No short cuts in Quality Assurance –
Theses from a sense-making perspective

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Abstract

This paper argues that one of the key problems in designing/implementing an institutional QA system is rooted in the underlying assumption of rationally functioning organizations that can likewise be rationally managed and controlled. What is often neglected is the dynamic and self-referential character of organisational developments and the interpretive autonomy of the involved actors. Emanating from ideas of Karl Weick and similar organisation theorists and based on the authors' practical experiences with developing an institutional quality culture over a period of six years, the paper puts three alternative theses for discussion: that learning from others has its limits, that a successful QA system is not built for the organisation, but *from* the organisation and that it is not enough to 'involve' stakeholders or 'let them participate': if teachers, students etc. shall see themselves as a part of a certain quality culture they have to be assisted in their sense-making efforts.

Quality Assurance may no longer be a challenged issue, but as a concept it is still facing some considerable challenges: the active involvement of key stakeholders (in a way that they actually feel involved, cf. ESU 2010), the avoidance of pure top down approaches (e.g. EUA 2006) and the establishment of holistic institutional systems are only a selection of the continuously discussed items on the 'To Do'-list of the QA profession. And indeed, the practical realisation of these ideas seems to suffer from some inherent contradictions: Stensaker (2008: 6), for example, states that "although staff involvement is, in principle, encouraged, what is often meant is involvement that supports the external agenda and not the perceived problems of those working in the institutions." Waugh (1998) suggests that any kind of strategic planning is essentially a top down process where many members of the organization and its broader community can be involved in process, but the leadership is responsible for defining the parameters of the discussion; yet involvement does not equal engagement. And Houston et al. (2008:222) found in their research that while there was broad agreement among the key actors that quality was a concern, "there was little agreement about what exactly the issues are or how they should be resolved".

The resulting and growing need for practical orientation seems to be met with an equally growing number of quality assurance guidelines, benchmarking initiatives and best practice exchanges which suggest a linear learning process, where ideas and models can be imitated or imported from successful pioneers and the experiences of others help to avoid costly mistakes. Nevertheless, such efforts

seldom work as intended, with key stakeholders still feeling left out, considering the formal QA system a threat to their own well-established quality culture and with QA routines becoming a merely bureaucratic shadow of their idealistic original design.

From our perspective, one of the reasons for such problems is rooted in the underlying assumptions of rationally functioning organizations that can be equally rationally managed and controlled. What is often neglected in the relevant quality assurance discourse is the dynamic and self-referential character of organisational developments and the interpretive autonomy of the involved actors. In our own case, for example, neither the establishment of a QA Board that involved all internal actor groups nor the introduction of a wide-spread network of academic quality promoters were able to ensure that a) most members of the university were aware of the most recent QA initiatives and b) would interpret those initiatives in the supposedly benevolent and improvement-oriented way they were intended to be. It was only through a continuous (and mostly informal) exchange and dialogue with various university members that the awareness level was raised – and a lot of the original initiatives could either be changed for the better or jointly repositioned (not every project has to be sold as a major improvement for *all* parties). In this paper we will thus try to take a different perspective to such experiences by reinterpreting some of the difficulties described above as a problem of organisational sense-making. Starting with a brief survey of the ideas of Karl Weick and similar organisation theorists we will then present three theses on potential 'developmental blockers' that are in equal parts derived from on theoretical considerations and our practical experiences in developing an institutional quality culture over a period of six years.

The dynamics of organisational sense-making

Despite an observable tendency of international higher education institutions towards Taylorism (Parker 2007) owed to a mechanistic understanding of organisations (cf. Morgan 1986), quality assurance systems do not work like machines, where solutions to problems are created in an automated way, but can rather be compared with von Foerster's 'non-trivial' machines (Foerster 1984): quality assurance systems are complex and dynamic social entities, whose structures are partly intransparent (e.g. patterns of actions in actual teaching-learning-interactions), and in which different actors (university managers, teachers, students, administrators etc.) pursue different interests. In his works, Newton (2007, 2002, 2000) has frequently pointed out that quality cannot be conceived through formal definitions alone, yet "is also crucially contingent on how it is used and experienced in practice, by academics and others who are impacted upon by quality assurance arrangements" (Newton 2007: 16). In this regard, "the process of development and implementation quality policy becomes changed, even subverted (ibid. p. 20)". As one consequence, processes

permanently deviate from the original plans and intentions and blaze their own trails (cf., among others, Weick 1979, Dörner 1991, Luhmann 2000, Ortmann 2003, 2004).

This dynamics can be related to several factors:

a) Organisations rely on communication, yet not as a mechanism for sending information as in the Shannon-Weaver-Model (1949) but as a process for generating and sharing meaning. In this respect, the chosen information is not simply transferred and reaches the recipients as intended, but has to be actively reconstructed by the communication's participants. Due to the plurivalency of language and action, this requires an active interpretive act on behalf of the actors, where those, who want to convey an information depend on the others' reactions in order to realise what kind of sense they are making of the information. This is mirrored in Weick's observation "How can I know what I think, until I see what I say?" (1979, p. 207). From this perspective, communication is a process where change is inherent, including the change of meaning(s) in daily interactions. Controlling and managing how a (communicative) act – such as a new QA guideline - is received and perceived becomes almost impossible.

b) Following the premises of Symbolic Interactionism, actors interact with each other (and towards other entities) on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to them. These meanings emerge from social interactions and are handled in and modified through dynamic interpretative processes (cf. Blumer 1969). On the other hand, any interpretation of a current situation is based on a retrospective assessment of previous experiences and is not just an individual achievement, but rather embedded in collective processes of negotiation. The introduction of a new evaluation routine, for example, cannot be detached from the actors' sense-making patterns that were established and structured by the handling of previous evaluations (or similar processes). It certainly stands to reason that the resulting perspectives are not homogeneous, but can differ with regard to an actor's role, position, experiences and expectations. Though we tend to neglect it in the more abstract professional discourse, the establishment of an information system as foreseen in the ENQA Standards & Guidelines (ENQA 2009) holds different meanings and functions for university managers than it does for students, teachers, administrators or future employers. This does not only manifest itself in different ideas on how such a system should be designed, but also how the data are used or what attributions are made to the system as such – ranging from a helpful tool to a symbol of dominance and control. On the discourse level, a dismissive or even more negative reaction towards new QA elements can therefore be discarded as irrational – yet on the practical level it is still a valid and relevant reality to be dealt with.

c) Actions (and decisions) in everyday life are seldom isolated, but rather integrated in more complex (inter)action sequences. Particularly in

cooperative organisational settings, the consequences of actions and decisions are often intertwined with the actions and decisions of others (cf. Weick's concept of 'mutual equivalence structures', Weick 1979). As a consequence, actors rarely have control over the effects of their actions. This can result in the emergence of action patterns which are largely decoupled from the actors' intentions. A teaching award intended for encouraging innovative course designs, for example, can in the medium-term well have the opposite effect by inducing teachers to adapt their designs to the established (and thus standardising) award criteria. Controlling a developmental process in advance (something that is not far from the suggestions of most QA model cookbooks), becomes an almost impossible endeavour: it is rather in retrospect that most actions reveal their intended and un-intended effects and start to make sense – an observation that gets far too little attention in most projects and implementation processes.

Three theses from a sense-making perspective

Summing up, a QA system that is designed on the assumption that strategies and procedures can be rationally and linearly planned and implemented might soon face some considerable difficulties, as the actions within the institution do not necessarily follow the system's rationale but are rather situatively defined and oriented at a variety of sense-making patterns that may well differ from those of the system's architects. We therefore propose a change of perspectives that may challenge a few of our fonder assumptions about how QA systems should be developed and implemented. Based on the theoretical ideas introduced in the first part and our own experiences from developing an institutional quality culture over the past six years, we will formulate three theses, of how this sense-making approach can be put to practice. It is notable though that the theses can only be roughly sketched in the scope of this paper. Consequently, they should not be read as instructions or guidelines, but as an opportunity to put our current strategies into question and maybe come up with suitable alternatives:

These one: There can be no short-cuts in Quality Assurance – learning from others has its limits.

In our perspective, the troubles of implementing certain QA procedures do not necessarily begin with the implementation process itself but can often be related to another preceding assumption: that we can rationally learn from the experiences of others and that what has worked elsewhere will also work in our own institution. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) have suggested that such mimetic isomorphism results from standard responses to uncertainty and that "organizations tend to model themselves after similar organizations in their field that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful" (DiMaggio & Powell 1983: 152). And indeed, evidence suggests that the field of higher education is no exception here (e.g. Stensaker & Norgard 2001).

However, the import of successful models can have severe drawbacks. Stripped of their immediate developmental contexts and specific institutional conditions, they create and carry different meanings than in the quality culture they originally emerged from: As our own experience shows, academic quality promoters, for example, can be of valuable support for focussing activities and initiating new projects in academic units with a high level of enthusiasm for teaching or in search of new communications structures. Transferred into (and externally imposed onto) other units with different conditions, the same concept can be met with great reluctance or even hostility, interpreting the promoters as adding to the bureaucracy or as the management's extended arm. Observances on the field level suggest that even EUA's quality culture concept is experiencing a departure from its original normative ideal in the context of its dissemination process, marking a shift of the quality culture notion towards a more functionalist meaning where quality culture is about the development of, and compliance with, processes of internal quality assurance (Harvey 2009). Small wonder, then, that the term *quality assurance culture* is already surfacing (European Commission 2009).

In our view such limits in transferring a successful idea or model are closely related to the limits of imitative learning as it disregards the historical dimension of any institutional quality culture (cf. Vettori et al. 2007) - and the re-interpretation of new ideas against the background of this culture. If we take this seriously, that would rather call for a policy of small steps than jumping over whole developmental stages.

These two: A successful QA system is not built *for* the organisation, but *from* the organisation.

Although it seems widely agreed that a QA system is never built from scratch, the usual implementation process is a linear one: new tools and procedures are developed and the organisation has to adapt to them. And usually the organisation *does* adapt though not always in the intended way: experiences with one of the most popular and wide-spread tools, student evaluations of teaching, show that improved results do not necessarily equal 'better' teaching or learning and that the long-term effects can even be counterproductive (e.g. Hundt 2000, Taut & Brauns 2003, Frey 2007, Lueger 2010). This is not to say that evaluations cannot be valuable instruments for various purposes, on the contrary; yet the way they are working may not always fit to the original design idea.

We are therefore proposing a different take on the implementation of QA procedures and standards: Instead of translating external standards to internal processes and procedures (assuming that all organisational actors will understand their rationality in the same way), it might be more fruitful to explore practices and activities that are already successfully applied within the institution and translate them into the more formal and standardised language of the QA profession, i.e. 'making sense of them' within different interpretive frames. Most

HEIs, for example, have a number of different feedback forms for students at their disposal (e.g. focus groups, sounding boards, fast feedback variants) which can be of equal value as standardised questionnaires (presuming that the main purpose of such instruments is not the production of comparable numbers). And the alumni networks of different university departments will often provide more informative insights into the graduates' post-university experiences than a quantitative alumni survey (though almost no one would count them among the official QA repertoire). To put it into perspective: It is not our intention to discard the value of additional surveys, questionnaires, process analyses (which fulfil several important functions), but to advocate a different starting point by taking stock of those practices that already carry meaning (or make sense) to the actors in the organisation and carefully develop them and adapt them to necessary external requirements. In our view, such an approach would even be compatible with convergence projects such as the European Standards and Guidelines – as long as they are not taken as a literal checklist for assessing whether all solutions look the same.

These three: It is not enough to 'involve' stakeholders or 'let them participate' – if they should see themselves as a part of a certain quality culture they have to be assisted in their sense-making.

Involving different stakeholders is one of the key requirements of any QA system. Yet in many cases the modes of involvement follow a similar pattern where a few stakeholder representatives are appointed to formal bodies and committees and the rest is cordially invited (or obliged) to participate in various activities, mostly in providing evaluation data or other documentation. The activities themselves are usually elsewhere defined. It is thus not very surprising that these stakeholders feel little inclined to claim ownership for the QA framework – or even perceive it as such. In our own university we were initially rather astounded to find that even a couple of years since the first QA framework was established, our students were neither knowing about it nor showing much trust in the university's efforts – all despite the fact that they were (at least conceptually) involved in various ways. After a while we realised that even after participating in an evaluation, focus group or program development project, most students were still not interpreting that as a quality-related activity, partly because they knew too little about the context and the underlying processes and partly because they had a completely different interpretive pattern of what quality assurance would and should be.

It is our persuasion that these different perceptions and sense-making patterns are not necessarily a problem but have to be taken into consideration. If different actors shall be regarded (and regard themselves) as an active part of an institutional quality culture, they need to be enabled (structurally and interpretively) to develop their own initiatives. From such a perspective, the QA framework itself does not need to define and regulate every specific procedure but assist the various actors in their sense-making. Following Weick, any framework can be potentially successful as long as it fulfils the following

functions: „1. Gets people into action; 2. Gives people a direction (through values or whatever); 3. Supplies legitimate explanations that are energizing and enable actions to be repeated" (Weick 2000: 163). Here, concepts or guidelines are not being regarded as normative parameters but as a means for supporting the actors' learning process.

Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to analyse some of the more common issues and difficulties in designing and implementing a QA system from a sense-making perspective. Following some concepts of modern organisation theory we have proposed that some of these difficulties might be grounded in a general rationalisation of organisational processes and actions, disregarding that they are usually interpreted in various ways. In this respect, it might be necessary to critically reflect on some of our underlying assumptions of how QA systems should be developed and what role different actors might/could play in such endeavours – always aware of the fact that the emergence of meaning(s) within an organisation cannot be controlled at the outset but will only be visible with the benefit of hindsight. Or to conclude with the words of Karl Weick himself (2000: 158): "People use labels to organize and make sense retrospectively of what they have been doing. They use labels to demonstrate accountability and acceptable practice to others. To portray quality as a problem to be managed can, if taken seriously, set in motion the very forces that preclude its realization."

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Questions for Discussion (suggestions)

- How can an institutional QA system allow for/include the differing perspectives and interpretive patterns of its internal and external stakeholder groups?

- How can the different stakeholders be assisted in their QA-related sense-making?

- What is the role of standards and guidelines within such a perspective?