

Tracking the development of a Quality Culture Is the discourse translated into action?

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Abstract

The notion of Quality Culture (QC) is raising growing interest. This is not surprising as a QC can take into account the diversity of contexts and leaves space for diverse and creative ways to give concrete expression to Quality. It is also a sound approach for obtaining real effects. QC is seen as a sub-culture of the organisational culture and, as such, is based on values. The main challenge is therefore the translation of values into practice in the daily life of the institution. Increasing the impact of QA mechanisms requires observation of the development of the QC. The central question of this paper concerns identifying ways of observing and monitoring this development. The literature on organisational culture has been used to develop a simple grid to observe the evolution of a QC. The use of this grid is illustrated with examples drawn from our own University.

Introduction

“If you want to change the culture, you must **BE** the culture you want to see”. This paraphrase of Ghandi’s famous quote expresses one of the main challenges regarding the development of a Quality Culture in higher education, namely the need to behave in coherence with values.

The concept of Quality Culture, which was formulated as a reaction to bureaucratic approaches to Quality is usually given a relatively warm welcome. Indeed, the development of a Quality Culture is a very relevant alternative to normative approaches not only because it favours real changes, but also because it can take into account the diversity of contexts and leave space for creativity, offering opportunities to create new ways of giving concrete expression to Quality. However, to become a relevant and efficient alternative, the development of a Quality Culture requires that Quality be not only a discourse, but also that it be concretised in real acts, reflecting a change in the system of values.

As with any cultural change, the development of a Quality Culture is a long-term process and the result of various interactions (Schein 1990) and of a combined effect of top-down and bottom-up processes. In order to strengthen and support this evolutionary process, it is necessary to observe and in some way monitor the establishment of the Quality Culture. This would help to evaluate the path covered and determine which specific effort is required for further development.

However, very few papers are devoted to identifying the relevant “measures” to observe this development or have described such evolutions. Since this is a critical issue for each institution, it seems interesting and useful to develop tools to “track” the establishment of the Quality Culture.

It is the aim of this paper to propose a framework for observing this evolution, in order to answer the following basic question: “What progress have we made in the

establishment of a Quality Culture?" This framework should above all help university governance . However, it should be research-based and that is why the paper will contain a short review of the literature on these issues, more focused on organisational culture than Quality Culture, because of the limited number of specific papers. In the first part of the paper a short summary of the notion of Quality Culture is presented to provide the background for this framework and to allow more explicit subsequent choices to be made. The third part of the paper contains a proposal to observe the development of a Quality Culture, illustrated by the case of the University of Lausanne.

1. Quality Assurance and Quality Culture

The development of Quality Assurance (QA) mechanisms in Higher Education is an integral component of the Bologna process and has become a high priority in many European institutions. Two main issues follow from this will to include quality on the agenda of the construction of the European Higher Education Area: one is to create or adapt a quality system compatible or in line with international standards and the other is to integrate the system into the Higher Education Institution (HEI) concerned. Thanks to the European Standards and Guidelines, institutions now have a framework within which to create methodologically sound quality systems, but the literature shows that this first condition is not necessarily sufficient to increase quality. Indeed, several research studies suggest that some quality processes have had no real effects on the quality of teaching, research or other activities, at least not in the measure expected (e.g. Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001; Newton, 2002). Standard certification procedures do not always result in the improvement of services (e.g. Staines, 2007). Moreover, there are frequent complaints about QA (e.g. Jones and Darshi de Saram 2005, Goodlad 1995, Harvey 2002), suggesting that adherence also has to be deepened.

To overcome this lack of integration of Quality in institutions, the concept of Quality Culture has emerged. In higher education, the notion of Quality Culture has been put forward in a consistent manner by the European University Association (EUA) and has been "*chosen to convey a notion of quality as a shared value and a collective responsibility for all members of an institution, including students and administrative staff*" (EUA, 2006 p6).

The expression "Quality Culture" is nowadays quite fashionable and can be found in numerous publications and even regulations. The expression is appealing because it seems to give some form of human touch to a word associated with cold notions such as control, assurance or industrial processes. But this honeymoon may cease if it remains at the level of discourse only.. To understand how a Quality Culture can give real results, a detour via a more detailed analysis of this concept may be useful.

In the author's understanding (Lanarès 2008), the expression "Quality Culture" can have two meanings. The first of these implies that "Quality" is an organisational priority and one of the values of the organisational culture. In the second understanding, Quality Culture is seen as a subculture of the organisational culture and is underpinned by several values.

There seems to be general agreement that there can be no agreement on a unique definition of quality (Harvey, 2006). The expression "Quality Culture" itself therefore remains quite unspecific, because it is tied to implicit or explicit definitions of quality. In reality, "quality" as a value incorporates and integrates other qualities or values, such as reflexivity, communication or participation (EUA, 2006). Therefore it seems

that Quality is always associated with several values and can be considered as a sub-culture of the institution's own organisational culture.

There is no universally accepted definition of organisational culture, but as a short definition Brennan and Shah (2000) underline three dimensions generally agreed among researchers: "Culture embraces both values, attitudes and behaviours" (ibid. p341). Since attitudes and behaviours are based on values (Bontis 2006, Hofstede 2001, Klenke 2005, Kowalkiewicz 2007, Schein 1990, Sundrum 2004), we like to see the values as the basic foundations, the heart of the culture.

Different set of values will lead to different Quality Cultures. They will differ by what is more valued: control or development?; specialisation of some people involved in quality or ownership by the greatest number of people?; conformity or adaptation?; etc. For instance, in some HEIs, quality processes are managed by quality specialists who try to control the conformity of processes, whereas in others, ownership by the largest majority and creativity are stressed. Both kinds of institutions have a Quality Culture, but it is not the same Quality Culture. For instance, Kolkiewicz (2007) and Harvey & Stensaker (2008) give examples of different subcultures.

Therefore, developing a Quality Culture implies cultural change. This is necessary in order to reach a situation where there is broad sharing of ways of thinking and acting about quality and associated values. It means a new way of doing things, but also a new understanding of these actions.. Since values are beliefs, in the sense that it is difficult to demonstrate their superiority, changing the prevailing culture implies conviction-building, the goal being to increase the sense of identification with the values (Kotter & Cohen, 2002)

The next step is making sure that the values are translated in both the concept and the practice of the quality system. However, there is not always a perfect match between declared values and the other latent values which really influence behaviour and decisions (Hofstede 2001). Therefore, a critical question that should be asked, even if it appears naïve, is how do we prove to others and to ourselves that these values are a priority for us? On which basis are people from both inside and outside the organisation able to identify these values as priorities? Of course several decisions and actions can be based on a single value and this is one of the aspects of processes where diversity and creativity can come into play.

2. Measuring the development of a Quality Culture

Our goal is to find ways to "track" the development of the Quality Culture, without aiming at finding absolute or universal measures of culture. Our results will have to be contextualised to each specific institution.

Since Quality Culture can be seen as an organisational subculture, one option is to explore more globally how organisational culture is "measured". However, if it is important and useful to observe the development of a Quality Culture, it must be acknowledged that this cannot be a straightforward process. The development of a Quality Culture is a complex process in the sense that several variables are involved in interaction. Therefore, it is difficult to identify clear causal relations in quality matters (Stensaker 2008, Newton 2002). Moreover, choices of measures are determined by definitions of quality, approaches to organisational culture and other considerations (Scott 2003).

In our review of the literature, we looked for three kinds of information: what levels of observation?, what kind of measures?, what methods to measure?

Levels of observation

Some authors have proposed to analyse organizational cultures at several levels. For instance, Schein (1984) suggests three levels. The first, which is most visible, is constituted with *Visible Artifacts and Creations* (e.g. constructed environment of the organisation, office layout, dress code, public communication). Considering that, at this level, data are easy to observe but are often not decipherable, he suggests a deeper layer (deeper in the sense of "more hidden") which contains the *values* governing behaviours. But since there can be a discrepancy between manifest or espoused values, he puts forward a third and deeper level, namely *Basic Assumptions* (underlying □ more or less unconscious □ beliefs about how things really are; e.g. the nature of human nature or activity, relationship to environment). Cooke and Lafferty (1989) interested in "Culture Disconnection" consider that bringing organisational structures, systems technologies and skills/qualities into alignment with the organisation's values, mission and philosophy will reduce the gap (or disconnection). They suggest analysing the outcomes of this new congruence at individual, group and organisational levels. These two examples illustrate two basic differentiations. One concerns the depth of the process, the other the generalisation of the process among actors of the institution.

What is measured?

Our analysis of the literature reveals that most studies rely on what people say about their values or actions (e.g. Cook and Lafferty 1989/2003, Koslowsky & Stashevsky 2005, Koufteros et al 2007, Kovalkiewicz 2007, Meglino et al 1989, Waldman et al 2006, Javidan et al 2006). To some authors, "espoused" values can be good measures of organisational cultures (Javidan et al 2006).

At a behavioural level, several studies show the link between values and choices (Javidan et al 2006, Koufteros 2007, Waldman et al 2006). Therefore, decisions could be good indicators of the culture. Innovations represent a specific case of decision and action and seem to be related to cultures (Jaskyte 2004). Some authors (Skerlavaj et al 2007) analyse information interpretation, specific behavioural and cognitive change (for instance, adaptability to environmental pressures, employees' level of understanding of major problems in the company). In some studies, the authors look for behaviours coherent with the culture (Lomas 2004, Gordon 2002, Yorke 2000) but how this congruence is observed remains unclear.

The behaviour of leadership is sometimes considered in relation with organisational cultures (Trice & Beyer 1991, Koslowsky & Stashevsky 2005, Klenke 2005). Usually the behaviours are described in terms of a theoretical approach to leadership or organisational structure.

Several studies relate cultures to various aspects of organisational performances calculated through data from the companies (Yilmaz 2005, Skerlavaj 2007) including data such as extra-work (Min Ping Hung et al 2005)

Although some research favours quantitative data, it appears that more qualitative data are interesting to identify the effects of quality assurance mechanisms (Stensaker 2008), also because qualitative methods are better suited for exploring beliefs and opinions (Scott 2003).

How is it measured?

“Culture has been viewed as a property of groups that can be measured by questionnaires leading to Likert-type profiles” (Schein 1990 p110). Scott (2003), who analysed 84 articles reporting the development or use of organisational culture assessment instruments, confirms that “most studies adopt questionnaires with simple Likert like scales for respondents to indicate their level of agreement with predefined statements” (ibid, p 3). Indeed, although analytical descriptive, ethnographic or clinical descriptive methods have been used, survey by questionnaire is the most widely used methodology (Schein 1990).

In some cases, answers to questions have been obtained through interviews or focus groups (e.g. Lomas 2004, Polychranis & Syntetos 2007). Discourse analysis of the importance given to quality can also be performed (Kovac et al 2006).

In some cases, other tools are involved, such as role playing or decisions in simulated situations (Koslowsky & Stashevsky 2005).

As already mentioned, performance indicators are obtained by computing data gathered from companies or institutions.

In summary, three main categories of measures are used: what people say about their values and beliefs, what people say about what they do, and what people do or the result of their actions.

As far as methods are concerned, questionnaires are the most widely used tools for answering the two first questions, while more objectives measures are used for the third category.

Although these studies are useful and interesting, they do not completely fulfil our expectations since they deal more with the comparison of cultures than with the development of a specific culture.

It appears that few papers, if any, have considered the development of the culture *per se* and the majority are more focused on measuring the effects of the culture. Nevertheless, they do “give food for thought” and we tried to integrate some of these results in the following framework.

3. A proposal to create an observation grid

Description of the process

From the author’s point of view, the development of the Quality Culture can be seen in two dimensions like the development of waves when a stone is thrown into water.

At the surface level, it requires observing how people, who are further and further from leadership positions or highly motivated people, agree with the values and are involved in quality.

At the deep level, it concerns the change of behaviours associated with adhesion at the surface level. Deeper means more and more spontaneous, integrated into the usual process.

So, it is a two-fold process that we need to observe: the increased number of people who adhere to the culture and the extent to which this agreement is translated into actions, as illustrated in figure 1:

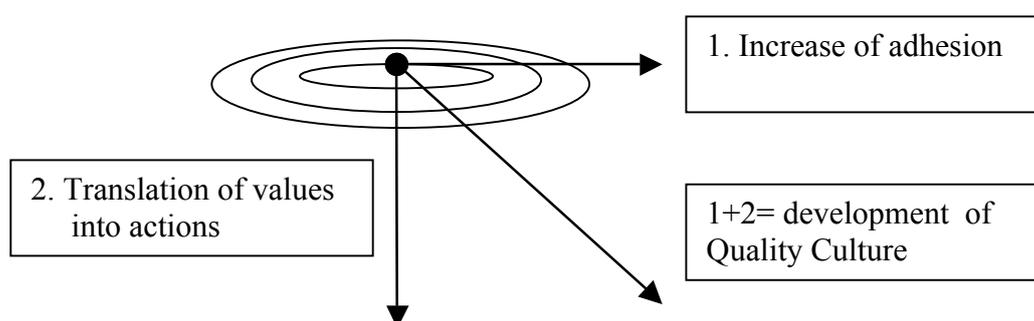


Figure 1: Schematic development of a Quality Culture in two dimensions.

How to track the development of a Quality Culture?

As previously mentioned, most studies rely on what people say. Since culture is about adherence to values, what people say is useful, though not sufficient, considering that there are discrepancies between values and practices (Javidan et al 2006, Waldman et al 2006) and agreement on values does not imply satisfaction as far as concretisation of values is concerned (Telford and Masson 2005). It is therefore necessary to include observations about what people actually do. Based on our review of the literature and our own experience, we propose a grid (see Table 1) for creating a tool to observe the "grass rooting" of a Quality Culture within a HEI.

We do not intend to strictly measure this development, but rather to help to construct an observation grid containing both quantitative and qualitative data. The suggestions in the boxes are only examples and this does not constitute a comprehensive list of potential indicators.

	What People say	What People Do
Individual Level Management Staff Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comments on quality processes • Percentage of people who adhere to the Institutional Quality Approach and values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement in quality processes. • Spontaneous evaluation of teaching • Response to evaluation of teaching
Collective Level Institution Faculty Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality concept • Quality regulations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual innovations in relation to quality • Application of regulations

Table 1 : Draft grid for creating an observation framework.

The choice of indicators could also be enriched by an analysis of the specific Quality Culture of the institution. In other words, how the specific values of the Quality Culture of the HEI are translated into practice. For instance, if one of the values is "responsibility", how is this value translated into its institutional life? Or, if one of the values is the "involvement" of people, the number or percentage of people involved in quality processes could be an indicator.

Depending on the "measure" chosen, the analysis will rely either on one-off events (like new regulations) or the evolution of quantitative data (like the number of spontaneous evaluations of teaching).

An illustrative Case

We have started to use this grid to observe the development of Quality Culture in our University. We have identified "measures" in the four parts of Table 1 and, to illustrate, a sample of these potential indicators is described below.

1. What people say at individual level:

- Answers to questions of external experts during the governmental Quality Audit (example, the experts' report underlines that while people found self-evaluation quite demanding, they all said that it was interesting and useful)

- Discussions in specific committees: Minutes of participative committees involved in Quality processes at University or Faculty level contain comments about the relevance of quality processes, the evolution of practices, the involvement of various type of actors in the discussions and the development of ownership of Quality issues.

2. What is said at collective level

- Quality concept of the University: there is a public and fully developed document about quality policies and processes at all levels of University (University, Faculty, Central units, Staff, etc).

- Evolution of regulations: Several regulations, for instance those dealing with faculties' contracts renewal, have been modified to be in line with the values of the quality culture.

- Appointment of a Vice Rector in charge of Quality, which has been a clear sign of the importance given to quality issues.

3. What people do at individual Level

- How students answer teaching evaluation questionnaires (qualitative analysis of comments which shows mainly constructive comments)

- How teachers fill their reports spontaneously (evolution of their reflexive involvement in writing their reports for renewal of their contracts)

- Involvement in self-evaluation of faculties (participation's level, etc)

- Involvement in teaching evaluation (answering rate, number of answers to open questions)

4. What is done at collective level

- The "rules of the game" of the quality process are in line with the values of the Quality Culture

- Modifications of the action plan of the faculty following self-evaluation indicating that quality processes are not bureaucratic activities but used in daily governance.

- Communication about self-evaluation (for instance comments about self-evaluation during opening discourse of the academic year).

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Conclusion

We consider that the Quality Culture is a sub-culture of the organisational culture, underpinned by several values. A key issue in creating or developing a Quality Culture is therefore to make explicit these values and priorities and for them to infuse the quality concept and its operations and to influence collective and individual practices.

Developing a Quality Culture requires means for "tracking" this development and the real ownership of the culture. Evaluation of ownership is based on what people say and do. Both aspects are important for "grass rooting" a quality culture.

We have proposed a draft grid to develop tools to track the establishment of the culture. This grid clearly has a practical orientation and certainly has to be refined.

Relations between values and behaviours are complex but this intermediate step between the culture and its impact seems useful for more precisely identifying the obstacles to the increase of quality of research, teaching and services, which remains the ultimate goal of QA processes.

3 questions for discussion

What kind of observations could you make in your institution regarding the evolution of its Quality Culture ?

For you what are the best indicators of the establishment of a Quality Culture ?

What kind of tool or grid did you develop to “track” the development of the quality culture ? from your point of view what is the usefulness of these. ?

EQAF 2009

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