

DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY CULTURE IN THE UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

In the area of higher education, however, the adoption of quality control has been superficial and diluted by the exercise of academic freedom, as well as being hampered by lack of shared vision and lack of a match between quality management and educational processes. Further, the prevailing culture of universities is often based on individual autonomy which is jealously guarded (Colling & Harvey, 1995). This type of culture is usually difficult to combine with the need for teamwork, which is an important feature of all quality management efforts (Boaden & Dale, 1992; Lagrosen *et al.*, 2004). Cultural change is being recognised as an important aspect of total quality development. However, the issue surrounding quality culture in higher education has not been comprehensively studied.

Objective of the paper: This paper will discuss the issues of quality culture and its development in the universities. *Methodology:* The research methods were the literature review and document analysis.

Keywords: quality, quality culture, quality management, universities.

Introduction

Quality has always been of great importance to academic institutions (especially with regard to their self-image). Over the course of the past few decades, quality has quickly become a 'buzzword' in the higher education community - a systematically pursued area of public significance with a multitude of strategies and approaches dedicated to its 'management' and 'assurance'. Many of these developments can be directly or indirectly attributed to the so called Bologna Process, but in fact the reasons for this change are manifold, including the massification and diversification of higher education, difficult resource situations, a consumerist view on universities or an increased public and political demand for 'accountability' (Hodson & Thomas, 2003; Brennan & Shah, 2000).

Against the background of such often unfavourable conditions, most European Higher education institutions (HEIs) have developed ambitious strategies and concepts for improving their teaching and learning quality, which are often quite similar (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). Nevertheless, there are still some important differences which can at least partly be ascribed to contextual factors. As an admittedly multidimensional and perspective-bound construct (Harvey & Green, 1993), quality is deeply connected to an organisation's culture. Thus, quality notions provide a framework for institutional perceptions and actions. As such, they are influenceable but not controllable through managerial concepts. Therefore, the challenge for any university management lies in creating a setting that is conducive to strengthening an internal quality culture, not to managing this culture. This task is further aggravated by the fact that each decision is contingent on different understandings of quality, leading to dynamic situations of great ambivalence (Vettori *et al.*, 2007).

Cultural change is being recognised as an important aspect of total quality development. However, the issue surrounding quality culture in higher education has not been comprehensively studied.

The scientific problem addressed in the article deals with the situation of universities, their environmental needs determining a new approach to quality assurance and quality culture development. *The research problem* consists of the following questions: What is the relationship between the quality assurance requirements and management in universities? What are the peculiarities of university organizational culture and quality culture? How to combine the quality standards and quality culture in universities?

Aim of the paper is to identify and summarise the main dimensions of quality culture in universities. This paper presents an overview of quality culture concepts in universities, summarizes the quality culture conceptions used in the education policy documents, and highlights the elements that may be of benefit to the academic community in the development and harmonization of quality culture paradigm in universities.

Methodology: The research methods were the literature review and document analysis.

It is hardly reasonable to speak of 'the' quality culture, but of (a) quality culture in general. Within any university, quality notions differ distinctly between various groups of actors (e.g. university management, academic staff, administrative staff, students etc.) and even within these groups (e.g. different academic fields). In this respect, the university management is just one actor/stakeholder among others, which makes managerial quality concepts a very legitimate position, but certainly not the only one. If a quality culture

should indeed be sustained by the whole organisation, its basic principles have to be largely shared or at least accepted (Vettori *et al.*, 2007). In our paper we review a theoretical framework for quality culture development. The first section of the article deals with interpretations of quality, their understanding in higher education context. In the second section, it is attempted to outline the main issues about organisational and quality culture in the universities. Finally, in the last section, possible controversial combination “quality standards versus quality culture” are analyzed. The paper ends with conclusions.

Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions: Managing Change

Quality in higher education may even be more difficult to define than in most other sectors. The issue of what constitutes high quality teaching and learning is one which is of prime importance in the development of quality assurance systems, and one which is often not explicitly addressed. There is a growing consensus that high quality teaching is not just about high quality presentation of content, nor just about the implementation of high quality teaching skills. High quality teaching is fundamentally about affording high quality student learning (Ramsden, 1992). Assuring quality of teaching based on this concept of quality teaching is about keeping a focus on how and what students are learning, and how this can be improved (Trigwell & Prosser, 1991; Prosser, 1993; Žiliukas & Katiliūtė, 2008). It is fundamentally about affording a context in which high quality learning is possible and is encouraged (Marthens & Prosser, 1998).

Discussing quality in higher education, Harvey & Green (1993) propose five discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about quality:

- *Quality as exceptional.* Quality is regarded in terms of excellence, which means something special or exceptional. High standards are exceeded.
- *Quality as perfection or consistency.* The focus is on processes and specifications that are aimed to be perfectly met. Excellence, in this case, means “zero defects”, i.e. perfection.
- *Quality as fitness for purpose.* Quality has meaning only in relation to the purpose of the product. In traditional quality management, the “fitness for purpose” notion is related to the customers. In higher education, however, Harvey und Green (1993) see the view of quality as “meeting customer requirements” as problematic due to the contentiousness of the notion of “customer” and the difficulty for, e.g. students to specify what is required.
- *Quality as value for money.* Quality is equated with levels of specifications and is directly related to costs.
- *Quality as transformation.* The process should ideally bring about a qualitative change, a fundamental change of form such as the phase transition when water transforms into ice as the temperature is lowered. This view can be found in the thinking of major Western philosophers as well as in Eastern philosophies. In education, the transformation can take the form of enhancement and empowerment (Lagrosen *et al.*, 2004).

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (2005) are based on a number of basic principles about quality assurance, both internal in and external to higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These include: providers of higher education have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance; the interests of society in the quality and standards of higher education need to be safeguarded; the quality of academic programmes need to be developed and improved for students and other beneficiaries of higher education across the EHEA; there need to be efficient and effective organisational structures within which those academic programmes can be provided and supported; transparency and the use of external expertise in quality assurance processes are important; there should be encouragement of a culture of quality within higher education institutions; processes should be developed through which higher education institutions can demonstrate their accountability, including accountability for the investment of public and private money; quality assurance for accountability purposes is fully compatible with quality assurance for enhancement purposes; institutions should be able to demonstrate their quality at home and internationally; processes used should not stifle diversity and innovation.

Green (1994) argues that, given the difficulties in defining quality in higher education it is necessary to define as clearly as possibly the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality and take all these competing views into account. In time, the customer-based definitions seem to have come to prevail, but in reality, they all need to be integrated. Ideally, quality management can thus be a means of bridging the gap between external quality management, starting with customer perceived quality, and internal quality

management focused on conformance (Lagrosen *et al.*, 2004; Katiliūtė, 2008; Staškevičiūtė & Neverauskas, 2008). Regarding the demand for increased quality (Staškevičiūtė & Čiutienė, 2008), to date several authors have introduced the principles of TQM (*total quality management*) into various aspects of the educational arena as a step towards bringing better management to higher education. TQM helps to achieve and maintain excellence in higher education (Ho & Wearn, 1996). TQM is customer-focused and revolves around the concept of customer satisfaction. The definition of quality as fitness for purpose has been particularly popular in universities (Lomas, 2002) and to a large extent explains why TQM has often been adopted as a quality management strategy. It is a standard quality management model that has been used extensively in the business and commercial sectors for many years. The six main elements of TQM are: (1) customer-defined quality; (2) internal and external customers; (3) employee involvement; (4) error-free processes that eliminate waste; (5) performance management; and (6) continuous improvement (Rowley, 1996).

There are numerous quality management models, such as TQM, ISO 9000, IIP or EFQM, which are designed to help enhance quality within an organisation. The choice of quality management initiative will depend in part on a university's definition of quality. Defining quality is problematic as the notion is contested (Newton, 2002). However, these quality initiatives *per se* are unlikely to lead to success. As well as the chosen strategy or strategies being appropriate for the organisation, the organisation's structures, and therefore its communication channels, need to be such that the initiative(s) can be disseminated effectively. A conducive organisational culture is required in order that new ideas can be discussed, assimilated, modified, accommodated and then implemented. Similarly, it is not enough to restructure the organisation and focus on faculties rather than departments or schools. Nor is it likely to be enough to concentrate on changing culture without the impetus of an appropriate and relevant strategy allied to the required form of organisational structure. The inter-relatedness and interdependence of strategy, structure and culture mean that all three require the full and constant attention of senior managers and other institutional agents of change.

Effective top-level leadership and commitment to this quality improvement strategy are also required if there is to be total customer satisfaction (Ho & Wearn, 1996). If quality is to be embedded successfully in a department or a university, then high-level management and leadership abilities will be crucial in achieving this. Determining and then implementing the appropriate strategy, putting in place the complementary organisational structure and developing a conducive and supportive organisational culture are all problematic and present major challenges for senior staff. Barnett (1992) has some most helpful advice. He makes the important distinction between management *of* quality and management *for* quality. Management *of* quality, he argues, is associated more with the leadership style of an army general, whereas management *for* quality requires the leadership style of a conductor of an orchestra. Just as a conductor brings in particular instrumentalists at certain times and determines the pace and volume of the music, so senior managers need to lead the members of the academic unit sensitively and skilfully. Barnett (1992) is advising them to employ and encourage the more subtle "two i" approach of inform and involve rather than the army-style "two c" approach of command and control. Collegial discussion can assist greatly in a "two i" approach by "engaging the hearts and minds" of staff and resulting in broad agreement about how to proceed (Yorke, 2000).

To embed quality, transformational leaders are required rather than just transactional managers. Such people are able to provide a guiding vision and gain commitment (Ramsden, 1992) and have the personal qualities of passion, integrity, curiosity and daring. Transformational leaders innovate and originate, focus on people rather than systems, ask what and why and play an active role in raising expectations (Gordon, 2002). The transformative leadership skills of all staff involved in change will have to be of the highest order if behaviours, beliefs, values and basic assumptions are to be altered (Schein, 2004; Fullan, 2001).

University Organisational Culture and Quality

There is a multitude of definitions of culture, each with its own slight variation depending on the focus of study, but most suggest culture is the pattern of arrangement, material or behaviour which has been adopted by a society (organization, group, or team) as the accepted way of solving problems. As such, culture may be taken to include all the institutionalized ways and the implicit beliefs, norms and values and premises which underline and govern behaviour (Ahmed *et al.*, 1999).

Organisational culture has been defined as the values, myths, heroes and symbols that have come to mean a great deal to the people who work in a particular organisation. Essentially, it is the way we do things round here. It can also be considered as the glue that holds an organisation together (Baron, 1994). An

organisation's culture is made up of a variety of rituals, stories, myths, routines and stories and underpinning assumptions and values. It is also greatly affected by organisational structure and the distribution of power.

Simple definitions of organisational culture suggest that it can be considered in isolation and the notion is straightforward and uncomplicated. However, organisational culture should be examined in relation to its structure, the technology that it adopts and the environment within which it operates (Bax, 1991).

The culture of an organisation is influenced by numerous factors. Hofstede *et al.* (1990), on the basis of their research into multi-national organisations, identify six independent dimensions based on whether the organisation: (1) is process-oriented or results-oriented; (2) is job-oriented or employee-oriented; (3) is parochial or professional in outlook; (4) operates in a closed system or an open system where it is subject to a far greater degree to the political, economic, social and technological environment; (5) adopts a normative or a pragmatic approach; and (6) exercises loose or tight control over its employees. Each of these dimensions will affect basic assumptions, beliefs and values and, consequently, their manifestation through organisational artefacts (Schein, 2004; Lomas, 1999).

Many researchers argue that organisations are an amalgam of a variety of different cultures rather than just one pervasive culture. The size of an organisation has an effect on its culture. Once an organisation has grown beyond a size where it is possible for members to communicate regularly, then there is likely to be the development of sub-cultures which have basic assumptions, beliefs and values that may differ from those of senior managers. Such sub-cultures could form in a department of an organisation, those employees who work in a particular geographic location or people who regularly take lunch together (Schumacher, 1997). People with a common workplace and/or who use the same catering facilities will interact on a regular basis and, consequently, are likely to form as a group and develop a distinctive group culture. Thus, in large organisations, it is likely that an employee interacts with many other organisational members and so it is possible that he/she is a part of a number of sub-cultural systems. It is not clear to this employee what the organisational culture is. An organisation can be seen as a mosaic of subcultures. However, unlike the pieces that make up a mosaic, the edges of each sub-culture are not always clear and well-defined. Culture can be seen on occasions to be a differentiating rather than an integrating force (Lomas, 1999).

Culture is not fixed and stable, but can be regarded as the result of multiple interactions, involving all participants of these interactions. Accordingly, the focus lies on developing structures of social meaning (*sense making*), which form the basis of every interpretation of organisational activities, events or observances and their interconnection with specific action sequences. Geertz (1993) points out that culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action; social structure is the form that action takes, the actually existing network of social relations. As this interpretative process takes place permanently and depends on specific contexts of action, organisational culture is in a state of continuous and dynamic change and is not necessarily homogeneous, thus reflecting an organisation's internal complexity. As a result, a university's culture has to be comprehended as a historically grown social phenomenon that is very likely differentiated into several subcultures, but without guaranteeing that the participants are completely aware of the single components (Vettori *et al.*, 2007).

So, culture is the key factor underpinning success in terms of developing the necessary commitment to any form of change. Quality culture is the main ingredient in a successful TQM program (Westbrook, 1993). An organization with a 'quality culture' can be defined as one having clear values and beliefs that foster total quality behaviour. Changing organizational culture is increasingly recognized as one of the primary conditions for successful implementation of total quality management (Hildebrandt *et al.*, 1991).

Schein's (2004) simple model of organisational culture is helpful in identifying the three key aspects of organisational culture: (1) tangible artefacts such as buildings, de'cor and facilities; (2) beliefs and values; and (3) underlying assumptions. For example, great attention, with the attendant expenditure, can be given to the quality of lecturing facilities, but staff need to be committed to an underpinning philosophy, beliefs, values and basic assumptions if quality is to be embedded. It can be considered that there has been some success in embedding quality when there is little or no discussion about quality because it is a basic assumption of members of an organisation. Yorke (2000) notes that a quality culture in an institution has been created when there is an orientation towards the needs of all its stakeholders and there are clear, effective mechanisms to support its entire staff in endeavouring to achieve the be a commitment throughout the organisation to quality and its continuous improvement.

Vettori *et al.* (2007) argued that the Quality Culture approach promoted by the EUA (EUA, 2006, 2005), differs clearly from traditional quality assurance strategies, dedicating more attention to development-oriented and value-based aspects. Although Sursock (2004, cf. Vettori *et al.*, 2007) goes a little bit too far

when naming the EUA approach more 'neutral' than most others – ideological issues may be different, but they are still present –, it still stands out positively from a number of rather technocratic top-down concepts of recent years. In the quality culture perspective, quality is not beheld as a process that can be operated through evaluation and measurement procedures alone, but as values and practices, that are shared by the institutional community and that have to be nurtured on many levels (e.g. by considering the subcultures in the respective academic subunits) and by various means at the same time. The approach demands the involvement of multiple internal and external stakeholders, acknowledging the fact that a quality culture cannot be implemented from above, although strong leadership may be necessary for starting and promoting the process in the first place. Quality measurement and quality control are undoubtedly important elements of such an approach (as they are of any quality management system), but they cannot be regarded as quality guarantors *per se*, rather needing to be embedded in an overarching framework that is in line with the institutional objectives and focuses on continuous improvement.

Differing quality notions can eventually be traced back to group (or subculture) specific norms and values, indicating that many culture-relevant aspects are located on a level that is scarcely accessible or alterable, but nevertheless affects organisational attitudes and actions to a considerable extent. In many ways, such latent components are at the base of culture, as they underlie most conscious operations. Schein (2004) names them underlying assumptions, encompassing beliefs, habits of perception, thoughts and feelings that are unconscious yet taken for granted. Unless newly founded, universities already have quality cultures of their own. The main challenge lies in changing this informal and implicit culture to a formal and explicit culture and in making the difference understandable (EUA, 2006). At the same time, any activities dedicated to this aim have to take the hitherto existing structures and processes into consideration as well.

The quality culture approach is closely related to the concept of organisational learning. From a theoretical perspective, irritations (e.g. based on feedback) in the form of structural modifications (e.g. curricular alterations) get incorporated into an organisational system of actions over the course of the learning process. In order to reconstruct this learning process, it is necessary to understand the conditions that lead to the formation of such irritations, as they are not simply a subject to perception, but nevertheless result in a palpable alteration of structures of action. Thus, certain sensitivity for specific irritations (i.e. an awareness of quality and quality criteria respectively) is required. Influencing the patterns of explanation and interpretation that prevail in a certain organisational context will – at least in a long-term perspective – produce better results than simply reworking evaluation methods or implementing new procedures (even though both sides are obviously interrelated) (Vettori *et al.*, 2007).

Adopting a quality culture approach requires two strategic decisions that do not sit comfortably with traditional (quality) management approaches. Firstly, it is necessary to empower all actor groups that hold a stake in the teaching and learning processes (stakeholder-orientation), enabling them to develop their own quality goals, initiatives and measures (within the overall framework defined by the institutional mission) and making productive use of the actors' self-organisational abilities. Secondly, this depends on a huge amount of trust that these groups are willing and able to support such an endeavour. This means that all members of the university are held responsible for the organisational developments (Patton, 2002).

The whole quality process has to be accompanied by trust and confidence-building actions. The EUA report on the Quality Culture Project (2006) states the importance of information for developing a quality culture. But even more important than a well-designed system for circulating information is communication in the meaning of reciprocal reconciliation. The corresponding efforts have to build up on the already existing organisational culture, which has usually been developed over a long course of time and is unique. With respect to such cultural peculiarities, it is not enough to copy a standardised model of quality assurance and development and hope that a strategy that has already been successful at another university will have similar success in one's own institution. It is necessary to acknowledge and consider the historical, political and social characteristics of a certain quality culture and to develop strategies that are adequate for such conditions. It is only then that the quality culture approach will have a chance to actually achieve results instead of degrading to a new variant of impression management restricted to some glossy management brochures (Vettori *et al.*, 2007).

Quality Standards *versus* Quality Culture

In previous parts of article are defined quality cultures as stakeholder-dependent, historically grown and learning oriented social phenomena that can be barely managed and make it difficult to predict future

developments. Such a participative quality culture is never homogeneous since it reflects the complexity of the interactions and interpretation the culture(s) emerge(s) from. Interventions are possible, but often only in an indirect way that takes localised and sub-cultural differences into account, as the latent premises for perceptions and actions are only slowly changing and cannot be directly tackled (Lueger & Vettori, 2008).

As a consequence, focusing on sustainable internal developments will demand a strategy which basically understands central management as a function for supporting the other institutional actors developing and unfolding their potentials. Such a strategy has to take the factual heterogeneity (i.e. subcultures) of larger universities into account and emphasises localised and customised quality strategies. As paradoxical as it may seem, within such a framework, standards can even lead to more flexibility and inspire innovation instead of streamlining and homogenising individual efforts and thus losing much needed social acceptance. Elements of this type of strategy may include (Lueger & Vettori, 2008):

- Harmonising general (institutional) and local standards; general standards may work primarily as guidelines for orientation which have to be locally adapted and implemented;
- Involving all actors with serious claims, concerns and issues in negotiating and defining standards; here, the crucial factor is a common understanding of such standards, which can only be achieved through processes of continuous, reciprocal communication;
- Delegating responsibility (autonomisation of quality development) and empowering stakeholders to develop their own goal and measures; this may well increase the commitment of the actors involved, even though the decentralised objectives and actions must fit into the overall mission/framework;
- Allowing for the possibility that standards may change during various stages of development processes; this will require sufficient leeway for decision-making and an avoidance of inflexible process standardisations;
- Emphasising the signal function of standards; basically it is not the university management or some specialised quality assurance unit that 'produces' quality, but various other actors (students, teachers, researchers, administrators etc.). Used in a certain way, quality standards can sensitise them towards certain problems and raise quality awareness;
- Considering latent and symbolic aspects of standards; quality standards will be interpreted ('read') and used in different ways and on different levels – it is important to acknowledge the fact that implementing them can have effects other than the most obvious or desired ones and to make provision for dealing with subsequent difficulties.

Conclusions

When implemented by a university, quality enhancement models need to be fitted in sympathetically with the organisation's culture and structures. If embedding is to occur, there needs to be a careful consideration of the opportunity costs of the various options that could bring about the necessary transformative change (Lomas, 2004). The importance of transformative leadership and the creation of a conducive organisational culture are also explored, as are the major indicators of success.

Organisational culture can be considered as the assumptions, beliefs and values of an organisation, with these intangibles being manifested through organisational artefacts such as uniform, jargon, rituals, logos and office furniture. Culture is dynamic and subject to change. Assumptions are often made that there is a definitive and integrative culture that pervades an organisation, whereas it could be more likely that an organisation is composed of a network of different sub-cultures. There is a danger of over-simplifying the notion of culture, both at national and organisational levels, as culture is not necessarily uniform. It is questionable whether the developing standards-based and relatively rigid universalistic quality management system can assess adequately the quality of HEIs which are not standard in terms of their mission statements, aims and objectives, size and nature of student in-take (Lomas, 1999).

The quality culture approach promoted by EUA (EUA 2006, 2005) differs clearly from more traditional quality management strategies, shifting attention to more development-oriented and value-based aspects. The approach demands the involvement of multiple internal and external stakeholders, underlining the fact that a quality culture cannot be implemented from above, yet on the other hand ambivalently stating that strong leadership may be necessary for starting and promoting the process in the first place (Lueger, Vettori, 2008). It is just this ambivalence concerning the relationship of top-down and bottom-up ideas (or

differing management ideologies, respectively) that will pose one of the major challenges for the approach in future years.

Different types of standards are differently suited for supporting and influencing quality assurance and quality development and we should pay more attention to the ways they are adopted in order to realise the overall objective. Even if the quality culture approach may basically be a tool for analysing 'who we are' instead of 'who we want to be' (Harvey, Stensaker, 2007), tackling the latter question is not beyond our influence. Dealing with quality standards in a cautious, reflexive and productive manner is certainly a step in a promising direction (Lueger, Vettori, 2008).

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