Examining Quality Culture Part III:

From self-reflection to enhancement

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Foreword

In October 2009, the European University Association (EUA), together with its partners, the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and QAA Scotland, launched a project entitled: "Examining Quality Culture in Higher Education Institutions" (EQC).

The EQC project was a continuation of EUA's long-term work with its members on developing internal quality assurance. In the course of two and a half years, the project mapped the state of affairs within European universities and explored the dynamics between the development of institutional quality culture and quality assurance processes. The final workshop organised in Edinburgh, Scotland, in February 2012 gathered 30 participants from EUA member universities from across Europe, to analyse the practical application of the project conclusions, as well as to discuss challenges and good practices in developing quality cultures in various institutions.

On behalf of the project partners, EUA would like to thank Oliver Vettori, Director of Programme Management and Quality Management, Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria, for accepting the challenge of writing this report. We also express our deep gratitude to all the members of the project Steering Committee for their commitment to the project throughout its lifetime. Last but not least, thanks go to all the universities that took part in the various project activities, be it through responding to the survey, contributing to the interviews or to the lively debate on quality cultures that took place in Edinburgh.

We hope that this report will also enable those who did not have a chance to take part in the workshop to benefit from the discussions and in particular to continue to reflect on ways of enhancing their own institutional quality cultures.

Lesley Wilson

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1. Introduction – A multitude of quality cultures

"A culture of quality is one in which everybody in the organisation, not just the quality controllers, is responsible for quality".

This quote by Crosby (1986, cited in Harvey and Green 1993: 16) might at least partly explain the still increasing popularity of the term "quality culture" in European higher education: for the quality assurance 'boom' that has found Europe-wide resonance since the 1990s has not been embraced by everyone. Academics in particular have been very reluctant to engage with management schemes and procedures which they found overly bureaucratic and demotivating (cf. Morley 2003, Newton 2002, 2000). The concept of quality culture was one answer to this problem, complementing the structural dimension of quality assurance (quality management handbooks, process definitions, instruments, tools) with the dimension of values of an organisation, relating to the commitment of its members, the underlying values, skills and attitudes (cf. Ehlers, 2009: 346).

An important step in developing the concept's key principles was achieved in the context of EUA's Quality Culture project, which was launched in 2002 in order to assist universities in their efforts to develop and embed an internal quality culture as well as to encourage the dissemination of existing best practices in the field of quality assurance. From this perspective, it was found that **a quality culture cannot be simply equated with the institutional quality assurance system** – although the system forms an important part of it – but that it builds on the values and practices that are shared by the institutional community and that have to be nurtured on many levels and by various means at the same time.

But how to recognise such a quality culture? And how well have the European higher education institutions (HEIs) fared since the start of the Quality Culture project in 2002 (cf. EUA 2006, 2005) and the adoption of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) in 2005 (cf. ENQA 2005)? These questions were at the heart of EUA's two-and-a-half-year long project "Examining Quality Culture in Higher Education Institutions", which EUA launched in the autumn of 2009 together with the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and QAA Scotland. The project aimed at

providing an overview as well as selected in-depth analyses of the internal quality assurance processes in place within European HEIs and was organised in three phases:

- In the first phase, a survey questionnaire was used to gather quantitative evidence on the development of internal quality assurance processes as envisioned by the seven areas in part 1 of the ESG. Based on the answers of 222 institutions from 36 countries across Europe, it was shown that remarkable progress had been made in QA in recent years (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010): European HEIs had implemented – mostly tailor-made – QA frameworks that were covering a variety of different areas and activities, from curriculum design to staff development and institutional information systems. From the open questions, however, it also became apparent that, although the processes themselves looked very similar, they were embedded in rather different organisational, structural and interpretative contexts: even an instrument as 'universal' as student questionnaires had a wide range of meanings and functions.

- These findings were confirmed and elaborated on in phase two: in this phase, 59 telephone interviews were conducted with 10 universities in 10 different countries from the survey response sample. The resulting report (Sursock, 2011) did not only come up with suggestions of how an effective quality culture could be fostered, but also emphasised the role of power, ideology and different perceptions: even within the institutions there are usually different subcultures – disciplinary or organisational ones – that have to be considered when devising quality assurance policies and procedures.

- Phase three, finally, was about taking stock – and about discussing how to make use of the previous findings and insights. Thirty quality assurance professionals from EUA member institutions from all over Europe were assembled for a two-day workshop in Edinburgh, Scotland, in order to explore further the practical applicability of the conclusions that have come out of the project, as well as to discuss challenges and good practices in developing quality cultures in their institutions.

This short report is a condensed compilation of the insights of phase three – and the questions they in turn have led to. It does not, however, provide a full empirical analysis of the

workshop discussions or an inventory of the good practices that were identified in the various working groups and plenary discussions. One of the project's key results was the **acknowledgement that even the best ideas cannot always be imported into one's own institution**. In order to develop an effective quality culture, one first needs to understand the institutional principles, aspects and environmental conditions that are already in force – and thus, affect each decision, action and interpretation. In this regard, this report is neither a summary nor a good practice manual, but an invitation: to examine those quality cultures we can already find in our own institutions. The best foundation for future enhancements may well be a reflection of the past and present.

2. Quality culture as a tool for reflection

In the current higher education discourse, the concept of quality culture mostly takes the form of a normative ideal: starting with the EUA recommendations (2006, 2005), **practice-oriented takes on the concept have become entrenched**, with the idea that there are 'good' quality cultures that are worth striving for, and 'bad' quality cultures that should be avoided. An examination of the academic state of the field (cf. Vettori, 2012) shows a clear dominance of articles that assume that a quality culture can be created or at least partly controlled (i.a. Gvaramazde 2008, Gordon 2002). From such a perspective, a quality culture is "[…] *an organisational culture that sustains the development of an effective and efficient quality management approach that allows the educational institution to realise its objectives and enhance the quality of its education and services"* (Berings *et al.,* 2011). From this perspective, quality culture is about the development of and compliance with processes of internal quality assurance (Harvey, 2009). Such a functionalist understanding, however, has some severe drawbacks: first, **the question of what counts as a 'good' culture is as difficult to answer as questions on the nature of quality itself**. Considering the great diversity of national contexts and institutional solutions as demonstrated in the phase-one and phase-two reports of the EQC project, it is highly unlikely that the same normative ideal would appeal to every institution. This can also be seen from the answers to the open questions in the phase-one questionnaire:

several of the answers were referring to the effectiveness of the institutional quality assurance system in terms of its rigid internal controls and sanctions. Within their specific contexts, such control systems were considered as part of a good quality culture, as the system allows for or even requires such control mechanisms and the institutional culture ensures their acceptance. Yet within other contexts, the same kind of control logic was experienced as obstructive and hindering: exactly the kind of quality culture that should be avoided. In relation to the respective underlying value systems and premises, both views are perfectly valid.

In addition, an instrumentalist approach to quality cultures could well thwart the very objectives of the concept: to frame culture as a potentially identifiable and manipulative factor among others means to underestimate the **importance of the value and belief systems that underlie all organisational activities, events or observations**. A deliberate change of existing value systems still counts among the most difficult tasks any manager or organisational actor could set out to accomplish.

This was also one of the most important premises that were identified in the workshop: that any attempt to develop institutional quality cultures further towards an ideal of improvement and enhancement has to **take into account the cultures that are already in place**. Even the enhancement goals themselves have to start with an examination of the current situation, for the definition of what counts as enhancement or improvement is again very relative and dependent on the values and ideas that are already in force. In this respect, quality cultures can be understood as historically grown social phenomena that are very likely differentiated into several subcultures whose underlying premises many actors are not even aware of (cf. Vettori *et al.*, 2007).

Reframing the quality culture concept along those lines means to let go of the idea of a universally shared ideal. From such a perspective, the quality culture concept does not provide a common goal for every institution, but a common starting point: if we understand quality culture as a matter of context rather than a set of procedures (cf. Harvey, 2009), then the concept can be used as an analytical tool (cf. Harvey and Stensaker, 2008) – as **a means for reflecting on our current strategies, practices and principles** and thus for creating the very foundation for future enhancement.

In this regard, an analysis of quality culture could very well start, "[...] *with the question about how a higher education organisation is realising the challenge of enhancing quality in a certain field, e.g. the area of teaching and learning or the area of research"* (Ehlers, 2009: 353). The following sections are intended to support HEIs as a whole, their quality management professionals and every actor involved in matters of quality assurance, in their task to analyse where they come from and define where they want to go.

3. Examining our own quality cultures

A full examination of our institutional quality cultures would be a comprehensive endeavour and probably require lots of different approaches and methods. Such an attempt is not only far beyond the scope and ambition of this report, but would probably also be more than is actually needed in order to get started. In this respect, the following three sections do not propose a fully developed analytical framework, but should rather be regarded as **a reflective exercise that applies the principle of enhancement to the institutional QA frameworks themselves**. Each section focuses on one dimension that was found of particular importance for institutional QA systems and quality cultures: 'Strategies and Policies', 'Instruments and Practices' and 'Principles and Underlying Assumptions'. Every dimension will be briefly described with regard to its cultural resonance and practical relevance and it will be demonstrated where the first steps towards a reflective examination have led the workshop participants. Every section will conclude with a suggested roster of questions that could facilitate a better understanding of the QA environments in which we currently live and act, and show some areas for future improvement.

3.1 Examining our strategies and policies

The importance of appropriate and effective institutional (and national) policies and strategies reverberates throughout international higher education and is also mirrored in the first standard of the ESG. Phase one and two of the EQC project have shown that, although most HEIs have a strategic document either at institutional or faculty level,

not all strategies are equally successful: **the most effective strategies are those that can build on well-developed management structures and which provide clear goals and responsibilities** (cf. Sursock, 2011: 50).

In the EQC workshop, a number of additional factors were identified. It was acknowledged that any strategy has to **build upon institutional identities, not try to change them.** Even though not every single actor can (or should) be involved in the formation and formulation of a strategy, the final result still needs to find resonance with all HEI members. Within every institution, we can find a number of cultures and different perspectives – e.g. between academics, administrators or students, but also between academics or students from different disciplines. In this regard, strategy is about finding a balance between those different interests and preferences, but, even more importantly, about making choices. A good strategy is almost an act of bravery: defining where an institution needs or wants to go will always disappoint a considerable number of actors and stakeholders – not everything can be achieved, and certainly not at once. Legitimacy can be found by linking the strategy to the institutional identity. Although the current convergence of institutional profiles might indicate otherwise, not every HEI will achieve the same objectives; partly, because not every HEI is able to, and partly because the objectives would differ considerably if they were derived from the institution's current form rather than being imported from elsewhere. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that not every institution has to set the same goals.

This is also touching on one of QA's predominant issues: **the relationship of external and internal requirements.** The workshop has shown that in many national contexts there is a tendency towards aligning external quality assurance processes and internal procedures. The problem of priorities, however, remains unsolved: it might be possible and even necessary to achieve partial synergies between different logics, e.g. by using external feedback as a lever for internal reforms, but eventually, adhering to external standards (e.g. in the context of accreditations or national frameworks) requires different strategies and means than tackling internal challenges. The principle of functional differentiation (e.g. keeping different units for different purposes) can offer solutions on the operational level, but will not settle potential conflicts on the strategic level.

In addition, all three phases of the EQC project demonstrated the importance of the temporal dimension: change is one of the key experiences of and key challenges for every higher education institution. Some changes might be deliberately induced, but the majority just 'happens': sometimes welcome, sometimes not, and all too often unexpected. In the logic of institutional quality assurance frameworks, 'unplanned' change is usually blanked or framed as a problem: paradoxically, processes that are aimed at continuous improvement have a particular tendency towards stability rather than dynamics (e.g. by creating multi-year plans and evaluation cycles), which regularly results in the kind of bureaucracy the QA profession has been afflicted with and aggrieved by for decades. It was thus acknowledged by the workshop participants that effective strategies do not only have to be aware of the complexity of institutional and environmental changes, but even embrace it: the most successful strategies are not always those that intend certain changes, but rather those that deal with changes that are already occurring in a constructive way.

All in all, **effective strategies need to be *meaningful*** by helping to make sense of what is going on, by integrating the meanings and values that are already constitutive for a specific culture and by providing orientation for its members and stakeholders of why and how the institution will fulfil its mission in an increasingly complex and dynamic world.

The following questions can help to find and create such meaning. As such, they might look rather different from usual guidelines for strategic management. It is important to note, though, that they are not intended to replace such tools and guidelines but rather to provide a starting point for reflecting on and enhancing the strategic dimension of our institutional quality cultures:

- What is important and from whose point of view? Is there a gap between the rhetorics and reality?

- Are the institutional identity and values mirrored in the strategic documents or is the strategic document rather envisioning an ideal institution?

- Do the strategic goals acknowledge the difference between improving internal structures, processes and outcomes and the improvement of indicators and numbers?

- Who are the addressees of the mission statements and strategies – are these statements and strategies also understandable to and acceptable for the institution's members and principal actor groups?

- How well does the institutional culture deal with change? Do the institutional strategies provide for the possibility (and necessity) of change in the institution and the institutional environment? How and how well can it cope with conflicts that may arise?

- What is the relationship between the strategic document and the actual organisation and procedures?

- Are there different strategies for dealing with external QA requirements and internal needs? Are they needed? Which requirements have priority? How can they be balanced constructively?

3.2 Examining our tools and practices

Tools and practices are among the most discussed issues in quality assurance. Phase one of the EQC project has shown that a lot of progress has been made with regard to formal quality assurance procedures: there is barely a university left which has not yet developed or adopted a considerable number of tools for data gathering and analysis (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010). In phase two, it was found that the important differences often lie in the details – **even seemingly universal instruments such as course evaluations or staff development trainings take a lot of different forms and fulfil different functions** (Sursock, 2011).

In the phase-three workshop, these observations were taken a step further: context was considered as particularly important, especially with regard to the way a certain practice is embedded in the organisation – manifestly in terms of its interplay with other practices as well as latently in terms of the meanings it is imbued with. There is more than just a semantic difference between 'staff development discussions' or 'performance reviews', even though the procedure itself may very much look the same. In many ways, an institutional quality culture can be best observed from examining the tools and activities in which it manifests itself. Student participation, for example, can be limited to a variant where students are mere data providers and feedback givers or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, participation may take a form where students are actually actively contributing to certain improvement processes, e.g. by reviewing the syllabi and learning outcome formulations, for which they are supposed to be the primary addressees in the first place.

In this respect, there are two important lessons that can be learnt from the exchange of ideas during the project: first, that **the purpose of a certain tool should be very clearly defined**, before the tool is implemented or adopted, and not just in terms of the ideal purpose, but in terms of how the tool (or data) will actually be used in practice. Feedback data that is used for measuring effectiveness instead of indicating strengths and weaknesses is just one example where tools can generate a 'cultural backlash' if they are too little defined or left to themselves. In this regard, it was generally found that the impact of current quality assurance activities should be much more closely observed.

Secondly, **tools should not only be checked with respect to their effectiveness but also to their efficiency**: observations show a tendency of simply adding new procedures to those that are already in place, which is not only putting a severe strain on resources, but can also overburden the system as a whole. As a rule of thumb, there could/should be at least one tool or activity that gets abandoned for every one that gets newly created – at least if the activities are geared towards the same purpose. There is already a lot of data that is produced but not actually made use of – some because it is not usable (an even better argument for stopping to generate it) and some because many QA systems and quality cultures can be too preoccupied with the measurement part instead of

focusing on suitable follow-up phases. Not all information can or should be used for decision making processes, but all data should have some use beyond being reported, in particular if they are collected regularly.

Eventually, it became clear that the effectiveness and efficiency of current QA practices and tools is also closely related to the issue of diversity. Heterogeneity *between* different higher education institutions is already a much debated topic, but heterogeneity *within* institutions is not always acknowledged, at least not from a QA perspective. In both cases, this dimension has a considerable impact on the cultural resonance and impact of certain tools: good practice exchanges that lead to a blind adoption of practices which work rather well elsewhere often ignore that **ideas have to be carefully 'translated' in order to make them work in a different environment**. And the affinity for standardisation that afflicts many QA frameworks can result in a 'one-size-fits-all' approach that is unable to engage different communities or respond to individual needs.

Overall, tools and instruments are rarely neutral or self-reliant: they are embedded in broader contexts of actions and interpretations and usually imbued with certain meanings. As such they should be responsive to the cultural environments in which they are used and cautiously employed with regard to their potential cultural impact. The following questions can help to examine existing practices critically with regard to their various effects on the institutional quality culture:

- Are the current tools and practices finding resonance with the stakeholders and actors they are intended to benefit? If not, why not?

- Are they congruent with the institution's QA philosophy or rather subverting it, e.g. by promoting a logic of control while the policy speaks of trust and development?

- Does every QA activity in the institution have a clear purpose? If yes, who are the main beneficiaries: the students, the academics, the administration, the leadership, the ministry, external agencies or someone else entirely?

- Which of the current tools and practices are being maintained just because 'it has always been this way' or because 'the others do it well'?

- Which are the most important tools and activities within the QA system? And which are the ones the system could very well work without?

- Who is using the data and information that is collected, and for what purpose? If data is not used, is this due to the quality of the data or to the quality of the follow-up processes?

3.3 Examining our principles and underlying assumptions

In the conclusion of EQC's part-one report, it was found that *"developing a quality culture takes time and effort, and is closely related to values, beliefs and a cultural element which cannot change quickly"* (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010: 11). Part two of the project showed that this cultural element has a strong political dimension and that quality assurance is very much about power and ideology (Sursock, 2011). In this regard, it is important to not only focus on strategies and instruments, but also on the often unquestioned principles and 'underlying assumptions' (Schein, 2004) upon which such strategies and instruments build. This is not only a pivotal part of understanding one's own quality culture, but might also be important in order to make explicit whose and what interests are actually being pursued – **the less notions of quality are defined, the more they run the risk of becoming a tool for safeguarding and enforcing (political) interests** (Laske *et al.,* 2000).

Admittedly, this part of the examination exercise is the most difficult one, for it is one of the key characteristics of underlying assumptions that they are rarely directly observable or explicitly discussed. There are some deconstructive and reconstructive methodologies that might allow to approach such deep-seated levels of latency (cf. Vettori, 2012) cautiously, but they require lots of time and effort: in our daily practice, we might have to content ourselves with a critical and reflective look at the meanings that our actions and rhetorics are imbued with and how they can and will be interpreted by others.

During the workshop, participants identified and discussed a number of **assumptions that seem to be deeply encoded in the language of quality assurance**, but which might signal other things than the originally intended ones: the idea of continuous improvement, for example, seems to be a universally acceptable one and can be found across a great number of QA policies and strategies. In combination with an output logic, however (e.g. by framing high quality as an increase of high impact publications or constantly higher student satisfaction results), the ideal transforms into a demotivating threat, that, no matter how much people invest, it will never be enough. Similar problems can be identified with regard to one of the profession's favourite

implementation ideologies, i.e. that QA systems should not be decreed from above but grow bottom up. Considering the highly decentralised nature of universities, which often resemble rather 'loosely coupled systems', and with regard to the multitude of actors involved, the idea draws the question, who is actually forming 'the bottom' of a university – is it the students? The junior faculty? Everyone below the senior management? And even if that question is solved, the concept remains a little paradoxical, as the call for more quality and quality assurance usually comes top-down, which rather thwarts the idea of a bottom-up initiative. These are just two examples that can show how particularly those ideas that are constantly and unquestioningly reiterated can be interpreted out of the institutional context they emerged from, and how they could affect the actors' attitudes to quality assurance as a whole.

The most discussed issue in this respect, however, was the notion of conflict. It was found that conflict is usually framed as a problem to be avoided and that an effective quality culture would be built on friction-free harmony. As a consequence, compromise often even precedes actual negotiations and stakeholder participation is regularly reduced to indirect forms that preclude direct confrontations. On the other hand, the very idea of quality assurance advocates the concept of (constructive) conflict, as one of QA's key principles is the involvement of multiple stakeholders and their perspectives in order to achieve better results. It seems rather obvious from previous experience that these perspectives differ in a lot of important aspects and that not every interest can be satisfied, as legitimate as it may be, yet this also offers valuable opportunities for future development: conflicts cannot only be surprisingly creative in their outcomes, but they are also an important window to identify and understand the assumptions, values and beliefs that underlie people's rationalities. In this regard, **conflicts play a particularly important role for understanding and enhancing our institutional quality cultures** – although enhancement may well have to start with our ability to handle conflicts.

All in all, awareness of the 'meaning dimension' of our strategies, actions and instruments is an important foundation for any constructive development. For a start, **we can critically reflect on the language we are using, but also be aware of the fact that actions often speak**

louder than words: the principles that are the most difficult to identify and approach are not those that manifest themselves in policy documents and strategy papers, but those that are inscribed in the tools we are using and in our daily communications. The following questions are intended to enable a better access to the 'meaning foundations' of our institutional quality cultures and the ways we are making sense of them:

- What are the key principles of the institutional QA policy? Could and would everyone in the institution agree to them? Do they exist on paper only or are they translated into concrete actions?

- Are there any passages in the QA documents that most people overlook because they are so evident? If yes, what is their function?

- Are there any principles in your institution that 'go without saying' and are thus never discussed? If yes, is everyone aware of them and are these principles interpreted by everyone in the same way?

- How are the current QA practices perceived by different actor and stakeholder groups – what sense do they make of them? If there are differences in perception and interpretation, where could the differences stem from?

- How are QA instruments and policies developed in the institution? Are there opportunities to discuss them across different actor groups and disciplines?

- How are the results and outcomes of QA activities and evaluations used by different actors and what does this say about the actors' priorities?

- How well are we able to cope with conflict in our quality cultures and quality assurance systems? Are there enough opportunities for open discussion and direct dialogue? How do we deal with different opinions and goals?

4. Conclusion: From self-reflection to enhancement

Even on the level of single processes and individual activities, improvement can be difficult to achieve: one does not only need to identify areas for enhancement, but also to define directions and scale, find suitable ways and deal with the complexity of the contexts and situations in which such processes and activities are embedded. Enhancements on an institutional, system or cultural level are a much bigger challenge. The complexity is considerably higher, with a multitude of perspectives to consider, actors to involve, interests to explore and contingencies to allow for. It is thus no coincidence that many change processes on the system level focus on structures, roles and procedures that are relatively easy to alter – at least on the surface level of documentation and process descriptions. However, as the different phases of the EQC project have shown, there are many important layers below the surface that need to be considered as well: shared practices and implicit knowledge that cannot be found in any official document; norms and values that form the institutional identity and inform the ways people deal with each other; and the latent beliefs and assumptions that underlie our rationalities and actions. Any change and development process has to be aware of these different levels and their relationship, particularly when the process is directed at such a complex phenomenon as an institution's quality culture. **It is, generally spoken, the interplay of the manifest and formal quality assurance processes and the latent and informal values and assumptions that lie at the heart of enhancing an institutional quality culture.** A thorough and reflective understanding of this interplay and its different dimensions might thereby form an important foundation for improvements. In simpler words: finding an answer where to go requires knowing where to start from and vice versa.

The questions and ideas that were introduced in the previous sections can be a starting point for reflecting on the status quo and for planning future developments – not as a questionnaire or a test that will ultimately lead to an optimal result but as a way of examining our very own quality cultures and the directions in which we could and might want to take them. There are no right answers to these questions, but asking them in the first place could be even more important and effective than the answer itself. And maybe even induce a cultural change of its own.

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