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Proposal

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Toward a multi-perspective model of quality culture in Higher Education Institutions?

G. Bendermacher[*], M. oude Egbrink, I. Wolfhagen & D. Dolmans

Abstract

A vast majority of Higher Education Institutes have formalised their quality management practices in order to be able to systematically generate information for accountability and improvement purposes. Despite the fact that these practices are becoming more alike, differences between and even within institutions persist in the degree to which they are considered effective in actually enhancing quality of education. A broad consensus exists that institutes should strive for a 'quality culture'. However, to date, there is a lack of agreement on a definition of 'quality culture', its underlying organisational values and means to nurture such a culture. In this paper, we elaborate on the theoretical background and present a conceptual framework underpinning a research project aimed at collecting empirical data on staff members' values across different study programmes as well as the present communication climate, commitment of staff members and its relationship with the perceived effectiveness of quality management practices.

Introduction

While Higher Education Institutions (HEI) nowadays find themselves confronted with a decrease in public funding, irrespective of growing student populations, they simultaneously need to invest in organisational change processes in order to successfully react to a number of internal and external forces (Chandler, 2010). Hence, the past two decades reveal a tendency to approach higher education from a consumerist perspective, in which institutions have embraced information and communication provision on quality indicators as a strategy to gain position in a competitive (international) market. Internationalisation and standardisation of (internal and external) quality management practices have played an important role in providing documentation and creating transparency on performance of HEI. Yet, it remains unclear whether these practices, which have prospered in systems fostering accountability, have contributed to the actual enhancement of educational quality (Harvey & Williams, 2010). There is a growing sense of awareness among HEI that tools and instruments for quality management have too often been implemented while neglecting the organisations' culture and that "rather than understanding culture and quality as independent entities, it is important to understand that quality actually stems from a broader cultural perspective" (Davies, Douglas & Douglas, 2007; EUA, 2012; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008, p. 431). Despite the fact that the added value of striving for a 'quality culture' in HEI seems apparent and indisputable, consensus is lacking on distinctive features of such a culture (Berings, Beerten, Hulpiau & Verhesschen, 2011). There is a need to further explore the concept of quality culture e.g. by providing insight in its prerequisites. This will enable researchers to empirically study the added value of the quality culture concept in terms of its often advocated, though scarcely justified, contribution to the effectiveness of quality management practices in education.

Quality culture in higher education

According to Schein (1992, p. 50), the significance of the concept of organisational culture in relation to organisation performance stems from its ability to solve "the basic problems of (1) organisational survival in and adaptation to the external environment and (2) integration of the internal processes to ensure the capacity to continue to survive and adapt". Following this line of thought, the evolution of a mechanistic and technocratic approach to quality management toward a more holistic, cultural approach might prove to be effective in tackling academic staffs' reluctance to an involvement in quality management practices which can be perceived as externally imposed and excessively bureaucratic. Thus, an approach to quality management which takes into account organisational culture (i.e. is in congruence with staff

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values) and fosters ownership and commitment, might be considered an adequate response to the imperative need for continuous improvement of educational quality (Newton, 2000; Ehlers, 2009).

Higher education organisational culture has been defined as "the collective, mutually shaping pattern of norms, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions that guide the behaviour of individuals and groups in an institute for higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus" (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 28). While at first glance this definition appears to provide a useful starting point for understanding individual and group behaviour in HEI, both Kuh & Whitt and more contemporary researchers note that (academic) staff in HEI are influenced by multiple coinciding cultures, which might encompass different and even contradicting underlying values. By focussing on culture at an institutional level, the dimension or subculture that actually is most important for the functioning of the academic community might be neglected. Subcultures in HEI are amongst others believed to be related to a shared belonging to the academic profession (research, teaching), discipline, type of institution or specific department within the institution (Austin, 1990; Välimaa, 1998; Lomas, 1999, Chandler, 2011).

If one considers *quality* culture to be a specific type of organisational culture (or subculture), it can be argued that a quality culture is situated in a broader organisational context, consisting of a mosaic of subcultures. Hence, in order for a quality culture to be embedded in the organisation as a whole, its basic principles should be largely shared or at least be accepted, while at the same time taking into account its convergence with other academic subcultures and their underlying values (Vettori, 2012). The European University Association (EUA) refers to quality culture as "an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and on the other hand, a structural, managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts" (EUA, 2006, p. 10). Because management strategies and systems for measuring and improving teaching and learning quality have become quite similar between and within institutions, we will emphasise the cultural/psychological element in the remainder of this paper. To this purpose, we will build on previous research on the relationship between organisational culture and effective implementation of quality management practices, and concentrate on the cultural/psychological aspects of a quality culture, as these might add to a better understanding of effective or ineffective implementation of quality management practices (Powel, 1995; Maul, Brown & Cliffe, 2001; Irani, Beskese & Love, 2002; Prajogo & McDermott, 2005).

Quest for synergy in an organisational (quality) culture model reflecting competing values

In order to be able to gain a better understanding of the broader organisational context in which a quality culture can evolve, there is a need to identify the organisations' members' values (underlying organisational (sub)cultures). A well-known and validated model to conceptualise values is Quinn and Rohrbaugh's Competing Value Framework (Cameron & Quinn, 2006). The values in the model represent two dimensions. One dimension encompasses an internal versus an external focus. The other dimension deals with control versus flexibility. Two seemingly contradictory values "can both be considered as valuable but are to a certain level incompatible or tricky to accomplish together" (Berings et al., 2011, p. 39). This is not to say that it is impossible for two opposing values to be present within an organisation. After all, an organisation's culture consists of different subcultures which favour different values. Moreover, even individuals might consider two opposing values to be equally important. Empirical research has shown that competing values are significantly associated with organisational effectiveness. Organisations have shown to be high performers in domains related to the dominant value orientation (Cameron & Freeman, 1991; Smart & St. John, 1996; Cameron & Quinn, 2006).

Berings et al. (2011) have more recently developed a conceptual model of organisational values in higher education which specifically encompasses divergent visions on care for quality. Similar to the competing values framework of Quinn, his conceptual framework consists of bipolarities which 'mirror' the values of HEI staff. The six competing organisational culture values in the model reflect the dichotomy between a Total Quality Management-paradigm characterised by 'managerialism' (innovation, collective orientation, system control) and a more traditional vision of the academic world, based on 'professionalism' (self-determination, individual specialisation, tradition).

Figure 1.
Competing values underpinning quality culture (Berings et al., 2011).
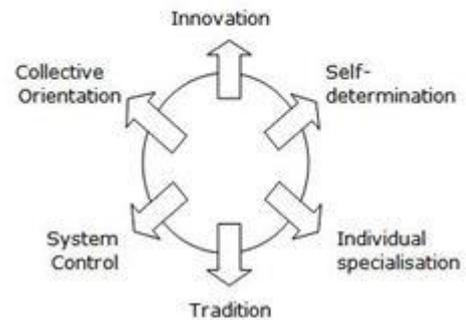
Whereas collective orientation, innovation, and system control can be considered crucial values for the implementation of an integral approach to care for quality (Berings, 2010), it is important to point out that the other organisational culture values can contribute to realisation of effective quality management practices as well. In this sense, one could say that organisational values have *varying* relationships with the effectiveness of quality management practices as opposed to *opposite* relationships (Hartnell, Yi Ou & Kinicki, 2011). Contingent upon the specific objectives, strategies and environment of a HEI, values affiliated with professionalism might prove to be equally – or perhaps even more - important for realising a quality culture than managerial values (Berings et al., 2011). There is indeed a growing belief that organisations should strive for a healthy balance between, and a mix of different values. A constructive interaction between managerialism and professionalism is acknowledged as being beneficial for the organisation (Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Kolsaker, 2008). Thinking dialectically and reflecting on paradoxical organisational values underlying a quality culture could be an important step toward realising a synergetic interaction between competing values (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Berings & Grieten, 2012).

Commitment and communication as prerequisites for quality culture

As HEI are attempting to transfer quality management approaches from an emphasis on assurance and accountability to a stronger focus on quality enhancement, staff motivation to actively contribute to care for educational quality has become of paramount importance (Rowley, 1996). Meyer and Allen (1991) argue that commitment plays an important role in determining staff behaviour in organisations. Therefore, it might be useful to take this concept into consideration when trying to shed light on the prerequisites of a quality culture in HEI. Staff commitment can have a locus on the organisation, the occupation, or both, and is most often conceptualised in a three component approach (Cooper-Hakim & Viswesvaran, 2005; Cohen, 2007). *Affective* commitment refers to the emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organisation. Staff with a high affective commitment stay in an organisation because they want to. The second component, *continuance* commitment, refers to costs associated with leaving the organisation. A high continuance commitment score indicates that staff stay in an organisation because they need to do so. Thirdly, *normative* commitment reflects a feeling of obligation to continue employment. A high degree of normative commitment indicates that staff feel that they ought to remain in the organisation (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Affective commitment has been reported to have the most favourable correlations with outcomes relevant for the organisation, such as attendance, performance and organisational citizenship behaviour (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch & Topolnytsky, 2002; Marchiori & Henkin, 2004). This specific component of commitment also seems most important in a quality culture context, since employees with high affective commitment are considered to be willing to put extra effort into their work and have a tendency to be concerned with its quality (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Like staff commitment, communication climate can be regarded as a crucial component of quality culture. I.e. in order to be able to improve quality of education, staff should both possess reliable information on quality of study programmes and be part of a communication network through which ideas on innovation and improvement can be shared (EUA, 2006). In addition, communication might be of significant importance since it is through interaction that academic staff can express their own values and are able to discover values of colleagues which might be competing (Chandler, 2011). One should note that staff often is not merely satisfied or dissatisfied with communication in general, but rather can be positive or negative about different dimensions of communication (Smidts, Pruyn & van Riel, 2001). Communication climate is a rather broad term which can refer to horizontal (interaction with colleagues at the same level in the organisation), vertical (communications up and down the hierarchy), formal and informal, and digital and verbal communication (Postmes, Tanis & de Wit, 2001).

Delineation of the quality culture concept in relation to effectiveness of quality enhancement activities

In the introduction section of this paper, it was argued that the meaning and content of the quality culture concept and the way it is related to effective quality management practices need further clarification. In this section, a framework is presented in which hypothesised relationships between the concepts described in this paper are shown (figure 2).

Empirical evidence on the relationship between organisational values and effectiveness of quality management practices in HEI is scarce, but studies conducted by Kleijnen et al., applying Quinn's' Competing Value Framework demonstrate that staff prefer values which allow for a 'flexible' approach to quality management above 'control oriented' values (Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems & van Hout, 2013). Moreover, in a large study applying his model of competing values, Berings (2001) revealed that collective orientation, self-determination and innovation were the most important determinants of effective implementation of quality management practices. Staff members who perceive quality management practices in their organisation as effective report that the present culture is characterised by open communication, strong collaboration, an external orientation, openness to criticism, reflection, and a willingness to innovate (Kleijnen, 2012).

The degree to which preferred values are being put into practice might differ across study programmes. From an internalisation perspective, a fit between perceived and preferred values is hypothesised to be a determinant of commitment (to the occupation and/or to the organisation) (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Lok & Crawford, 1999, Meyer, Hecht, Gill & Toplonytsky, 2010). Moreover, organisational values are believed to have an impact on the communication climate in the organisation (Canessa & Riolo, 2003; Brown & Starkey, 2004; Thornhill, Lewis & Saunders, 1996). Both a high degree of affective commitment and a positively experienced communication climate are considered to have a positive effect on the perceived effectiveness of quality management practices and (improved) quality of education as the final outcome of organisational processes.

Figure 2: Conceptual framework of quality culture in relation to (perceived) effectiveness of quality management practices
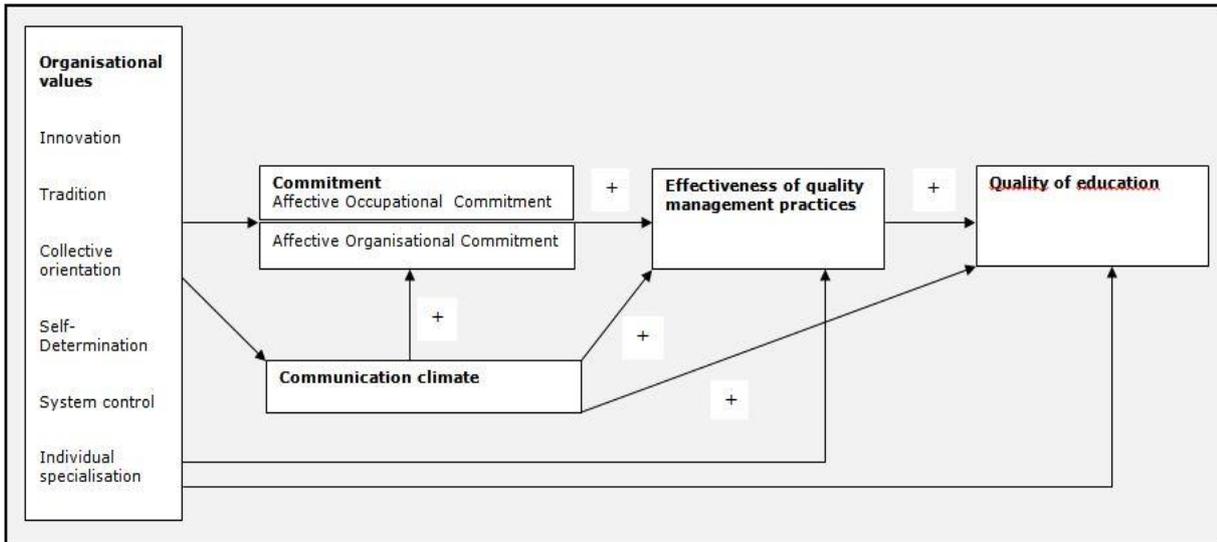
Added value of the proposed case study

In the remaining sections of this paper, we provide a general outline of a case study which will be carried-out in order to study the hypothesised relationships between the concepts as presented in the framework.

To our knowledge this is the first time that these concepts are going to be empirically studied in this constellation and in the specific setting of a university. While differences in culture between HEI and their relationship with the perceived effectiveness of quality management practices have been subject of past research, empirical data about differences in organisational values *within* institutions, and especially their relation with commitment and communication climate are lacking. The conceptual framework might provide valuable insights into the potential impact of a quality culture on commitment and communication. As the latter concepts might be considered important factors of effective quality management practices, which are easier to address and change than staff values underlying quality culture, they might provide a stepping stone for developing strategies to nurture a quality culture in study programmes in HEI.

Research questions

1)   Are there differences between study programmes in terms of perceived and preferred organisational culture values, commitment, communication climate, and the (perceived) effectiveness of quality management practices?

2)   Is there a relationship between organisational culture values, commitment, communication climate and the (perceived) effectiveness of quality management practices as determinant of quality of education?

Study design

In the case study a mixed-methods approach will be applied in the setting of a university faculty (the Maastricht University Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, FHML), which is the result of a merger in 2007 (see 'Case setting'). First, surveys among academic staff will be conducted; these surveys will be constructed based on well-validated questionnaires which have been applied in previous research. Based on the outcomes of the surveys, we will intentionally invite respondents from various study programmes to take part in an interview (staff scoring highest and lowest on 'perceived effectiveness of quality management').

Study subjects

The survey will be conducted among module coordinators of six FHML study programmes: European Public Health, Medicine, International Track in Medicine, Biomedical Sciences, Health Sciences and Physician-Clinical Investigator. Module coordinators bear final responsibility for the organisation and evaluation of a module. Beside their coordination task, they often have teaching tasks in the module. Coordinators are involved in management, quality assurance and have formal and/or informal contacts with teaching staff. This makes them suitable respondents for a survey on the relationship between quality culture and quality management practices.

Case setting

> The Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences (FHML) at Maastricht University is the result of a merger in 2007 between the former Faculty of Health Sciences and the Faculty of Medicine. In 2008, FHML and the Maastricht Academic Hospital have intensified their collaboration in the Maastricht University Medical Centre+ (UMC+) since. FHML/Maastricht UMC+ includes about 45 disciplinary departments. The Institute for Education is responsible for the educational content (quality and innovation) of study programmes provided by the faculty. It hires staff members from the departments to teach. FHML offers five Bachelor programmes and 16 Master programmes, which are organised under an umbrella of three 'educational domains': health sciences, medicine and biomedical sciences.
>
> Although FHML is a relatively young faculty, teaching staff are often affiliated to specific study programmes since many years. Since these study programmes are close to their daily working reality, the (sub)cultures within these programmes are expected to be of more significance to the staff than the culture of the organisation as a whole. As staff in the three educational domains have different disciplinary backgrounds (i.e. social sciences/health sciences, medicine, biomedical sciences), and differ in tenure in teaching, research and patient care, they are expected to be influenced by disciplinary and professional cultures as well.

Questions for discussion

1) Would you consider communication climate and commitment to be determinants or results of staff members' organisational culture values?

2) Which of the six quality culture values is the most crucial one to predict the effectiveness of quality management practices?

3) Could you give an example of quality management practices applied in your institution which are (or are not) congruent with academic staff members' organisational culture values?

Word Count: 2998

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