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**Abstract**

This article adopts a theoretical approach to analyse the evolution of the quality agenda in English higher education. Using the concept of reification, it shows how the quasi-state has attempted to build a 'natural' understanding of the idea of quality. However, the policy implementation process has demonstrated the fragility of the state's construction for it has failed to establish a broad consensus of support for both its idea of quality and how it should be evaluated. The shifting models of quality control represent both a continuous struggle to define what constitutes quality (with the current debate centred around the move from quality assurance to quality enhancement), and reflect the differing positions of the dominant higher education interests operating within a system driven increasingly by the interaction of market and state pressures. Given that even the state's intrusion into this territory is disputed, such instability is entirely predictable and can be expected to re-occur as the power balance among the dominant interests in higher education evolves and the policy concerns of the state change.

(HRK / Abstract übernommen)