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Book Section (Published)

http://epub.wu.ac.at/

1 Quo vadis, quality culture? Theses from different perspectives

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This article contains the extended and enriched version of six theses (three pairs of thesis and antithesis) that were first presented in September 2016 at the annual conference of AQ Austria. The six theses were never meant to be a simple "pro and contra" debate, but rather to explore different directions, which the quality culture concept and discourse could take in the next years. The theses were phrased in a rather pointed form in order to encourage a discussion – some of the results of this discussion might be found in the following parts of this publication.

Considering its relatively young age, the concept of quality culture has made quite a career in the past years. Searching for "quality culture in higher education" via Google delivers almost 69 million results – five years ago it were around 26 million (Vettori 2012a). In addition, the concept has become an established part of conference programmes, press statements and institutional quality assurance policies. At least to some degree this comes as a surprise: Quality remains an elusive concept and culture is often used as an "umbrella term for all possible intangible factors in organisational life" (Harvey/ Stensaker 2008: 431) – it thus seems unlikely that a combination of both parts will overcome the relative vagueness of each single component. And even though the term has entered higher education literature more than a decade ago (Yorke 2000), it remains a theoretically underdeveloped and under-researched issue. Yet possibly, the concept's appeal lies just in this ambiguity as some of our theses below seem to suggest.

The concept's prominence in the European Higher Education Area is largely owed to a series of projects and initiatives started by the European University Association (EUA) in the early 2000s. Their original quality culture project was launched in 2002 in order to assist universities in their efforts to embed and develop an internal quality culture as well as to encourage the dissemination of existing best practices in the field of quality assurance.

Spanning an overall period of four years (2002–2006), the project was organised in three rounds, each of them involving more than 40 different higher education institutions from various national backgrounds, which were grouped into six thematic networks (e. g. research management, teaching and learning, student support services etc.). Based on a mix of methods – peer-exchange meetings, SWOT analyses and action plans – the network partners sought to increase quality awareness within their own institutions and implemented several initiatives and projects for strengthening their internal quality culture. A summary of the major findings can be found in the overall project report (EUA 2006).

The name of the project was deliberately chosen to set itself apart from technocratic top-down approaches that might backfire in an academic setting. In the EUA's quality culture perspective, quality is not beheld as a process that can be operated through evaluation and measurement procedures alone, but as values and practices that are shared by the institutional community and that have to be nurtured on many levels (e. g. by considering the subcultures in the respective academic subunits) and by various means at the same time. The approach demands the involvement of multiple internal and external stakeholders, acknowledging the fact that a quality culture cannot be implemented from above, although strong leadership may be necessary for starting and promoting the process in the first place. Quality measurement and quality control are undoubtedly important elements of such an approach (as they are of any quality management system), but they cannot be regarded as quality guarantors per se, rather needing to be embedded in an overarching framework that is in line with the institutional objectives and focused on continuous improvement (Vettori et al. 2007: 22). And indeed our first pair of thesis/counter-thesis stems from these roots.

Thesis 1: The quality culture idea is important because it emphasises the importance of shared attitudes, values and communication.

The term "culture" itself conveys the "softer side" of quality assurance (QA) and carries the message that QA cannot be solely about processes, instruments and formal standards. There is a conceptual closeness to "organisational culture",

and thus the term indicates the importance to fit one's QA system to the individual profile of the institution. Implicitly, the concept also raises awareness of the fact that a culture does not emerge overnight and that fostering a quality culture needs the collaborative efforts of many people at once. The idea carries the promise of less resistance to quality assurance and less need for formalised standards and procedures, because actors are collaboratively striving for institutional improvement. In this regard, the quality culture concept might not bring along completely new tools and processes, but gives an important spin to existing ones and promotes certain practices over others.

Yet a few years later, the EUA conducted a comprehensive multi-method study ("Examining Quality Culture"), demonstrating on the one hand that it was difficult to stick to the concept's original focus (the quantitative part of the study largely ignored the issue of values and internal collaboration and basically equated quality culture with the quality assurance processes and structures in general, (Loukkola/Zhang 2010) – and on the other hand, uncovering the different interpretations of quality culture across Europe through in-depth interviews (Sursock 2011).

This leads us to our first counter-thesis: **The quality culture idea has lost its conceptual power, as the concept presently can mean anything to anyone.**

"Quality" is a very intangible concept with a great number of different meanings depending on one's perspective and interests. And the same holds true for "culture", which has been defined in hundreds of ways by different disciplines. Combining both concepts does not make things clearer – on the contrary. With scant literature on the concept and the theory behind it, "quality culture" has become a buzzword that seems more acceptable than quality assurance or quality control. It has lost its operational power because it is used in so many different – even opposing – ways and contexts without any actual discussion to clarify its scope and meaning. What seems to further support this counter-thesis is the fact that the oxymoron "quality assurance culture" has even surfaced (European Commission 2009).

From a scholarly perspective, the quality culture concept has already found broad acceptance: If quality culture is understood as "context" rather than a set of procedures (Harvey 2009), then the concept can be used as an analytic tool (Harvey/Stensaker 2008) for reconstructing the contexts in which different quality assurance approaches, strategies and instruments make sense to the actors in a given field.

Our second pair of thesis/counter-thesis is very different from the first one because it sprung from the type of event where these theses were presented: An event hosted by an external quality assurance agency focussing on the internal quality culture of institutions basically invited the exploration of the relationship between internal and external drivers for the development of a quality culture.

Thesis 2: In order to emerge, quality cultures need impulses from outside the institution.

Internal quality processes are developed in response to the demands of external stakeholders, including QA agencies. It is mostly when the agencies require such processes and even define them that the universities develop them. New ideas are carried into the institutions by way of guidelines, events and publications initiated by the quality assurance agency. In this regard, the development of an institutional quality culture needs external assistance. It is helpful if the quality assurance agencies publish recommendations or even define a set of metrics by which to measure quality culture.

Here the corresponding counter-thesis seems to lie at hand. **In order to thrive, quality cultures need to be left alone – in particular with regard to standardised recommendations and external examinations:**

Universities have always had internal quality processes; they just did not call them that. It is true that it is in response to external requirements that the universities have developed more extensive and explicit processes, but when they simply respond to external demands, there is very little chance to embed a good quality culture and the universities will end up with bureaucratic processes to satisfy external stakeholders and this will alienate academic staff. What's more, a quality culture is not measurable though metrics and should be fit for purpose. The only way to achieve that is to ensure that the quality culture is grounded in a specific organisational culture of a specific higher education institution. A single set of standards and measurements will not achieve that.

Of course the last part of the counter-thesis is a bit polemical: External influences cannot be automatically equated with standardisation – even though institutional tendencies towards mimicry tend to suggest this. The tricky part about these two theses is that it is not so easy to declare this an

issue of autonomy: influences can be manifold and are not necessarily a manifestation of external control. Even Ehlers, who argues for an approach to quality culture that is based on an organisation's culture (2009), recognises that institutional developments are basically a reaction to external developments. Following Edgar Schein, Ehlers sees quality culture as an answer to the question of the way in which an organisation is responding to its quality challenges and is fulfilling its quality purpose. And this purpose is not necessarily set by the institutions themselves. In any case, the concept's relation to power and ideology has long been acknowledged (Sursock 2011).

With so many inherent contradictions and so many different interpretations of the concept, the big question does not seem to be how to translate the discourse into practice (Lanarès 2009), but whether the concept will actually be able to fulfil the various expectations attached to it – besides the fact that its power to fascinate seems unbroken. This brings us to our third pair of thesis/anti-thesis.

Thesis 3: The quality culture concept has not yet reached its full potential and will offer fruitful impulses for years to come.

The mere fact that the concept is becoming increasingly popular around the world and has found its way into many policy documents or external quality assurance schemes shows that the concept is here to stay. Admittedly, the discourse would need a bit more conceptual clarity and theoretical backup, but this is more of an argument to delve even more into the idea than to abandon it. In addition, striving for shared frameworks and collaborating on institutional improvement will remain important goals of higher education institutions, and the quality culture concept can help with that.

One main condition for this optimistic view of the future seems to be that the quality culture concept manages to overcome some of its inherent paradoxes (Perovšek 2016), e. g. by focusing on its potential for institutional self-reflection (Vettori 2012b).

But there is also the risk **that quality culture has already gone "mainstream" and lost its power to infuse the discourse with new life – indicating that something "new" is needed.**

If within a political context – and quality assurance in higher education definitely qualifies as such – a term or concept has become so broadly accepted that it does not incite any controversy anymore, it has lost its disruptive ability to make people rethink or review issues from different viewpoints. "Quality culture" seems to have reached this state – although the AQ Austria 2016 conference could be interpreted as signalling otherwise. However, in order to keep the discourse and development of internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA) alive (and to keep all our stakeholders interested) we might require something that signals more innovation and manages to excite people once more, creating movement through its appeal of being something new everyone needs to develop.

We hope that these three pairs of thesis/counter-thesis have provided food for thought for our readers. From our point of view, the ambiguity of the quality culture concept represents at the same time both its strength and its weakness. While it obfuscates the power relationships between those who define quality and those who must submit to it, it also represents an ideal – perhaps utopian – that an institution will gather around a common understanding of what constitutes shared standards and values of quality. Regardless of how difficult this goal is, it is nevertheless worth trying to reach it collectively.