

Quality Cultures and Institutional Barriers to ESG1 implementation

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Two key projects

- **Project DEEP** (Documenting Effective Education Practice), working through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) Institute, examined the working practices of twenty universities across the USA and published its findings in 2004. Using student engagement as a proxy definition for quality the project sought to identify the valuable working practices that differentiated high-performing institutions. The project's final report identified four conditions that seemed to be particularly important: leadership, partnership between academic and student affairs personnel, student agency and the contribution of highly-committed individuals who, regardless of their formal role, play a significant contribution to the prevailing culture at their institution.
- **The EUA Quality Culture Project** had three phases from 2002-2006 and involved the participation of 134 institutions from 36 European Countries. During the three phases of the project participating institutions were grouped into networks that each worked on a specific theme. The themes included in the project were broader than the scope of this study and included research management and research and industry partnerships, the role of women in universities, student support services, implementation of Bologna and programme evaluations. Reports from the project are available at: <http://www.eua.be/quality-assurance/quality-culture-project/>

Definitions of quality cultures

“Quality culture refers to 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.” (Sursock, 2006)

"Quality culture is the guarantee of good quality" (Bollaert, 2014)

Why should we care about culture(s)?

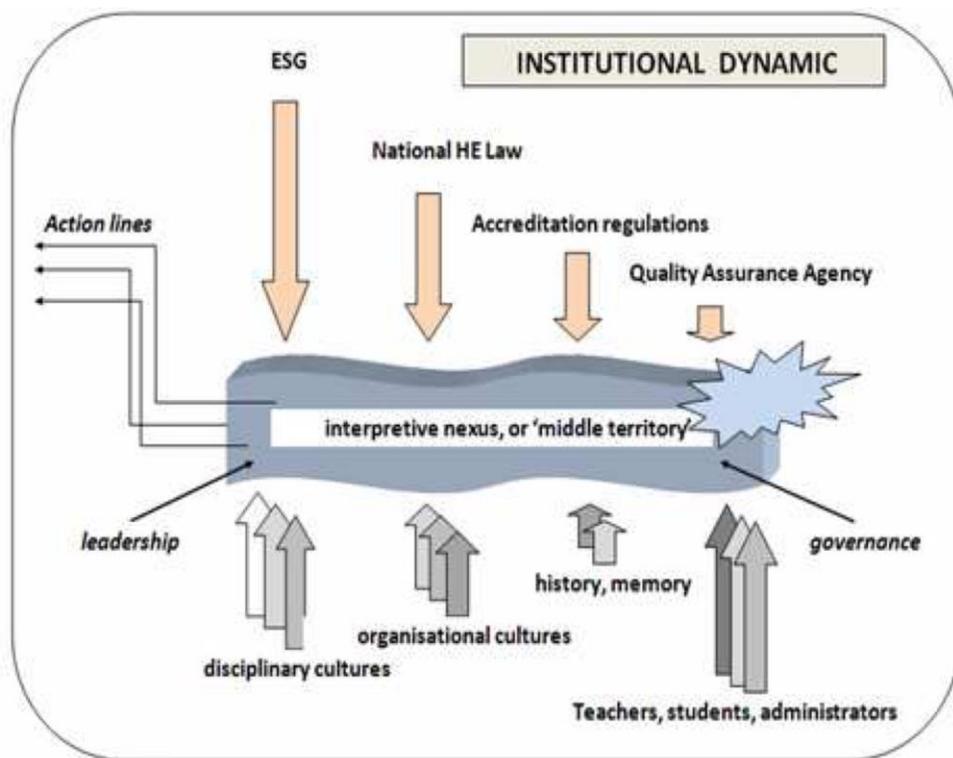


Fig.1 The 'middle territory' or interpretive nexus

EACEA IBAR Project: <http://www.ibar-llp.eu/project.html>

Exercise 1

If you described a university culture in which educational quality could thrive, what characteristics would you identify?

SHEEC/QAA Scotland Project

The international case studies collected for the 2009 project* span a spectrum of intentions which can be captured as an affirmative, experimental/developmental, or transformative framework. Whichever strategy is favoured common denominators include:

- engagement of stakeholders
- active commitment from leaders
- good communication and willingness to listen to feedback
- thoughtful use of evidence
- freedom to experiment
- clarity of purpose
- specialist support
- honouring success
- sharing and reflecting on experiences

*email c.owen.1@research.gla.ac.uk for the final report

Problematizing issues 1

- No one would ever publicly admit to *not* having a culture of quality
- If culture is owned collectively across the university, who do you ask about how the culture works?
- Is culture measurable in any meaningful sense?
- Can you "change" or enhance something that is tacit, hidden, unmeasurable?
- Can you measure "talent", "commitment", "atmosphere"?

Exercise 2

What evidence would you use to demonstrate a culture of quality in your institution?

Problematizing issues 2

- One culture or many cultures?
- Stable culture or emergent culture?
- Dialectics of organisational culture(s) and quality cultures
- Whose culture is the "right" culture?
- At what level does culture operate? National, regional, institutional, disciplinary, departmental, teaching group, individual...
- Alignment and creative tension
- Work *with* "the culture" or change culture?

Redefining institutional cultures 1

At the **University of Aveiro** in Portugal, staff and students have been supported to develop a new way of thinking about learning in response to the challenges posed by Bologna. Teaching activities have been re-designed to offer opportunities for dialogue and students are invited to use drop-in boxes placed in labs and tutorial spaces to pose questions about their learning. The university has encouraged staff to re-think their role as one of facilitator rather than transmitter of knowledge. Careful management of this change process has included piloting in a single department and an exploratory and non-threatening action-research-based evaluation before full roll-out across the institution.

Redefining institutional cultures 2

At the **University of Strathclyde**, in Scotland an institution-wide campaign *Feedback is a Dialogue* has provided students and staff with information about ways to use feedback effectively. The aim of this campaign is to encourage staff and students to think differently about how they provide and use feedback and to equip students with information that helps them to develop a more active role in the learning process. Students across the institution are being encouraged to recognise a wide range of resources and experiences as feedback and to actively seek feedback from their peers and from teachers. Staff members are being supported with resources to help them provide feedback more effectively. This campaign is one part of a broader strategic programme which aims to encourage students to develop the skills they need to become independent learners. The principles of assessment informing the campaign have been embedded into university policy and are currently informing proposed enhancements of the university's curriculum approval and review processes.

Redefining institutional cultures 3

At the **University of Alicante** in Spain, students are actively involvement in staff development activities through the university's Novice and Expert Teaching Development Programme. This programme brings together students, novice teachers and expert teaching staff (co-ordinated by a facilitator from the educational development unit) to work together on a project. Common project topics include curriculum design, learning materials development or new assessment techniques. The aim is to co-ordinate the career development of both novice and expert teachers in a single activity (supporting new teachers to learn from established teachers but also presenting experienced teachers with new ideas and opportunities to revise practice) and to use student experiences and opinions as a means to improve teaching. This programme contributes to the development of a teaching culture at the University of Alicante, but has also been extended to five other universities in the region and offers opportunities for inter-university collaboration.

Problematizing issues 3

- What is the relationship between action/process and belief?
- Does participating in practice change beliefs/cultures?
- Do educational projects and innovations change quality cultures?
- Does dialogue/collaboration across universities dilute or enhance institutional culture?
- Is dilution of entrenched cultures sometimes helpful?
- Do external agencies determine cultures of quality?

Exercise 3

What can/should national quality agencies do to influence university cultures?

Some concluding thoughts

- Is a focus/commitment to developing quality cultures compatible with budget cuts and efficiency drives?
- What is the difference between individual teachers' commitment to quality provision and communal quality culture(s)?
- What is the relationship between university profile/mission and its culture?
- How does the national or legislative culture influence practice?
- How do we learn to do better?
- Who is "we"?

A final notion: beyond culture

"What we do and want to do depends on who we are with and who we are in biographical terms" (Maclean and Mackintosh, 2012)

Understanding, commitment, practice, action is *situated*.

Referent groups are important. And they are temporal. Action is therefore emergent.