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Chapter 8

Developing a quality culture through internal dialogue at Vienna University of Economics and Business: 'The medium is still the message'

Oliver Vettori, Karl Ledermüller, Julia Höcher, Julia Zeeh, and Christoph Schwarzl

Founded as the 'Imperial Export Academy' in 1898, Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien (WU) is Europe's largest higher education institution (HEI) focused on business and economics, with more than 22,000 undergraduate, masters, and doctoral students, and 11 academic departments in areas such as business and management, economics, social science, business law, natural science, and foreign languages. It employs some 750 academic staff, carrying out teaching and research, who produced over a thousand works for publication in 2014 (WU, 2015). Students and academic staff are supported by some 550 administrative staff members (WU, 2015).

The strategic mission and orientation of WU stem from its legal obligations, laid down in the Universities Act of 2002. Its mission is to 'contribute to the personal development of the individual, and to the welfare of society and the environment' (UG, 2002: §1). WU is a public university, mostly financed by the state, and although it has full autonomy over its staffing and academic programmes, agreements between the Ministry of Education and the university are subject to triennial performance contracts.

WU is a long-standing member of various international networks of business schools, such as PIM (Partnership in International Management) and CEMS (Community of European Management Schools and International Companies) and is a member of EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System accreditation, awarded by the European Foundation of Management) and AACSB (the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business).

The university law of 2002 requires all public universities to develop internal quality assurance (IQA) systems, although they are free within generous limits to choose any approach that fits their own structures and cultures. Public universities are also obliged under the Quality Assurance Act (QS-HRG) to conduct institutional quality audits to review the status of their IQA. They are allowed to choose any agency in the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies (EQAR) for external quality assurance (EQA). For WU, the audit is effectively equated with its EQUIS accreditation.

Austria follows the Bologna Process, a commitment by European governments 'to pursue complementary higher education reforms in order to establish a 'European Higher Education Area' of compatible national higher education systems' (Keeling, 2006: 207), and this has meant that WU has been and remains strongly influenced by European higher education policies. The Bologna Process was set up with the goals of strengthening the attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education and of fostering student employability and mobility within the region. The process has grown and changed, and now touches upon almost all aspects of higher education. From its inception, the Bologna Process recognized quality assurance and quality enhancement as critical to the achievement of its goals (EHEA, 2015); it was even framed in many member states as the 'quality reform' (EUA, 2007). The process has come increasingly to direct attention to issues such as student engagement in quality assurance processes, feedback mechanisms for teaching and learning, and staff awareness of quality enhancement processes (Gvaramazde, 2008). On the European level one of the most important policy documents on quality assurance is the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG), which functions as a framework of politically agreed principles of good practice to provide guidance on quality assurance for HEIs and quality assurance agencies.

European higher education policy is not the only international influence on WU's strategies and processes: over the course of the last decade, WU has achieved the so called 'triple crown' of major international business school accreditations – EQUIS, AMBA, and AACSB. EQUIS and AACSB are accreditations at institutional level and cover all areas of an institution, including strategy and governance, resource management, quality and development of academic staff, research and teaching, and learning. AMBA (the Association of

MBAs) accredits individual executive education programmes. These accreditations have brought about several crucial developments in the governance and organizational structure of WU, and have also made a major contribution to fostering dialogue on quality issues within the institution. This focus on dialogue is one of the most prominent features of WU's IQA system and a cornerstone of its quality culture approach.

In recent years, the European University Association (EUA) has proposed using the concept of quality culture as a tool for reflection on quality assurance from a cultural perspective (Vettori, 2012). Portraying and describing the IQA system of WU as an application of the concept of quality culture directs attention towards aspects that are less procedural and instrument-oriented than might be expected. Quality culture needs to be understood as 'context' rather than as a set of procedures (cf. Harvey, 2009).

This chapter is based on a case study developed as a part of the IIEP research project on IQA. Drawing from the case study findings, it aims to reflect the current development of the IQA system at WU and its effects on various aspects of the university (i.e. teaching and learning, employability, and management) from the angle of quality culture. It focuses on the social (in particular, communicative) environment in which such procedures have to be embedded in order to become effective.

8.1 IQA at WU – quality culture as a culture of communication

The University Act 2002 granted full institutional autonomy to all Austrian public universities in the establishment and development of their institutional quality management systems, and so led directly to the introduction of major reforms in quality assurance in Austrian higher education. The design of a quality management system, the choice of quality management instruments and procedures, the definition of the competencies of the IQA units, and decisions as to which processes should be implemented at what organizational level were now all left to the universities (Hanft and Kohler, 2007). Public universities were required by the Quality Assurance Act (QS-HRG) to review the status of their IQA by conducting institutional quality audits. They were allowed to choose any agency from EQAR for EQA.

WU's quality assurance framework is based on the 'quality culture' concept developed by the EUA,[25] focusing on aspects such as communication and organizational learning. In essence, the quality culture concept aims at reframing quality assurance as a core value of HEIs instead of an externally imposed chore: 'A culture of quality is one in which everybody in the organization, not just the quality controllers, is responsible for quality' (Crosby, 1986 cited in Harvey and Green, 1993: 16). The approach puts a strong emphasis on the behaviour of stakeholders rather than the on operation of a quality system (Harvey, 2007: 81), or, differently phrased: 'The existence of an in-house quality assurance system does not guarantee a quality culture' (Yorke, 2000: 23). Consequently, quality at WU is thought of as a value that has to be supported by the whole institutional community and nurtured on many levels and by various means.

Putting this idea into practice, however, is not easy: quality assurance – in particular the managerial hopes attached to it – leans heavily towards top-down approaches and centralization, and is always threatening to sway the entire culture in this direction. The only way to counter this tendency is through stakeholder involvement, although there is a strong inherent danger that any attempt to 'engage' different actors in the quality endeavour will make them feel that they are acting out an externally imposed script instead of feeling true ownership of their own efforts.

Overall, WU's IQA system operates on five different dimensions: learning effectiveness, teaching effectiveness, efficiency and resource adequacy, responsiveness to academic and corporate needs, and alignment with external requirements (see *Figure 8.1*).

The last two dimensions can also be regarded as the link between WU's internal and EQA processes. IQA and EQA are regarded as two sides of the same coin, meaning they are closely aligned but offer completely different views on the same phenomenon, and so demand different approaches, on the strategic *and* operational levels.

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25.   WU acted as network coordinator for Round II of EUA's Quality Culture project from 2003 to 2005.

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Figure 8.1   Main quality dimensions of WU's IQA system
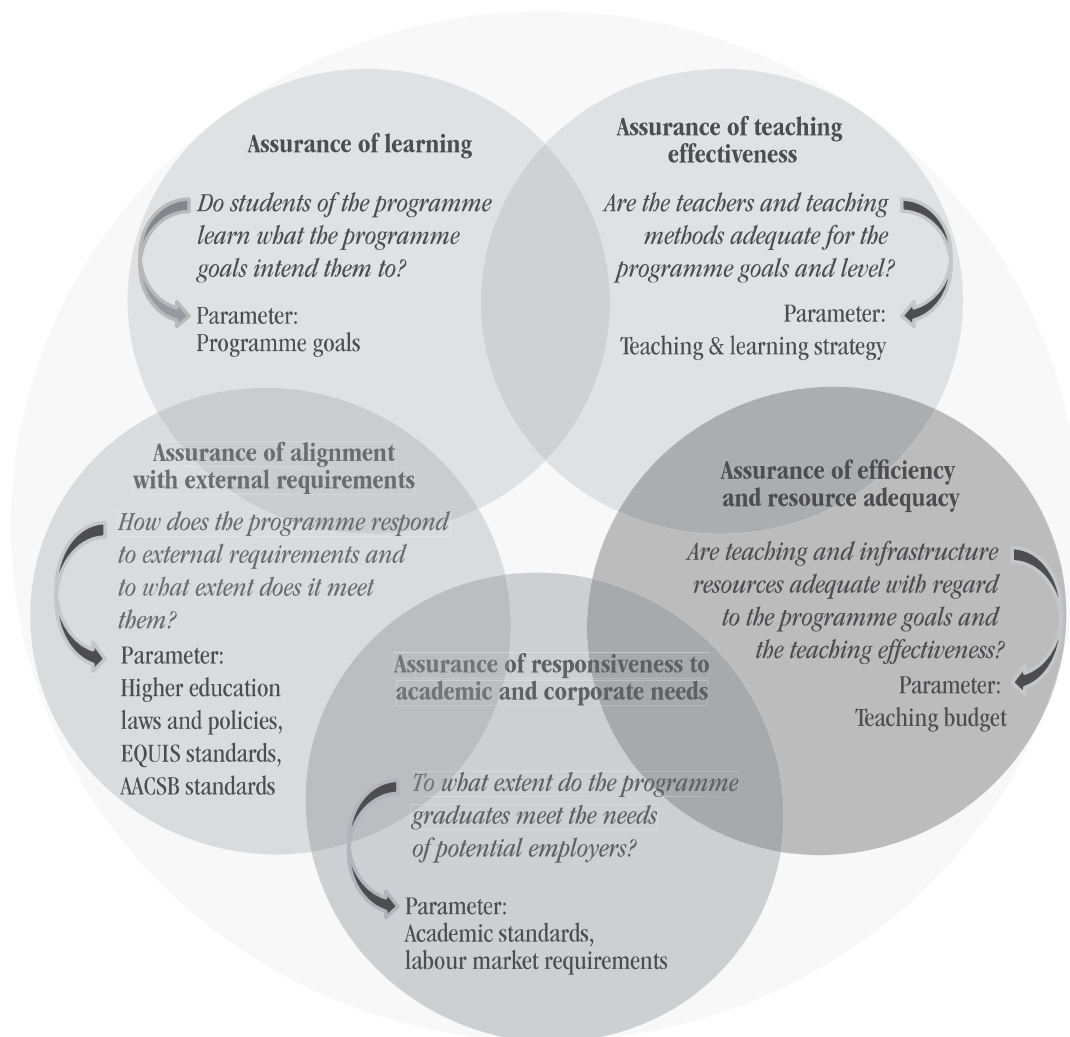
The instruments and activities on each dimension can be grouped into three broad processes: quality analysis, quality development, and quality dialogue. And each of these three processes operates through active communication between actors at all levels. In terms of quality analysis, WU's quality assurance experts have developed and assembled a toolbox of analytical instruments that cover all of the five dimensions and are designed to ensure maximum usability of the data. Reporting of data is therefore recognized as a key element of each analytical tool. Regular analytical tools and methods at WU include programme evaluations, course evaluations, peer feedback processes, learning analytics, workload analyses, study progress analyses, and assessment analytics, as well as initiatives such as Student and Graduate Panel monitoring (where each student cohort of each programme is surveyed at the beginning of, during, and after their studies) or WU's labour market tracking (where graduates' labour market performance is monitored based on their social security data).

Wherever possible, quality assurance processes at WU are an integrated part of actual management or developmental processes – though not always flagged out as such. This corresponds to one of the key principles of WU's quality culture approach. Borrowing from Raymond Williams' (cultural studies) definition of culture (Williams, 1989), quality culture at WU is perceived as a way of life, signalling that quality assurance systems should be less preoccupied with technicalities than with adding value to the sense-making and improvement efforts of individual actors. In a nutshell: quality in teaching and learning is not created by a quality assurance system but in the interactions between teachers and students. The system just needs to ensure that these interactions are as fruitful and productive as possible. Central instruments for quality development at WU include a complex yet at the same time very efficient curriculum review and development process, awards for innovative teaching, excellent teaching, and e-teaching (Vettori and Blüml, 2010), comprehensive tutoring and mentoring programmes, online tutorials for teachers and students (in the form of an open-access Teaching and Learning Academy and a student support area), and one of the best-used institutional e-learning and communication platforms in global higher education – Learn@WU.

Finally, as was indicated by the importance placed on an effective and resource-efficient reporting process and the overarching communication principle within WU's system, considerable time and effort is put into dialogue with internal and external stakeholders about quality, not just in terms of obtaining feedback, but in discussing and deciding changes to make that arise from analytically generated findings. Consequently, generating the right kind of data in a timely fashion is one part, but only one, of a functioning IQA system. Making sure the data are both useful and widely used is of equal importance. In order to ensure the data's usefulness, programme directors give regular feedback on the development of the reporting system. Yet, the structure of the overall system ensures that the approach to problems and challenges does not become too 'socio-technical'. There is general acceptance of the need for joint sense-making sessions among the involved parties, where they can interpret findings and negotiate interpretations, while also establishing agreements on future steps and actions.

Programme evaluations are an example of an IQA activity that leads to internal dialogue. Study programmes and their contexts are constantly
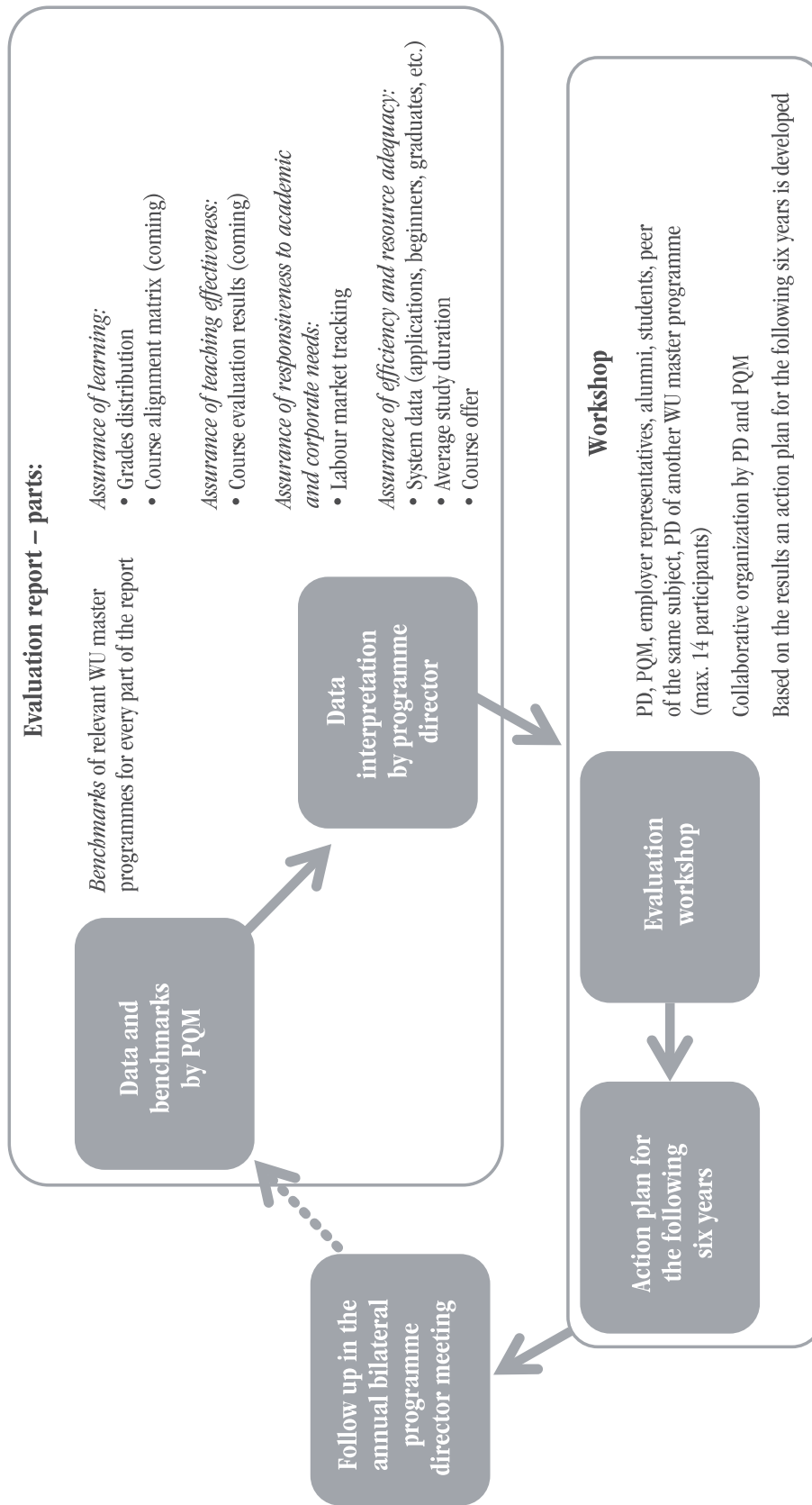
changing, driven by shifts in the number of applications, labour market need, legal conditions, and so on. WU's programme evaluations, conducted approximately every six years, are designed to improve the curriculum using indicators and feedback from relevant stakeholders, such as employers or representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional associations, and social partners.

The annual programme evaluation reports used by programme management, supplemented by additional benchmarking and contextual data, are the foundation of WU's regular programme evaluations (see *Figure 8.2*). Moving away from the traditional format of self-assessment/ peer review, a one-day workshop is at the centre of WU's programme evaluations, involving a variety of relevant actors and stakeholders (programme management, university management, students, alumni, teachers, labour market representatives, and academic peers from abroad). The evaluation workshops are designed to recruit and juxtapose different perspectives on the same problem and to negotiate the most relevant claims, concerns, and issues. Responsibility for the evaluations lies with the respective programme directors (PDs), but close collaboration with WU's Programme and Quality Management (PQM) department ensures that the most important findings are followed up. Similar procedures have been built into most of WU's quality assurance instruments and processes.

Such internal dialogue activities at WU are complemented by various communicative activities with the world and the stakeholders outside the university. A key element of WU's quality assurance system is regular dialogue with employers, the Federal Ministry of Science, Research, and Economy, the EQUIS and AACSB communities, graduates, and peers from other institutions. This is evidenced by the two externally oriented quality assurance dimensions already mentioned: responsiveness to external requirements, and responsiveness to academic and professional needs and standards. Labour market representatives are, as has been described above, a part of any programme development and evaluation process, as are members of professional associations and, in some cases, representatives from Austrian social partner institutions. This is complemented by the engagement of WU's quality assurance experts in national and international discourse, and their contribution to the development of quality assurance via publications and presentations.[26]

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26. WU is the coordinating institution of the Austrian universities' Network for Quality Management and Quality Development.

Figure 8.2   WU's programme evaluation process

Evaluation report – parts:

Benchmarks of relevant WU master programmes for every part of the report

Assurance of learning:
• Grades distribution
• Course alignment matrix (coming)

Assurance of teaching effectiveness:
• Course evaluation results (coming)

Assurance of responsiveness to academic and corporate needs:
• Labour market tracking

Assurance of efficiency and resource adequacy:
• System data (applications, beginners, graduates, etc.)
• Average study duration
• Course offer

Workshop

PD, PQM, employer representatives, alumni, students, peer of the same subject, PD of another WU master programme (max. 14 participants)

Collaborative organization by PD and PQM

Based on the results an action plan for the following six years is developed

Data and benchmarks by PQM

Data interpretation by programme director

Evaluation workshop

Action plan for the following six years

Follow up in the annual bilateral programme director meeting

Analysis of WU's communicative efforts in developing its internal quality culture (as the foundation of the IQA system) has been a pivotal aspect of the IIEP research. As has already been mentioned, WU's IQA system is rooted in the belief that the role of language and communication is pivotal when setting up an IQA system that is effective in terms of stakeholder engagement and satisfaction. Every organization relies on communication, and the effectiveness of building trust and participatory structures through regular stakeholder communication is universally emphasized in international quality assurance discourse (cf. Vettori and Loukkola, 2013). Social meaning has to be created by the actors themselves; it cannot be given or attributed to them by others. Meaning itself is conceived as fluid rather than static, and as a process rather than an outcome (cf. Vettori and Warm, 2015).

8.2 Assessing WU's quality culture

The views of the different internal stakeholders on the usefulness of WU's IQA elements – and the actors' awareness of their existence – were at the centre of the empirical research that this chapter is based on. Different data sources were triangulated for an in-depth exploration of stakeholder perceptions of the university's IQA system. The perceptions of academics from three departments – finance, accounting, and statistics; socio-economics; and foreign language business communication – and administrative staff from all over the university were investigated using two online surveys[27] specifically adapted to those IQA instruments most familiar to academic and administrative staff at WU. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions[28] were also conducted with senior management, academic and administrative staff, and students in order to capture their perceptions in greater depth. In addition, data drawn from an internal analysis of strengths and weaknesses conducted by WU's Department for Programme and Quality Management, and information from various internal documents (such as the strategic development plan, annual reports, and accreditation reports), were used in the study.

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27. The survey questionnaire was disseminated to 451 academic staff, of whom 70 (15.52 per cent) responded, and to 86 administrative staff, 39 (45.35 per cent) of whom responded.
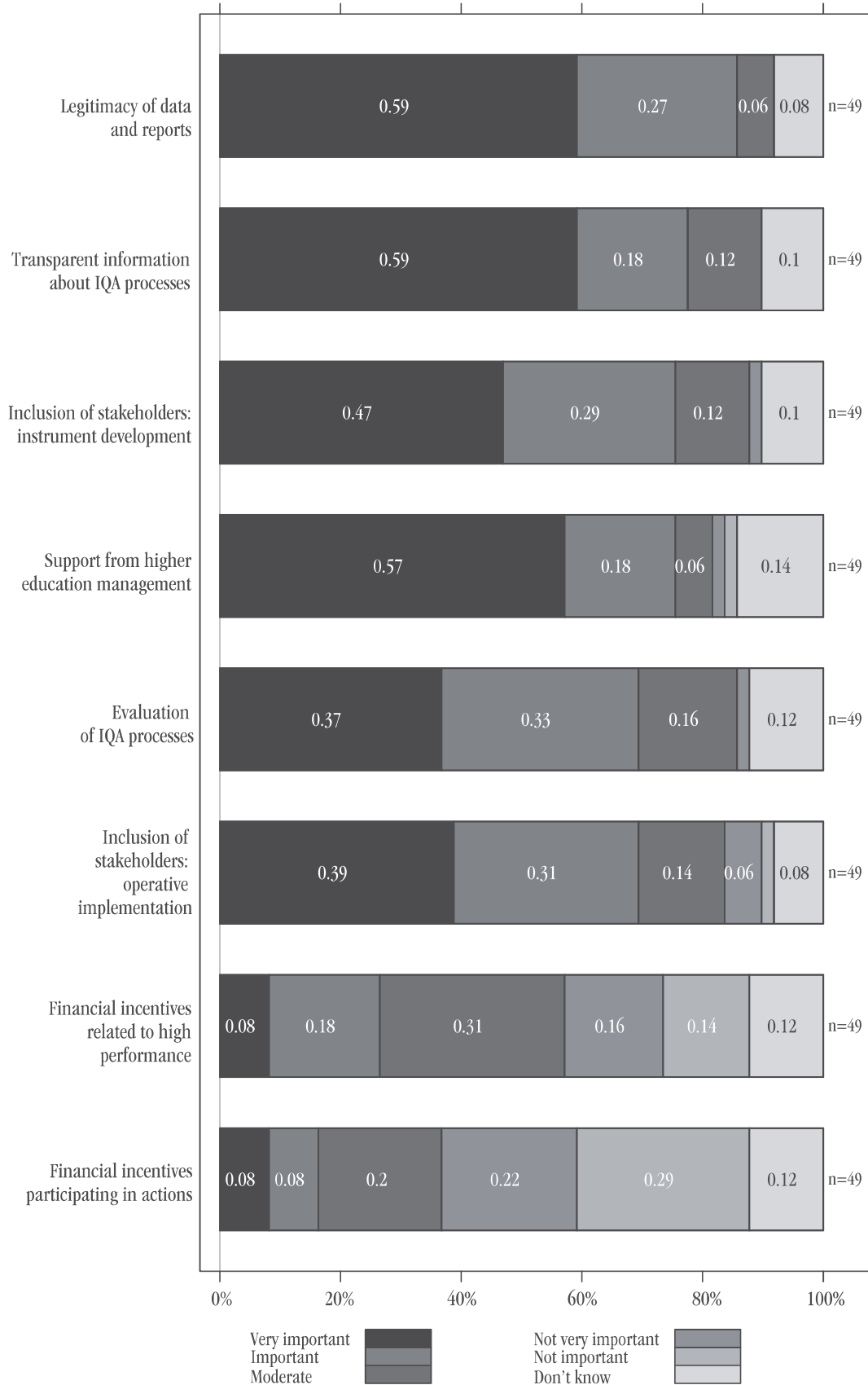28. Eleven senior and middle-level academic and administrative decision-makers (such as department chairs and programme managers) were selected for individual face-to-face interviews or focus group discussions.

Overall, all staff rate WU's IQA approach and the system into which it is translated as highly effective and reflexive, particularly in the area of teaching and learning. One department head identified the main strengths of the IQA system at WU as the high level of innovation and the large pool of available IQA instruments and processes.

The quantitative data clearly showed that even though academic staff experience intense IQA activities in teaching and learning, they are not reluctant to engage with them, and there is a comparatively high level of demand for further measures and activities, although the majority are satisfied with the current level (Vettori *et al.*, 2017). Administrative staff would like to see more efforts made in their working areas, as well as additional training to improve their work. Overall, however, there is little evidence of resistance to more quality assurance, indicating that quality culture is already rooted within WU. This was demonstrated convincingly by one of the interviewees, an academic quality promoter at departmental level. He wanted to see IQA integrated into daily work: no formal IQA system would be needed if everyone internalized the relevant aspects and applied them to their everyday practice; the main task of the quality assurance unit should be to set a framework and provide the necessary infrastructure, such as reports, or an online teaching support area.

Another quality promoter proposed that the implementation of quality assurance instruments and processes should largely be decentralized, as the variety of situations and challenges in individual departments made it necessary to manage them locally. Although keeping a balance between centralization and decentralization is an ongoing challenge, WU seems to have found an effective equilibrium: the decentralized programme units and central administration share responsibilities for day-to-day programme management; every academic programme director is supported by an administrative programme coordinator who is in in regular contact with the vice-rector for academic programmes and student affairs and the Programme and Quality Management Department; monitoring processes support programme management in identifying problems and areas for development such as providing regular data on admission numbers, student performance, retention, and satisfaction, and the jobs market integration of graduates.

**Figure 8.3   Success factors of IQA from the perspective
of academic staff**

Legitimacy of data and reports: 0.59 | 0.27 | 0.06 | 0.08   n=49

Transparent information about IQA processes: 0.59 | 0.18 | 0.12 | 0.1   n=49

Inclusion of stakeholders: instrument development: 0.47 | 0.29 | 0.12 | 0.1   n=49

Support from higher education management: 0.57 | 0.18 | 0.06 | 0.14   n=49

Evaluation of IQA processes: 0.37 | 0.33 | 0.16 | 0.12   n=49

Inclusion of stakeholders: operative implementation: 0.39 | 0.31 | 0.14 | 0.06 | 0.08   n=49

Financial incentives related to high performance: 0.08 | 0.18 | 0.31 | 0.16 | 0.14 | 0.12   n=49

Financial incentives participating in actions: 0.08 | 0.08 | 0.2 | 0.22 | 0.29 | 0.12   n=49

Legend:
Very important
Important
Moderate
Not very important
Not important
Don't know

Most WU academics felt that the legitimacy of the data and reports generated by the system and the transparency of information about IQA (see *Figure 8.3*) were the most important factors in the success of WU's IQA. This is only to be expected: if the methodology behind the instruments is sound and the data are trustworthy, decision-making based on them will command acceptance in an academic community where high academic and scientific standards are accepted as the basis for discourse and progress. Correspondingly, almost every interviewee from the university's management praised the professional and efficient way in which data are gathered and analysed at WU. One programme director saw a particular strength in the strong empirical evidence that IQA provided (for instance, alumni and student surveys) as a starting-point for any discussion – encouraging and supporting informed discussion is one of the foundational principles of WU's IQA system. Another programme manager emphasized the professional processing of large amounts of data, the gathering of indicators, and, again, a sound empirical basis as key strengths of the system.

It also became clear, however, that the generation and analysis of data is not sufficient: effective communication is crucial – transforming data into information and delivering it to the actors who need it. Growing professionalization in reporting over the past few years was seen to be a vital development in this respect. According to one programme manager, compiling the key indicators of the programme director's report in the central Programme and Quality Management Department enables the programme director and programme coordinator to analyse relevant trends without their having to create a specific reporting system.

These findings indicate the importance of an effective formal communication architecture as the structural foundation of a quality culture. Reporting processes need to be a part of this architecture. Individual responsibility within an IQA system built around a quality culture does not mean, though, that there is no need for informed decision-making; rather, shared sense-making efforts have to be a part of the overall communication design.

Although WU's information system for IQA, the backbone of its managerial processes, was held in high regard by all actor groups (with exception of the students, who rarely come in contact with it), the authors' analysis of the system found there was room for improvement. First, we found too many isolated reports that simply followed the logic

of the survey or data query upon which they were based. A management information system needs to be more than a data warehouse that collates data sources; it should bring the right kind of data to users, and make sense of the findings. There has to be a structured environment in which people can exchange their views on problems and challenges, and a climate in which they are willing to do so, defining a problem and developing acceptable solutions (both at the heart of any IQA cycle in higher education). In this process, aligning different stakeholder perspectives is a key function – and a key challenge – for an IQA system. This has to be applied across disciplines and roles within an institution – and in awareness of the need to balance centralized and decentralized responsibilities.

According to one senior manager at the rectorate level, WU has a long tradition of constructive dialogue, something which seems to be a sine qua non for a communicative culture. Such a culture of mutual understanding and discourse about quality, which WU has been cultivating for more than a decade now, has encouraged actors at every level to engage with quality improvement efforts. As a result, WU's academic staff regard incentives and rewards as largely irrelevant to the success of IQA, as was shown by the survey results (Vettori *et al.*, 2017).

WU's clear communication structures and constant dialogue, however, is also appreciated by a completely different actor group – students. In their focus group interviews, students defined the success of the IQA system not in terms of its processes but by its impact on their learning gains. To them, the quality of education is characterized by clear responsibilities, effective contact persons who support them, an adequate staff: student ratio, and regular communication between administrative and academic staff and students.

The student focus group interviews revealed a potential weakness of the current system. By their own accounts, students are only familiar with some small parts of the overall system; they lack any 'backstage insights', and are rarely informed about its achievements. As with other groups, students comprehend quality via proxies, but their proxies differ from those of the other groups. For students, the proxies are the image of the university, the duration of their studies, and their prospects of employability. As long as feedback loops are only implemented in one direction (i.e. with the students providing feedback but not knowing what happens afterwards), neither the students nor the university's

management can benefit fully from cooperation on quality development. In other words, the communicative quality culture at WU needs to be extended to include students and graduates in a more meaningful way. Infusing processes with meaning and helping actors to make sense of the organization and its environment are, in our view, two of the most intriguing (and important) challenges for quality assurance systems – at WU and in general.

8.3 Conclusions

This chapter reflects the role of quality culture in the IQA system at WU. The case study findings indicate that this concept provides a strong foundation for IQA processes to be integrated into the work of different units and stakeholders in the university. However, the achievement of a quality culture is incomplete, notably in the matter of the restricted involvement of students in IQA processes. The following are some of the recent institutional efforts and approaches to further strengthen quality culture at the university:

True dialogue and frequent negotiation of different perspectives and interpretations are necessary. Such an approach does not only fulfil a social function. Feedback obtained through different instruments is usually contradictory and does not offer clear, precise information on the causes of a problem or the potential solutions – deriving actions from such mixed feedback is not as easy as is implied in political or scholarly discourse. Consequently, WU is constantly experimenting with the format of its analytical studies and reports in efforts to make them connectable to different actors' realities and ensure that the information is actually taken up and fed into intra- and inter-institutional discourses. Recent developments in this regard include the development of 'theme reports' that compile data and information from various sources and integrate them into assessments of one complex yet relevant topic (such as an employment report, or a social status report); or the production of 'info bits' – short e-mails containing one particularly timely or new piece of information that are directed to the university's senior management and service units. In order to bridge the sense-making gap between quality assurance professionals and students, and to complete the information loop as described above, an improvement report is currently being finalized that informs students of steps that have been taken based on their feedback (and thus also signals to them the impact of their contributions to the IQA system).

Communications are difficult to manage or control. It is fatally easy to create serious unintended consequences. We have already argued that information is rarely interpreted in the way the communicator intends it to be. Even communication channels are usually imbued with meaning and treated accordingly. Putting the latest quality assurance achievements in the official institutional newsletter might stir the interest of external stakeholders, but can also lead to the internal view that this is 'just another marketing trend' (cf. Vettori and Loukkola, 2013). The fact that social meaning is predominantly created and conveyed through language leads us back to the important question of how issues, changes, and innovations are labelled and framed. Whether an activity is characterized as 'a get-together for developmental purposes'; or 'an annual performance appraisal' makes a huge difference. Announcing a new process as 'a necessary new quality assurance instrument' signals something completely different than calling it 'a way of making the curriculum development process more efficient'. At WU, for example, the term 'internal quality assurance' is hardly ever used in internal communications. Exploiting the strong link between IQA and programme management, most issues that would be viewed as part of the former (at least from an outside perspective) are framed as being part of the latter. Academic programmes have been a part of the structure and routine of HEIs for decades, hence the language related to them is far more familiar, unthreatening, and compatible with the institution's historically grown cultures, structures, and processes. In this way, a quality culture is not so much 'developed' as it emerges. Ultimately, it is the actions and interactions of the people, within and outside the institution, that constitute a university (much in the same way as the quality of teaching and learning is a co-production of teachers and learners; managers and quality assurance professionals have a merely contextual role). Consequently, any successful system builds on these relations and strengthens them. In this regard, understanding IQA as the management of relationships is certainly an approach to be recommended to any higher education institution.

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