitative quality indices are equally not within the neoliberal conception of quality and quality assessment.

The findings of this research support the argument that the neoliberal ideology and its market logic influence higher education’s tasks, and higher education’s conception of quality and quality assessment. According to the participants, the University of X focuses on “academic capitalism” which evokes the neoliberal market and profit logic. The participants also pointed out that the University of X’s focus on commercial forms of research and research publications as its major tasks with an underlying mission to achieve international reputation. To the participants, the University of X’s tasks such as teaching, students’ education, and tasks directed towards the wider society are not at the forefront of the University of X’s tasks. The participants also perceived that quality at the University of X is conceived of as, and assessed in mainly in quantitative, not qualitative terms; what counts are productivity, efficiency, and results. According to the participants, the neoliberal ideology
of a competitive free market partly explains the Finnish government’s higher education reform which has put in place a competitive performance-based funding system, urging Finnish higher education institutions to compete for private sector funding. The participants also perceived that the reform clearly stipulates productivity, results, and efficiency as the framework for quality and quality assessment; which are all central concepts in the neoliberal ideology. The participants also pointed out that these quantitative criteria serve as a basis for determining Finnish higher education institutions’ funding levels. According to the participants, the implications of the Finnish government’s performance-based funding scheme on the University of X has been a focus on commercial research, business affiliations, and a yearly mass production of graduates, Master’s and Doctoral thesis. Also, the participants perceived that quality criteria such as education, students’ self-cultivation and critical thinking are not central in the University of X’s conception of quality and quality assessment. These findings support Fillipakou’s (2011) argument that the understanding of quality in higher education has an ideological character. Following the findings of this research, the idea of the commoditisation of knowledge, the infiltration of, and existence of market pressures in the higher education sector is confounding. The findings of this research also support Barnett’s (1992) argument that a connection can be found between what we take higher education’s tasks to be, what we conceive of as quality, how we assess, or improve it.

One of the points of this research has been to find out the implication of the neoliberal values in the conception of higher education’s tasks, quality and quality assessment. What is problematic about the neoliberal ideology in higher education is that it confines the conception of higher education’s tasks and the idea of quality within a framework of profit, economic development, and productivity. Fillipakou (2011) argues that the problem with the ideological character of quality in higher education is that it provides a monolithic and narrow reading of what higher education is all about. In relation to research, the participants perceived that research at the University of X is driven by economic motives rather than societal concerns. The underlying question is how universities are accountable to social demands; between inevitable connections to economics and maintaining a critical distance, between serving the economy and maintaining space free from immediate utilitarian pressures, between teaching as the encouragement of open and critical attitude and society’s expectation that universities would impart qualification and skills (Anderson 2009). Anderson also notes that an imbalance between these binaries represents a simplification
and distortion of the tasks of the university. In this research, the participants perceived that there is an imbalance between the University of X’s tasks pertaining to economics on the one hand, and humanity/societal on the other. To the participants, there is need for a re-conceptualisation of the University of X’s tasks, as well as its conception of quality and quality assessment. According the participants, such a re-conceptualisation is important so as to accommodate and bridge the imbalance between the University of X’s economic and non-economic tasks, as well as the imbalance between the consideration given to quantitative and non-quantitative indicators of quality.

According to the participants, the funding criteria of Finnish higher education institutions on the basis of numeric performance indicators evoke the market and do not only commoditise higher education, but students as well. The participants expressed the idea that under such funding criteria, students and their performance take up a monetary value which translates into funding for the institution as “mass producing” students becomes a means of securing state funding. In the case of academics, the participants perceived that the quality of academics become confined to a question of how much they publish journal articles in international journals, and not how they facilitate students’ maturation or develop in them a sense of critical thinking and analysis. According to the participants, the University of X’s tasks, and its conception of quality and quality assessment revolve around a calculation of profit and profitability, which according to Hill & Kumar (2009) are the ultimate goals of neoliberal thinking. Following the participants’ perceptions on quality and quality assessment at the University of X, the idea of the market in higher education cannot be readily discarded. The assertion that Finnish higher education is copying from the neoliberal toolbox in its financial steering (Poropudas & Volanen 2003, as cited in Välimaa 2004) cannot also be overlooked.

A counter strategy of the neoliberal influence in higher education would be to understand the idea of the market, profit, competition, productivity, and efficiency in higher education as both is ideological and material (Levidow 2002). Neoliberal strategies are turning us into fragments of a business; be it a competitor or customer. There is a need to instigate public debate, which linked with academic freedom, can open space for the discussion of different futures. Critical citizenship and thinking become important to foster in students, so that they would be able to recognise ideological tendencies and demand the right for an alternative future. This could have potentials to lead to a democratic debate and discussion
of what higher education is for, what constitutes quality and informs quality assessment in higher education (Levidow 2002). Drawing from the findings of this research, it would be important to point out that the sources of neoliberal market pressures are more global than national. However, there is room for counter-action because there is no global without the national. It is important to re-take control of the public sector, including higher education, and re-conceptualise it as a right and not a commodity (Levidow 2002). Seeing quality and the contemporary tasks of higher education as ideological and not as natural or commonsense (Filippakou 2011), could keep alive the public debate about higher education’s tasks, and the idea quality and quality assessment in higher education.

Although it is always easier to talk about the present than the future, the case of Finland is an interesting one. As a country which so far enjoys equity, equality in access, free education and no obvious difference in social classes, the findings of this research suggest that there is need for debate over the possible implications of the infiltration of market and business-driven strategies into the Finnish Higher Education sector. The participants envisaged that with the infiltration of neoliberal market values into the Finnish higher education sector, there is a possibility that with increased commoditisation, education might not be possible for all anymore and the gap between the rich and the poor might be widened. This research also reveals the emergence of a market model of the university, or the “global university” or “entrepreneurial university” (Biesta 2009; Martens & Masschelein 2009; Dill 2004). The findings of this research also reveal that neoliberal market values play a vital role in constructing the idea of quality and quality assessment in higher education is around an industrial or business quality model.

6.4. Possibilities for further studies

In the course of writing this thesis, collecting and analysing data, I realised that there are possibilities for future studies that could shed more insights into this topic:

a) To carry out a research, finding out how teachers perceive their “new” identities nowadays, how they perceive their profession as academics, and how they deal with the dilemma between the ethics of their profession as academics, and the market ethics of competition and profitability.
b) Another research would be to investigate how greater global pressures, the decline of the self-determination of the nation-state, international agencies, and regional blocs policies, play a role in propagating the narrow readings of the tasks of higher education and the conception of quality and quality assessment.

c) Another possibility would be to investigate how academics give policies a “second amendment”, so they suit their own beliefs, conceptions, and professional ethics when it comes to quality, research, and teaching.

d) A fourth possibility would be to investigate students’ experiences; how students perceive the benefits of electronic course materials, as opposed to contact teaching and being in an environment with fellow students from diverse backgrounds. To find out which experience is more enriching for them.

Carrying out further research in the areas above would give better insights into the topic this thesis investigated. That is why this thesis ends with a suggestion for future studies, which acknowledges the richness and limitations of this research by virtue of the fact that it cannot cover all the other vital aspects that interplay to give a better understanding and appreciation of the topic of this study.
7. Ethics, reliability and validity of the research

This part of the thesis is going to look at the ethical issues that were taken into consideration during this study. It talks about some of the ethical dilemmas that were encountered, and how they were managed. It also looks at the issue of the reliability of the research, the idea of the generalisation of findings, and also the issue of replicability. Basically, it aims to show the reader some of the issues inherent in these concepts when it comes to qualitative research. This section also presents the concept of “thick description” as one of the reasons why as the author of this thesis thinks that this piece of work is worth paying attention to.

7.1. Ethics of the research

Developments in the field of social sciences in recent years have been accompanied by the growing awareness of the attendant moral issues implicit in the work of social researchers, and of their need to meet their obligations with respect to those involved in, or affected by their investigations (Cohen & Manion 1994). Qualitative research circumstances that give rise to an ethical dilemma have to do with issues regarding deception, the propriety of intervention, protection of human subjects, possible harm to participants, informed consent, contract obligation, privacy, confidentiality, honesty, deception, and even social right and wrong (Ely 1991; McBurney 1994; Cohen & Manion 1994; Kvale 1996; Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000; Ryen 2006; Soltis 2009; Smith 2009; Kvale & Brinkmann 2009; Litchman 2013).

In this research, ethical considerations started from the very initial process of getting academics to participate in this study. As I approached the to-be research participants with the request to participate in this study, I tried as much as possible not to pressurise them into agreeing to participate. I let them get back to me at their convenience, and accept to participate without me seducing or coercing them into being part of this study. Since competence, voluntarism, full information, and comprehension are necessary before participation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000), it follows therefore that as Litchman (2013) argues, research participants are by no means to be pressurised, or coerced into participating in research. All the participants in this research are adults capable of comprehending the nature of the study and competent to consent to participating. As a result, I did not have to seek
consent from any guardians. After the participants agreed on their free will to participate, a letter of informed consent was sent through to them. The letter typically told the participants about the purpose of the research, guaranteed their privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. The letter also assured the participants that their names, professional title, or any identifier that makes it possible to identify the source of the information will not be used. According to Ryen (2006), it is the obligation and responsibility of the researcher to protect the identity of research participants. Since consent also arises from the participant’s right of self determination and freedom (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000), the letter of informed consent made it clear to the participants that they are not only free to refuse to take part in, but are also free to withdraw from the study at any point in time. The need to assure the participants of their anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality went beyond the assurance promised to the participants in the letter of informed consent. The method of data collection in this study required no identifiers such as names or dates of birth.

The method of data collection in this research was through individual interviews. Although no personal identifiers were required in this study, collecting data through individual interviews posed a threat to anonymity and privacy, which I recognised and took responsibility for as the investigator. In this case, apart from the letter of informed consent which promised the participants anonymity, I made an explicit promise to the participants that their anonymity will be guaranteed. According to Cohen & Manion (1994), a research participant agreeing to a face-to-face interview cannot expect anonymity, and it is the responsibility of the researcher to promise confidentiality and ensure anonymity by not using the names of the participants, or any other personal means of identification. Cohen & Manion also argue that on no account should the provider of the information be made public, although the researcher knows who provided the information or is able to identify the participant from the information. Before the start of every interview, I would briefly explain the purpose of the research and get the participants’ voluntary consent to participate by having them sign a consent form. The consent form was signed by all the participants, confirming that their participation in the study was voluntary, that they agree to have an audio-recorded interview, and that they equally agree to the use of anonymous quotations in the publication of this study. In thesis, the names of the participants or the institution in which they work have not been mentioned. As a further step to guarantee the privacy promised the participants, throughout this thesis, the pseudonym “the University of X” was used to blur the participants’ identities.
Given that the method of data collection was going to put me face to face with the participants, I equally worried about the ethical issue of intrusiveness. Soltis (2009) argues that research is intrusive by nature. The ethical concern with respect to the issue of intrusiveness was not only in terms of the participants’ personal lives, but also of their time and space. In this light, the date, time, and venue of the individual interviews were made on the basis of the participants’ availability and convenience. I also asked the participants how much time they had for the individual interview, and I did my best not to exceed the amount of time they had to give. I also went to the interview sessions bearing in mind that the participants, as Litchman (2013) argues, have a reasonable expectation that the researcher will not be too intrusive. During the interviews, I kept to the topic under investigation and did not ask any questions about the participants’ personal lives. During the course of the interview, I also bore in mind that interviews could turn intimate and seductive, and cause interviewees to reveal things that they might regret later (Kvale 1996). This ethical concern was overridden by my sense of responsibility and commitment to the participants by keeping my promise of confidentiality so as not to cause them any form of harm or embarrassment. I realised that, protecting the participants’ anonymity and keeping to the contractual obligation of confidentiality to a large extent mitigates the possibility of causing harm to the participants; this explains the use of the pseudonym the “University of X”. According to Smith (2009), doing no harm to research participants is the prime consideration in inquiry.

Given the fact that the topic this study investigated did not require the collection of sensitive information, I did not have to conceal the true purpose of the study from the participants. Although this is possible in research and participants would be told the true purpose of the research either during briefing or debriefing, it was not the case in this research. According to the American Psychological Association, examples of sensitive information include religious preferences, sexual practices, income, racial prejudices, and other personal attributes such as intelligence, honesty, and courage are more sensitive items than name, rank, and serial number (American Psychological Association 1973, as cited in Cohen & Manion 1994). No sensitive information was not needed or collected from the participants as it did not constitute a unit of analysis for the purpose of this study. In the letter of informed consent that was sent to the participants, the purpose, procedure, potential risk and benefits of this research were made known to them.
According to Smith (2006), research participants cannot be taken advantage of. Bearing in mind that I was going to meet face-to-face with the participants and that consent also arises from the participants’ right of self determination and freedom (Cohen & Manion 1994), the letter of informed consent made it clear to the participants that they are free to withdraw from the research at any point in time. Mindful of any form of pressure which could amount to coercion or intrusion of privacy, I sent only one e-mail to the participants requesting them to participate in the study. I was equally mindful and concerned about issues of power relations during the interviews, but I found the participants to be very friendly, and the interview atmosphere was relaxed, compared to the tense atmosphere I had anticipated.

7.2. Appreciating the reliability and validity of the research

The definition of validity as the trustworthiness of the inferences drawn from data has always been a concern in educational research (Eisenhart & Howe 1992). Questions and answers about validity emerged historically in the context of experimental research (Barnes 1995). According to quantitative researchers, qualitative research lacks the sources of quantification to produce the requisite generalisations to build up a set of laws of human behaviour, and cannot apply adequate tests for validity and reliability (Walker & Evers 1997). This distinction between the positivist fact/value is often employed to discredit the claims of qualitative inquiry to produce knowledge, since knowledge is value-free in quantitative research, while in qualitative research, knowledge is irreducibly value-laden. In response to quantitative researchers’ claims of qualitative inquiry falling short of objectivity, high standards, and criteria for scientific truth, qualitative researchers have brought forth the explanation/understanding distinction. Qualitative researchers argue that statistical generalisations cannot capture the genuinely and distinctively human dimension of education. Knowledge of human affairs is irreducibly subjective, and it must not only grasp the uniqueness of events, but also the meanings of actions and individuality of persons (Walker & Evers 1997).

The conventional approaches to validity require internal validity; the researcher must show that threats to the interpretation of the results are controlled (Lincoln & Guba 1985). They also external validity; the researcher must show that the conditions, settings, people, and variables that define the experimental condition can be applicable, applied, and generalised
to other situations. Inherent in these conventional approaches are the notions of truth claims and neutrality. These conventional approaches to establishing the quality of an inquiry do not sit well within the qualitative paradigm, and their suitability as standard guides or standards for qualitative research has been questioned. Alternative terms such as trustworthiness, confirmability, transferability, and dependability have been proposed as guides when appreciating qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba 1985). For Kvale (1996), the terms of reliability, validity, and generalisability are positivist concepts that hinder an emancipatory and creative research.

Before I begin an appreciation of this research, I want to re-iterate that the point of departure of this study is not to make generalisations. This research sought to find out the perceptions some individuals in a particular context have about a phenomenon. Proposing transferability as a substitute for the positivist generalisability criterion, I agree with Lincoln & Guba (1985) that with transferability, the burden of proof lies less with the original investigator than with the person seeking to make an application elsewhere. Lincoln & Guba present that anyone seeking transferability should focus on the accumulation of empirical evidence with respect to contextual similarity. In order for one to know the inference limits with some confidence, one would have to know about both the sending and receiving contexts. In this sense therefore, transferability cannot be made by an investigator who knows only the sending context. The qualitative researcher cannot specify the external validity of an inquiry by providing a “thick description” necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion as to whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility (Lincoln & Guba 1985). In this thesis, I have shown the theoretical point of departure of this research, as well as my epistemological and ontological position. The theoretical framework of this study shows at a broader level, the discourses inherent in the phenomenon under study. On the other hand, the chapter in this thesis that talks about the context of the research puts this study in the Finnish context. The context of the research describes as much as possible the Finnish higher education and how the evaluation of Finnish higher education institutions is carried out. The methodological part of this thesis also talks about the research approach, data collection techniques, as well as the research participants. I think I have tried as much as possible from the start of this thesis to provide a “thick description” of the theoretical starting points, context and methodology of this study; all of which would allow another investigator seeking transferability to reach a conclusion as to whether it can be contemplated as a possibility.
According to (Creswell (1998), there are standards for assessing the quality of qualitative research. For Creswell, some of them include: the researcher being an instrument of data collection, the use of rigorous data collection procedures, the use of a tradition of inquiry, detailing the method, applying rigorous approach to data analysis, writing persuasively, and analysing data from the particular to the general. Also, writing in a clear and engaging manner, and full of unexpected ideas that grasp and reflect the complexities that exist in real life make the findings and story believable (Creswell 1998). In this research, I was the principal instrument of data collection; the interview requests as well as the individual interviews were carried out by me. In the methodological part of this research, I explored the tradition I chose; the qualitative paradigm which refutes the notion of a single truth/reality, but acknowledges the existence of multiple truths/realities. The methodology also details how data was analysed and how the description categories were created from the meaning units (excerpts) taken from the interview transcripts.

Although I am aware that phenomenographical interviews should take the form of a dialogue (Marton 1990), that was not the reality in this research as I rather let the participants tell me about their perceptions of the topic under investigation. I agree with Wolcott (1990) that one of the threats to the quality of qualitative research is the danger of qualitative researchers being their worst enemy by being their best informants. In this sense, even though my bias as a researcher cannot be denied, I am confident that the interviews and the transcripts thereof represented the perceptions of the participants; which is what this study set to find out. Since phenomenographical thematic interviews were the main technique of data collection, it would be worthwhile to look at issues of trustworthiness in that respect. One way of ensuring validity is to have a structured interview with the same words and format for each interviewee (Silvermann 1993 as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morris 2000). In this research, the phenomenographical interviews comprised of semi-structured thematic interview questions which were the same for all the participants.

The question has been raised as to whether another researcher examining the same data would come up with the same results (Marton 1997). Here, I align my thoughts with Marton who argues that finding out the different ways in which a phenomenon is perceived is as much of a discovery as the discovery of some plant in a distant land. Marton also posits that discoveries do not have to be replicable; it is unlikely that two botanists exploring the same island independently would discover the same plants and species. While replicability
in possible in the second sense, it is impossible in the first sense. For Marton, the underlying idea is that once the description categories are found, there must be a possibility to reach a high degree of intersubjective agreement regarding their presence or absence if other researchers are able to use them (Marton 1997). I agree with Marton’s distinction between inventing an experiment and carrying out an experiment. Aligning my thought to Marton’s, the description categories (findings) in this research are a discovery, and as a discovery, they do not have to be replicable. The aim of re-using the data used in this study would therefore not be to replicate the description categories, but as Marton (1997) argues, it would be to reach an intersubjective agreement regarding their presence or absence.

During the individual interviews, I did not feel any situated motive which has been identified by Lincoln & Guba (1985) as one threat to credibility. Lincoln & Guba define situated motive as a situation where research participants want to please the investigator. The research participants in this study are individuals with perceptions of their own and I felt that they told me about those perceptions. There is no reason I can think of for any of them to have wanted to please me. They not only participated in this study voluntarily, but also had the right to decline answering questions that they did not want to answer. The participants equally had the right to withdraw from the study at anytime. It would be honest for me to recognise here that, no amount of “thick description”, the lack of situated motive or credibility makes this research and its findings authoritative or absolute. I totally align my thoughts with Lincoln & Guba (1985) who argue that the criteria for trustworthiness are open-ended, and they can never be satisfied to an extent that the trustworthiness is unassailable, indisputable, or irrefutable. According to Lincoln & Guba, no amount of means to establish trustworthiness can ever compel, they can only persuade. As Silvermann (2000) also argues, qualitative researchers have no “golden key” to validity, so there is therefore no need to be overly defensive as one prepares his or her qualitative study.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX 1

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Dear xxxx,

You are kindly asked to participate in a research conducted by Marie Arrey, MA student from the Department of Education and Globalisation at the University of Oulu. If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me at the telephone number 0440303070 or by email: marrey@mail.student.oulu.fi

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of the study is to find out the perception of academics, with respect to higher education’s tasks, and the idea of quality and quality assessment in higher education.

PROCEDURES
If you volunteer to participate in this study, no demographic, personal, or professional information will be asked from you. The interview will take about 1 hour of your time and it will be audio-recorded. A semi-structured thematic interview questions will be sent to you before the interview so that you can reflect on them.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
There are no anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study. However, the possibility that the study might present some form of stress or excitement is not ruled out.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY
There is a possibility that you find the interview to be rewarding and enjoyable. Your participation contributes to a “fresh” theoretical discourse pertaining to higher education’s tasks, and the idea of quality and assessment in higher education. Your contribution also has the potential of leading to change in institutional practices by increasing awareness in the complexities inherent in the conception of higher education’s tasks, and the idea of quality and assessment in higher education.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There will be no payment for participation.
CONFIDENTIALITY
For the purpose of this study, no personal or demographic data will be asked. Information obtained from the study will remain confidential. Findings and quotations will be reported anonymously. Data obtained will be retained for a period of 5 years post publication in a secure place, after which it will be destroyed.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
You may decline answering any questions you do not want to answer, and also withdraw from the study at any time, either before or during the interview.

FEEDBACK OF THE FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS
Once the research is complete, a brief report explaining the findings from this study will be available for those interested.

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA
The data obtained from this research could be used for subsequent studies.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER
These are the terms under which I will conduct the research.

Marie Arrey.
MA student, Department of Education and Globalisation
University of Oulu
CONSENT FORM

By signing this consent form, I confirm that:

I have received and read the letter of informed consent which provided information about the study being conducted by Marie Arrey, a student at the University of Oulu reading Education and Globalisation.

I am aware that the interview will be audio-recorded in order to ensure accuracy of my responses.

I was duly informed that I can decline to answer any of the questions, and may withdraw from the study at any time.

With full knowledge of the foregoing, I willingly agree to participate in this study.

_____ Yes       _____ No

I agree to have a face to face interview and to have conversations audio-recorded.

_____ Yes       _____ No

I agree to have follow-up conversations if need be.

_____ Yes       _____ No

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in the publication of the study.

_____ Yes       _____ No

I agree to the use of direct quotations attributed to me only with my review, approval, and consent.

_____ Yes       _____ No

Participant’s Name: ________________________________

Participant’s Signature: ______________________________

Date: ________________________________
APPENDIX 3

SEMI-STRUCTURED THEMATIC INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

THE UNIVERSITY OF X’S TASKS

1. Could you tell me about the tasks of the University of X?
2. Have you experienced any changes in those tasks?
3. What in your perception is the cause(s) of those changes?

QUALITY

1. Could you tell me about quality and quality assessment at the University of X?
2. Have you experienced any changes in the understanding of quality and quality assessment at the University of X?
3. How would you describe the cause of those changes?

FUNDING

1. Could you tell me about the funding of the University?
2. How would you tell me about: the funding of the University of X, its tasks, and understanding of quality and quality assessment?

KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

1. How would describe the University of X’s tasks in the era of the knowledge economy?

DEMOCRACY/SOCIAL COHESION

1. How do you describe the University of X’s democratic tasks in Finland presently?