Article

T·R·E

T R E u
9(1) 41 58
T Au ( ) 2011
R :
u . .u / u P
DOI: 10.1177/1477878510394807
u .
SAGE

Accountability in higher education: A comprehensive analytical framework

Thaddeus Metz
J u , S u A

Abstract

C u u
u u u
T u (. . / , /
u , / , u / , / u , / , /
, /), u
, Fu ,
u - u u . T
u
. . M
u u u u . B
. u , u u u ,
, . . u u , .

Keywords

u , u , , u , u u ,

Introduction: accounting for the essence of accountability

As just about anyone familiar with the past two or three decades in English-speaking higher education will tell you, accountability has been on the rise, or at least bureaucratic forms of it have been. Concomitant with this sociological phenomenon has been an increase in theoretical reflection about the forms accountability has taken and the ones it should take. The literature is now peppered by a wide array of distinctions – for example, internal/external, inward/outward, vertical/horizontal, upward/downward, professional/public, political/economic, soft/hard, positive/negative and, needless to say, many more.

Corresponding author:
T u M , J u , PO B 524, Au P 2006, S u A
E : @u . .

When people speak of 'accountability' they frequently risk speaking past one another, having some of these distinctions in mind and not others, and, furthermore, often these distinctions are vague and cross-cut each other in ways that are as yet unclear. In my judgement, a number of these distinctions are ultimately useful, but the field could benefit from having a comprehensive framework in which to place them and to view their relations.

My aim in this article is to provide an analytical tool by which to classify important debate about what accountability in higher education has been and ought to be. Beyond organizing such debate, this framework will serve the purposes of revealing ambiguities in terms, conflations of ideas, assumptions that warrant questioning and gaps in present research agendas. If the schema is indeed useful in these respects, it should serve as a lodestar for future research by analysts of higher education, political philosophers, sociologists of knowledge, theorists of public administration and others.

Note some limits of this project. For one, I am not out to clarify enquiry into the causes of the increase in (rationalizing) accountability in higher education. I focus merely on the forms that accountability has largely taken and could take, without exploring the explanatory reasons why some forms have been more prominent than others. For another, I make no attempt to 'file' literally every topic and piece of writing on accountability in higher education into a certain taxonomic 'folder'. Instead, I appeal to influential and important English-language issues and works from the last decade or so on the topic, and aim to show that they are illuminated by analysing them in terms of the framework I employ. The suggestion is that these are a representative sample, so that other debates can be approached similarly.

I begin by presenting the framework, which takes the form of ten variables that are interrelated in a coherent fashion (Section 2). My suggestion is that in order to understand what accountability has been and could be, one should make reference to these variables, with a complete theory of accountability thoroughly addressing all ten of them. To the best of my knowledge, no one has undertaken that kind of lengthy, comprehensive analysis of accountability in higher education (Kogan (1986) and Wagner (1989) are implicit approximations). Instead, theorists invariably tackle piecemeal facets of the complex relationship of accountability, and the framework presented here will enable them to place their work in relation to other research that is likely to affect it. In sections 3–5, I discuss three major facets of the framework, corresponding to three different duties it invokes, and I bring out sundry respects in which each duty illuminates thinking about accountability. Specifically, I take up the basic duties of an academic agent to adopt responsible policies (Section 3), then a second duty of an agent to provide information to some body about whether the basic duties have been fulfilled (Section 4), and finally a third duty of an agent to respond to infractions of the first or second duties (Section 5). I conclude by summarizing the findings of this article, which is intended to be a formal prolegomena to any future substantive enquiry into accountability in higher education (Section 6).

A framework for analysing accountability in higher education

In this section, I present the framework that I believe will help clarify, organize and otherwise advance debates about accountability in higher education. I relate the framework to

some philosophical distinctions that are of use in specifying the essence of accountability. It is largely in the subsequent sections that I defend the utility of the framework, providing examples of how it can illuminate weaknesses in the literature.

I submit that a large majority of the research into accountability is well understood in terms of providing accounts of some of the following ten f .bapsm .tlrchs ils ypsmo E

needs, it could be permissible for a lecturer to let him sit in on her class, and even wrong not to, by sound professional norms. Researchers should reflect more on whether the genuine obligations of academic agents are invariably compossible or not.

Focusing on the duty of a public university, consider the difference between the F and G variables. It is one thing to have a duty somebody or something (F), but another thing to have a duty somebody or something (G).[4] The distinction is important to highlight because, in discussion of accountability, we often want to know, on the one hand, a university must do (F), and, on the other, the final purpose for doing so, e.g. who the ultimate stakeholder is (G). To see the difference, some might think that a university has a duty to enrol more students for engineering degrees (F), perhaps not (merely) for their sake, but rather in order to improve the public's quality of life (G).

Note that the G variable need not be a function of the well-being of persons; to act someone is not necessarily to strive to her in the sense of making her happier or satisfying her interests.[5] For a first counterexample, one could [illegible]

first-order duties to perform responsible actions. There are three major variables to consider here: which agents have the duty to provide information (A), which bodies should be provided with the information (C) and what forms the information should take (D).

First off, note that A need not be one and the same as E, that is, the higher education agent need not be identical to the one obligated to report on whether it has fulfilled its basic duties. It would be unusual if, say, a public university were not at least of the agents required to report on whether it has achieved its proper aims, it knowing what it has and has not done – or at least being best placed to know. However, perhaps the distinction between A and E will help one to remember that additional agents could have a duty to report on whether a public university has done what it is fundamentally supposed to do.

In particular, the media might be thought to have a moral obligation to report on whether a public university has realized its rightful mission (Dunn, 2003: 67). The ( ), for instance, could well have a duty to inform the public of the respects in which public universities compare with one another, and it could be useful for the public to have some numerical sense of rank that the provides. This could be true, even if academics and administrators rightly disagreed with the particular way that the has compiled its ranking and with the suggestion that the can fully, or even largely, discharge its duty to inform the public by providing such a ranking. Additional obligatory watchdogs besides the media could include 'higher' statutory bodies tasked to monitor public universities, as well as 'lower' individual whistleblowers within them.

With regard to the relationship between the C variable, the bodies to be informed, and G, the groups for whose sake a university should act, the latter should determine the former either directly or indirectly by virtue of a representative relationship. The ultimate reason for a public university to adopt certain policies will in large part be a function of the good of, or respect for, the public. Democratic principles entail that the ultimate stakeholder of the public itself, or at least its representatives, should be informed about whether the public university has done right by it. And these representatives are plausibly construed, in the first instance, as some group of elected officials or people appointed by them, perhaps ministers of education who report to the executive or specialists hired to report to the legislature. It might also involve, however, individuals who represent the community in a less formal manner, such as artists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who are part of the community itself (which Blacker (2003) recommends), sometimes known as 'vertical' accountability (Newell and Bellour, 2002: 7).

However, the public or its representatives are probably not the only ones who must be given information about whether a public university has achieved its proper aims with respect to the public. First off, it is worth noting that the bodies to be informed (C) about whether a university has fulfilled its duty should invariably include the university itself (E). Surely a public university itself must become informed about whether it has achieved its proper aims with regard to ultimate stakeholder G, however G is specified.[6]

Secondly, when it comes to whether a university has produced new specialized knowledge or imparted instruction informed by cutting-edge research, academics will of course be most suited to judge whether it has achieved this public goal (a point that Carl Friedrich has classically made with force, on which see Dunn (2003)). It is uncontroversial to

maintain that there should be some combination of 'professional' accountability (which usually includes independent 'peer' assessment) and 'political' (or more broadly 'public') accountability : both groups must be (C) about the extent to which public universities are performing responsibly (F) in regard to the public and other stakeholders (G). The widely discussed tension between professional and political accountability is not about whether professionals and politicians should be informed about how public universities have functioned (C), but rather is about the way they should to poor performance (H), which I address below.

Turning from respects in which the ultimate stakeholder G might ground reasons to inform some bodies, C, other than G itself or its representatives, I now point out that C might not even be completely grounded on G. That is, a public university could conceivably have reasons to inform certain people of whether it has carried out its duties to G that are not ultimately a function of G. If acting for the sake of G would have likely consequences for the livelihood of some other group that is not G, this other group might ground a duty on the part of the university to report to it about its activities undertaken for G's sake. Consider an American example. Suppose Illinois started up a new public university close to the border of Indiana. An Illinois state school might properly act for the sake of only Illinois residents, and yet it could be obligated to inform the state of Indiana about its activities, if they would foreseeably affect, say, migration of teachers and students or supply of electricity and water.[7]

Having clarified some of the possible and plausible relationships between the first-order duties of a public university and the second-order duty to provide information about whether they were carried out, I next address the issue of precisely which sort of provision of information is required. Distinctions abound in the field. Although there are some minimalist conceptions of accountability that limit the information to be provided to mere reporting on the use of funds, virtually no one currently working in the field believes this is enough. Most believe that public universities are obligated to provide information not merely about how they have spent money, but also about whether they have fulfilled all their basic duties, and, furthermore, that they are obligated not merely to transmit information about this, but also to give some explanation of, and justification for, the practices about which they are informing others.

A somewhat more contentious question is whether the reporting agent, which I here assume to be the public university, is obligated to be in a position to inform the relevant bodies, say, by retaining documentation for a period of time, or whether it must actually inform them on a regular basis. The latter might seem obviously preferred, but, if the aim were to efficiently encourage quality control, then a mere requirement to afford opportunities to an independent body might suffice, even if this body did not take advantage of them, or at least not routinely.

Still more contested is the nature of the information that must be provided. Notoriously, governments in the English-speaking world have lately tended to audit universities in light of not only their outputs, but also a quantitative appraisal of them, e.g. graduation and publication rates. However, other options are possible and often more attractive to educational theorists (Blacker, 2003; Davis and White, 2001; Huisman and Currie, 2004). Instead of (only) measuring outputs such as numbers of students graduated or articles published, external bodies could (also) appraise universities in light of inputs,

procedures or even outcomes, i.e. results of outputs that are intrinsically desirable (Romzek, 2000: 33–9). In addition, qualitative judgement could be employed to appraise any of these factors. Most prominent educationists would welcome the attempt to ascertain, say, the extent to which students' capacity for critical thinking has been developed, as opposed to (merely) calculating the percentage of students who completed a certain degree and in what average amount of time ('throughput').

The duty to respond to infraction

The third major duty in the normative framework for thinking about accountability in higher education is the second-order duty of some agent(s) to engage with an actual or potential failure to perform the other two duties. So stated, this duty already reveals an omission in the existent literature, namely, that when 'holding accountable' or equivalent terms are used, they invariably refer only to responses to failure of a public university (or other higher education agent) to perform its basic duties (F), e.g. to provide quality instruction. However, supposing the public university must report on whether it has performed these basic duties (B), it might also be sensibly held accountable for its failure to so report. In this section, I focus on the relevant agent(s) that should respond to such failures (I) and then the different kinds of responses that might be made to them (J).

One initially wonders how present variables relate to previous ones. In particular, it is natural to enquire as to whether the I variable, the agent responding to dereliction of duties, must be the same as the C variable, the body that must be reported to with information about whether the public university has carried out its proper mission (or other relevant basic duties). Although it would be normal for I to be C or at least C's agent, since C knows whether the duties F and B have been fulfilled, it is not necessary. For example, it might be that a public university has a duty to provide prospective students with information about the quality of its instruction, but that it is not these students who have a duty to hold it accountable if it fails either to offer quality instruction or to report on whether it does. For another example, it could be that a public university has an obligation to provide its academic peers with information about its research and teaching, but that it is not the proper job of these peers to improve what it finds to be inferior quality, but rather the job of the government alone. Quite often in the literature the distinction between the agent reported to about infraction (C) and the agent responding to infraction (I) is glossed, particularly by ubiquitous phrases such as 'internal' and 'external' accountability, as well as 'professional', 'peer', 'political' and 'public' accountability.

It is worth discussing whether it can make logical sense for the higher education agent E to be the same as the agent I that responds to infractions by E. I have already suggested, in the previous section, that it can make sense to think of the body that must be informed about whether a university has fulfilled its basic duties to include the university itself. Is it logically possible for the university itself also to be the agent that responds to the university's infractions? Can, say, the voluntary adoption of 'quality assurance' mechanisms be coherently conceived as 'self-accountability' on the part of a university?

With regard to the question of logic, one finds two views on the matter in the literature. On the one hand, one finds the recurrent suggestion that accountability is something that involves response from bodies and, implicitly, from them alone

(Behn, 2001: 3-4; Kogan, 1986: 33; Mulgan cited in Ackerman, 2005: 7; Wagner, 1989: 57). Both the labels 'external' and 'internal' are used in the literature to denote otherness, with the 'internal' signalling peer review by similar institutions of higher education, sometimes called 'horizontal' accountability (Newell and Bellour, 2002: 7). On the other hand, one finds mention of 'inward' accountability (Corbett cited in Vidovich and Slee, 2001: 432), by which is meant an agent using its conscience in response to infraction, as well as statements such as this: 'In the extreme case, can't an individual hold herself accountable for her own actions by, for instance, punishing herself if she fails to live up to her own standards of work performance' (Ackerman, 2005: 8)?

I shall not resolve this debate, but rather note that there appears to be a third, middle path between these two views that should be considered. To put the alternative tersely, relationships with others might be a condition for accountability to obtain without it being by them. According to this perspective, the 'inwardists', if a university informed only itself about whether it had carried out its basic duties and if it were alone the agent that responded to its infractions, then 'being accountable' and 'holding accountable' would be the wrong words to use to describe its behaviour. It could be said to be 'taking responsibility' for its behaviour, but not accurately described as manifesting 'accountability'. However, the 'outwardists', 'accountability' by definition need not involve interaction alone. Once a public university informs other agents about whether its basic duties have been fulfilled, and once other agents respond to infraction, then (and only then) it can make sense to speak of 'self-accountability' if the university also informs itself and responds to its own infraction, e.g. via 'quality assurance'.

Returning to normative issues, it is common to hold that non-professional (usually labelled 'external'), and in particular, political agents are obligated to deal with poor performance by a public university. For example, many believe that public representatives such as Parliamentary committees, or agents appointed by elected officials such as ministers of education, have a duty to respond to a public university's failure to carry out final ends, or at least its public-oriented ones.

However, this is not true.[8] Some theorists have said that a system of purely professional or 'horizontal' accountability in higher education would be 'a denial of the principle of public accountability because it clearly seeks to exclude the public from the exercise of accountability . . . [T]he demand for autonomy – with accountability to peers alone – contradicts democratic theory' (Friedman and Edigheji, 2006: 10). While this might be true in the final analysis, I submit that it is not self-evidently so. Reflection on the judiciary indicates that properly specifying the responsive agent, I, need not be in terms of those for whose sake the university properly acts, G, or even G's representative. Most political and legal theorists believe that it is proper for the judiciary both to act for the sake of the public in some broad sense and to be normally quite insulated from the public's influence, even when the judiciary fails in its duty toward the public. Favouring judicial self-regulation (in all but the most extreme cases) is almost never deemed to 'abrogate democratic principles' (Friedman and Edigheji, 2006: 4) or called 'anti-democratic' in some pejorative sense.[9] Now, a public university be analogous to the judiciary in this respect. Influentially among philosophers of education, Amy Gutmann (1987: 174–9) maintains, for example, that a public university has a duty to

protect minority viewpoints, which seems akin to a judiciary's duty to protect minority rights. Perhaps that proper function of a public university warrants merely professional, and not political or more broadly public, responses to infraction.

In reply, it is often argued that a public university is rightly subject to political or public intervention because it is a public organ, uses public funds or has a public purpose (Council on Higher Education, 2008: 24; Friedman and Edigheji, 2006: 4). However, the case of the judiciary indicates that having been created by government and funded by taxpayers for their sake is to deem the public or elected officials to be obligated (let alone permitted) to deal with the institution's infractions. It requires argument to demonstrate either that a public university is relevantly different from the judiciary and should submit to intervention from the public or its representatives, or that the judiciary should not be as independent as it often is.[10] Such argument might well be available; my point, again, is that it needs to be made.

Assuming the argument can be made, it is fairly uncontested that at least one proper forum for non-professional response to infraction is a public university's council or board. It is common to maintain that a council ought to have representation not merely by those intimately familiar with higher education, but also by a variety of stakeholders that include government, workers and members of the broader community where the university is located. Senior managers such as Vice-Chancellors and their deputies and deans are deemed responsible for carrying out a university's basic duties (F) and for informing others about this (B), while a university's governing body, not purely academic, is considered obligated to ensure that senior managers do these two things (H). More controversial is whether a government body more removed from the university, e.g. a Parliamentary committee, may regulate it. Such a body is less likely to be informed about academic matters in general or the intricacies of the particular university, so the sceptical argument goes.

Consider now the manner in which another agent should respond to a public university's violations of its basic duties (setting aside, for the sake of focus, any duty of it to report on such violations). Notice that these violations need not have already occurred; holding accountable could be a matter of preventing future violations (at least in light of some violations that have already occurred). I believe that most of the distinctions drawn with regard to this J variable are incomplete, and are misleading for occluding awareness of other possible and potentially desirable forms of 'holding accountable' by an extra-university agent.[11]

One routinely encounters the suggestion that accountability essentially involves a , i.e. a command backed by a threat, a penalty or some other form of coercion (Behn, 2001: 3–4; Du Toit, 2007: 121; Kogan, 1986: 25; Schedler, cited in Ackerman, 2005: 7). However, there are additional negative responses that are possible besides the use of coercion, which is usually labelled a 'hard' response (Friemdan and Edigheji, 2006: 16; Newell and Bellour, 2002: 8). Negative but nonetheless 'soft' responses to infraction include criticizing or shaming.[12] 'Moral appeals, expectations, exposure and embarrassment, and appeals to pride, international standing and responsibility are among these tools' (Newell and Bellour, 2002: 8). These all count as 'negative' since they involve the judgement that the university has acted wrongly and the consequent application of some kind of response intended to be undesired on the part of the university.

Upon a bit of reflection, though, it is clear that accountability responses need not be merely negative. Positive responses to good performance are also possible in the form of, say, praising, raising status and offering incentives, which would be expected to prevent bad performance in the future. These are positive since they involve the judgement that the university has acted rightly and the consequent application of some kind of response meant to be desired by the university.

However, not even the negative/positive distinction is comprehensive enough, and it warrants replacement or at least supplementation. Here is an example of a possible response to potential or actual infraction that is neither negative nor positive (as they are characteristically understood and defined above), but which appears relevant to holding accountable. Consider the idea of a non-proximate group such as a Parliamentary committee or statutory body with a public university about the kinds of policies it adopts. The idea of a social contract between universities and their government or the broader public (advocated most extensively by Du Toit (2007)) is neither a negative nor a positive response from government.

For another example of an accountability response that is neither negative nor positive, consider the use of policy and law, rather than restrictive rules, to steer the direction of public universities (for classic discussion in a legal context, see Hart (1961: 26–48)). Restrictive rules carry punishment in response to infraction, or at least demand compensation for it. Facilitative rules, in contrast, are not backed up by coercion, but rather confer powers on people. Non-academic examples of facilitative law include the rules governing the ability to acquire a will or to get married. The laws 'A will is valid only if two witnesses attest that a competent person has signed it', and 'A marriage is valid only between members of the opposite sex' enable people to do certain things under certain conditions. If the law is not followed, no punishment or compensation is sought; instead, there is simply a failure to achieve the goals of obtaining a binding will or becoming legally married.

Now, a government can hold public universities accountable by using facilitative