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Proposal

Title:

The potential impact of the internal service units on the quality culture in a higher education institution, and how to make optimal use of it.

Abstract (150 words max):

We want to explore the potential impact of the internal service units on the quality culture in a higher education institution (HEI). We will describe how the service units are involved in the external QA in Flanders and in the internal QA in our HEI, Limburg Catholic University College or LCUC. This is illustrated by a recent initiative taken at LCUC to make optimal use of the potential impact of the support units on the quality culture in our HEI: with the aim of involving the employees of the support units directly in QA, each support unit was asked to appoint a QA coach, similarly as the QA coaches in the faculties. QA coaches of support units and faculties are meeting to discuss QA in the entire HEI and to stimulate cooperation. Next we describe the outcome, some accomplishments, challenges and how we tried to answer them.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

We want to explore the potential impact of the internal support units on the quality culture in a higher education institution. We will briefly introduce the primary mission of higher education in Flanders, the importance of the support units in an organization according to the EFQM-model and the concept quality culture. Next we will describe how the support units are involved in the external QA in Flanders and in the internal QA in our HEI, Limburg Catholic University College or LCUC. The latter is illustrated by a recent initiative taken at LCUC to make optimal use of the potential impact of the support units on the quality culture in our HEI. Next we will describe some challenges we encountered and how we tried to answer them. The whole process is based on Lewin's Change Management Model in 3 phases and the Engine of innovation model by J. Staes. The paper closes with a status to date and some future perspectives.

1. Introduction:

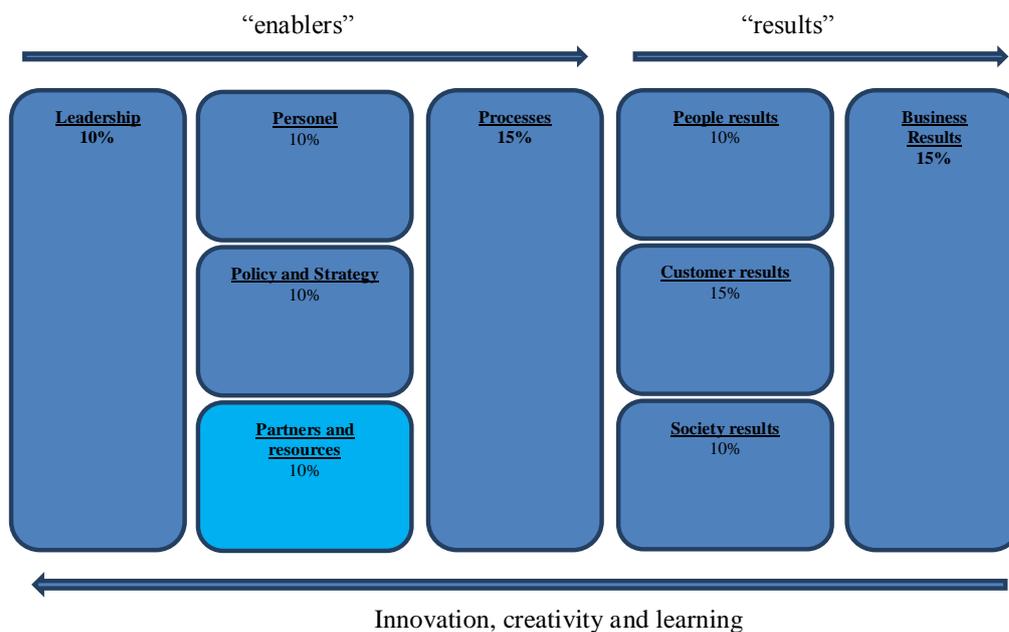
The **primary mission** of higher education in Flanders is to provide in

1. Education
2. (Applied) research
3. Services to society
4. Development of arts (in case the HEI has study programs in arts)

In our higher education institution (HEI), Limburg Catholic University College or LCUC, a number of **internal support units** such as ICT, logistics, finances, HR are centrally organized to support the faculties in achieving their primary mission. The subject of the

present paper is the question how the centrally organized support units (can) influence the quality culture in the entire HEI.

According to the **EFQM model** (see figure), the role of the support units is described mainly as part of the enabler ‘Partnerships & Resources’, which accounts for 10% of the total score. Although this may not seem that impressive, everybody will acknowledge the direct impact of e.g. a failing server, a non-paid conference invoice, an inadequate qualification or a cold classroom on the quality of teaching and learning, research, and services to society. That illustrates the impact which the support units have on the enabler ‘processes’ also.



In the present paper, however, we want to go beyond the potential direct gain of good functioning support units. The aim of the present paper is not merely to reflect on how we can create a quality culture in the entire HEI, including support units. The aim is to reflect on the potential impact of the support units on the quality culture in the entire HEI.

To avoid any misunderstanding regarding the concept of ‘**quality culture**’, we will briefly clarify how we consider as quality culture in our QA unit at LCUC. There are multiple papers discussing quality culture (e.g. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5). Recurrent interpretations are ‘sharing the same values and attitudes’, ‘working together on quality improvement’ and ‘involving all levels of the organization’. To make it concrete, when we aim for a healthy quality culture in our HEI, we aim for a HEI in which, on all levels (from bottom to top) and in all aspects (faculties and support services), all staff are motivated to contribute to structural quality improvement of the processes and products they are directly and indirectly involved with. We strongly believe that a lot of gain can be achieved when faculties and support units do not function as islands, but when they collaborate even on aspects they are not directly responsible for. We acknowledge that in times of budget cuts, this is not an easy message to



convey. Employees are confronted with an increased workload, which logically leads to the reaction to fence off their responsibility and create demarcation lines. Nevertheless, we believe that in the long run, it will pay off to invest in a collaborative approach and a collaborative organisation.

To make our point early in the paper, we believe that:

- Faculties can learn from support services because the latter have a wider focus than strictly education, research, services to society, and development of arts and therefore use unknown approaches that might inspire the QA in the faculties. They also maintain a bird eye view on things. Some examples: the support services are used to work with indicators and they are more product-oriented than process-oriented.
- Support units can learn and teach that QA is not limited to complying with legal regulations in e.g. finances, logistics or HR, but that it indirectly contributes to the primary mission of the HEI.
- Strategic goals should be actively supported by all sections of the HEI, also by the support units that have a role as enablers (see EFQM model): e.g. for internationalization, ecological sustainability by reducing water and energy consumption through sensitizing the staff and improving the infrastructure and student-centered learning.

There are multiple ways of achieving the objectives mentioned above. Good results can only be reached if and when the organisation's management supports the changes, according to the Lewin's Change Management Model (7) and the 'engine of innovation model by J.Staes (8).

The structure of a HEI - strongly centralized, decentralized or something in between – will therefore have a strong impact on the organization of QA. In order to explore the potential impact of support units on the quality culture in an HEI, we will illustrate an initiative taken at LCUC to involve support services not just at the level of the staff directors (top-down), but also at the staff level (bottom up) in QA.

2. External QA in Flanders and impact on internal QA at LCUC:

In the former accreditation system in Flanders and the Netherlands (note: we have a bi-national accreditation system), the role of the support units in the external review of the study programs was rather limited;

(http://www.nvao.net/page/downloads/Accreditatiekader_VL_1_sept_2009.pdf), e.g. the condition of classrooms, the domain specific facilities like labs, training rooms, workspaces and the library.

The new accreditation system in Flanders and the Netherlands focuses not only on the quality of individual study programs but also on the HE institution as a whole.

- Accreditation of study programs will mainly focus on teaching and learning.
- Review of the entire institution will focus on all the processes that guide and support teaching: Although the focus is still on the quality of education, external review commissions will make vertical and horizontal audit-trails in all aspects of the HEI in



order to check for consistency in policy execution and the existence of a quality culture (the assessment framework for Flanders is not yet finalized, but for a similar approach check the Dutch assessment framework:

http://www.nvao.net/page/downloads/DEFINITIEVE_KADERS_INSTELLINGSTOETS_22_november_2011_English.pdf).

The way support units will be the object of the institutional review is in part up to the institution itself (for an insight see public reports of institutional reviews in The Netherlands: http://www.nvao.net/overzicht_instellingstoets_kwaliteitszorg_nederland). The starting point for the review will be the structure of the HEI as explained by the HEI itself in a self-evaluation report. Since no HEI will deny the importance of the support units, it will most likely be part of each description of the HEI and will consequently be part of the review.

The new external review system, including the institutional review, triggered us to rethink the approach of QA at LCUC. In anticipation of the institutional review, it was decided a few years ago at LCUC that the QA unit functions for both the faculties and the support units. Since the faculties at LCUC are rather small (maximum 1000 students) the support units are traditionally strongly centralized. By sharing resources, we can install strong support units with a lot of expertise. Our support units know what is going on in the HEI and can proactively act for LCUC's benefit. The following examples show how cooperation might originally come at a cost, but eventually gains efficiency:

- 'Logistics' is a rather large support unit at LCUC, employing about 50 people. In order to keep an overview of the questions and tasks from the faculties and the other support units, they have developed an electronic ticket system. The success of this system is illustrated by the fact that other support units, such as ICT, also have adopted the electronic ticket system. ICT and Logistics are now considering how to link up and cooperate in order to fine tune the system in a way that it can automatically register interesting data such as: Type of questions/tasks, average duration before first answer, average duration before resolving the issue. This collaboration leads to the improvement of both units.
- An example of cooperation between ICT and the QA unit, with the involvement of teaching staff, is the development of an intranet system. Beside the aim to create a platform to share documents, we aimed to create an intranet system in such a way that the documentation required for internal as well as external QA is systematically documented and easily accessible.

These examples of cooperation between different support units and faculties are not unique. How promising they may sound, however, it is equally clear that they still can be improved. Additional spontaneous cooperation and innovation are usually considered less important than formal regulations and primary responsibilities. Moreover, a potential risk in a system of centralized support units is that they may become less client oriented, because they do not have to compete for clients. In times of budget cuts and ever increasing demands and administration, employees might feel the need to protect themselves, create demarcation lines and minimize spontaneous cooperation and out-of-the-box thinking.



3. How to make optimal use of the potential impact of support units on quality culture?

We agree that if common strategic goals are defined (and interpreted the same by everyone!), and each unit has been allocated sufficient resources, the HEI will be able to function and realize the common strategic goals: The heads of faculty and the staff directors are responsible for the execution of the strategic goals by adjusting the mission of their faculty or service unit in line with the strategic goals. However, reality teaches us that different interpretations of the same strategic goals can easily occur, and that unrealistic expectations or limited resources might hinder the realization of high quality processes and products in line with the strategic goals.

As mentioned in the introduction, a quality culture requires involving and the commitment of all stakeholders, a culture of open communication and access to information. A common approach to involve also the supportive units in the development and execution of strategic goals is to organize meetings with the heads of faculty and staff directors. In the initiative described below we aimed, however, to go further and involve not only the staff directors but also the (staff)members of the support units. This project was set up because we expected that the input of staff members would have a different perspective (bottom-up). Therefore this input is valuable in creating a good environment for innovative approaches.

Thus, as with the faculties, which are all represented by a QA coach, we asked the support units to similarly appoint a representative among their staff members, also to function as a QA coach. Criteria for selection are: not being the head of the unit and mandatory interest in quality assurance.

Our ambition is to meet up with each support unit (staff director and QA coach) three times a year, to discuss their quality action plan at the start of the year, to evaluate improvement processes in the middle of the year and to evaluate improvement results at the end of the year. The entire group of QA coaches (faculties and support units) meets a few times a year to provide insights in QA and learn from each other. The goal is to create a platform for discussing quality assurance on all the different levels (top and bottom) and address all the different aspects (primary and supportive) of the HEI.

4. Challenges encountered with implementing the QA coaches for support units

During the academic year 2012-2013, we organized three meetings with all the QA coaches of faculties and supportive units, according to the Lewin's Change Management Model (7), to unfreeze, change and refreeze the attitude of the supportive units towards quality assurance. In order to evaluate our approach. After each meeting we consulted informally with QA coaches, heads of faculty and staff directors and looked into their experiences. Between the second and the third meeting we visited each of the support units and faculties to explain our vision and check the ambitions of QA coaches and their managers. After the third meeting, the QA unit was invited in a directors' meeting where heads of faculty and staff directors assemble, to explain the approach and accomplishments:



- An introduction of basic QA terminology for QA coaches of the support units.
- A growing sense of the importance of QA in support units at the level of employees and motivation to plan actions on QA, like a satisfaction survey.
- Some exercises to stimulate out-of-the-box thinking and cooperation with other support units and faculties.

Although we were pleased to experience great cooperation to our initiative of both the staff directors as most of the new QA coaches, we are not blind for the challenges:

1. An important aspect of the creation of a quality culture is the use of a shared language. Therefore we initially organized the entire meeting with the coaches QA together (faculties and support units). This proved to be too ambitious an approach. The coaches from the faculties are more experienced in QA and have a different focus. A considerable part of the meeting was either not relevant nor understandable for the QA coaches of the support units.

In order to answer this critique, we organized the group meetings as follows : The first hour we meet with the QA coaches for teaching and discuss matters that are relevant for them only. In the second hour, the QA coaches of the service units join the meeting. We then discuss issues that are relevant for both groups. And in the third hour, the QA coaches of the faculties leave and we provide a training on QA for the QA coaches of the support units.

2. The culture to make all staff partners in QA is not present in each unit: In some units staff members have a merely executing task profile and they are not familiar with participating in the quality improvement of work processes and services. We are convinced that most employees are trying to do the best job possible. However, it takes time to develop a culture in which critical, constructive thinking about oneself and others is present, and further discussing about one's working habits with a colleague.

We do not want anyone to feel forced to be a QA coach. We have to admit, that it was difficult to find volunteers in some service units (see also challenge 4). Beside this, we are careful to discuss the right topic at the right level. Although we want to involve the QA coach in improving the HEI, we should not have the ambition to solve problems that can only be solved at the management level of the heads of faculty and the staff directors.

3. Risk of creating a forum to ventilate frustrations.

It should be guarded well that the meeting keeps focusing on securing quality and quality improvement as a job in which we work together and not blame each other. Inspired by the 'appreciative inquiry' method(6) we try to create a positive vibe with everybody.

4. A QA coach from executing staff often shows a misconception of the task at hand: Some have the idea that they are the ones that need to tell colleagues how to improve their work, and feel uncomfortable with it.

We explain that the coach is not the one pointing out what is wrong and telling everybody how to do it better. The QA coach is the one that puts QA on the agenda during meetings and informs colleagues on how to systematically work on QA. On the other hand, some people kept feeling forced and felt uncomfortable in the position of QA coach. The QA coach seems to be a person engaging the role of the experienced and trusted colleague.

5. Support units do not have a budget to invest in a QA coach

It is hard for a small support unit with a heavy task load, to invest time in a QA coach. We explained that our expectations about the QA coach are adapted to the possibilities and budget within each support unit. And we also explained that a good QA system can provide significant time savings.

5. Status to date and future perspectives

The first (informal) evaluation results are amazing: the QA coaches are even better motivated than the service directors to participate in the development of a HEI quality culture.

In general the service directors explicitly asked for more attention and support from the QA unit in organizing systematic QA within their unit. On the other hand, it was proposed that the joint meeting of QA faculty coaches with those of the support units should be put on hold. This suggestion was mainly made because of the merger operations that have been started up in which our HEI is to merge with two other HEIs. Furthermore, it was unexpectedly decided to speed up the start of the merger, with its first concrete implications in the academic year 2013-2014. We are happy to notice that our partner HEIs in the merger are also looking forward to involve the new, shared, service units in the QA system of the new HEI.

The ambition for next year is to stimulate each faculty and supportive unit to put QA explicitly on the agenda in their internal meetings, but also in their meetings with other faculties and support units. In the faculties this task is the shared responsibility of the head of faculty and the QA coach. In the support units, this will mostly fall to the responsibility of the staff directors (mainly because of challenge 4 and 5), whereas some support units will continue with a QA coach. The QA unit will continue to stimulate the awareness of collaborative QA on all levels and within all aspects of the HEI. This can be done during the training and hands-on support within the faculties and support units, during the meeting with the QA coaches of the faculties, during meetings with heads of faculty and staff directors. Beside all this, it is still the ambition of the QA unit to meet with representatives of the support units to exchange good practices and learn from each other.



References:

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4. <http://www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/quality-assurance/projects/eqc/>
5. http://www.eua.be/Libraries/EQAF_2012/Vandervelden_Indesteege.sflb.ashx
6. <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>
7. <http://www.change-management-consultant.com/kurt-lewin.html>
8. <http://www.eoiacademy.com/>

Questions for discussion:

- How are the support units involved in the QA in your HEI?
- Is it sufficient, and thus more efficient, to involve support units merely on the management level?
- How to cope with QA in decentralized organizations that buy services on the private market?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 7 October 2013 to Ivana Juraga (Ivana.Juraga@eua.be). Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.