

## **Quality Culture: idea, ideal, rhetoric, reality, opportunity, challenge. (0105)**

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### **Outline**

The idea that a quality culture in teaching and learning is something that can be planned, built and managed has grown in currency over the last decade. The Bologna process has focussed attention on the need for a shared European definition of quality and an understanding of the structures and systems that might help higher education institutions to enhance the quality of their educational provision. The term “quality culture” has been formalised and widely publicised through the European Universities Association (EUA) Quality Culture Project and is increasingly visible in the literature on university management.

The definition of a quality culture as proposed by the EUA has a number of implications for the university community, and in particular those with a management or leadership responsibility. As an ideal, it points to an institution-wide commitment to the permanent enhancement of quality. This requires not only the development of robust systems, structures and processes including those to collect and use data, recruit, develop and reward staff and share good practice but also that managers and leaders pay attention to the personal beliefs and values of members of the university community. Effective quality leadership might require significant attention to building a shared culture through, for example, recruitment decisions, training and development activities, mentoring schemes, reward and recognition programmes and promotion criteria. Students, too, may need significant support to develop the personal values and beliefs that help to sustain a healthy learning culture.

A fundamental characteristic of the quality approach in Europe and, increasingly, in other international contexts is the autonomous ability of institutions to define their own quality criteria and the systems and structures that support quality management and development. Institutions are diverse and will, inevitably, demonstrate different quality cultures: four such cultures are suggested in a 2008 paper by Harvey and Stensaker, who argue that these differential orientations create a challenge for those agencies charged with developing and managing sectorally-appropriate quality initiatives. According to Harvey and Stensaker, the success of such initiatives may “depend on empirical investment into the culture, the identity and organisational climate of the given institution”.

In Scotland, the rhetoric of enhancement has strongly influenced the direction of higher education institutions. The Scottish Enhancement Framework, which includes the ELIR (Enhancement-Led Institutional Review) process and the Enhancement Themes have focussed attention on the working practices and beliefs that might support a commitment to continual improvement.

As part of the Enhancement Themes work, the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) and QAA Scotland commissioned three projects on the theme of Managing Enhancement: Quality Cultures, Systems and Structures between 2008 and 2010. The projects were focussed on the general and key question of how to create and nurture cultures of quality enhancement and structures and systems to support quality enhancement in learning and teaching activities within higher education institutions.

Among a number of related aims, the work was designed to uncover the reality of current institutional thinking about the development of quality cultures in Scotland and to find examples of effective practice that could be shared across the sector. The authors interviewed senior staff responsible for learning and teaching quality at 19 Scottish higher education institutions and also spoke to heads of educational development units, members of the Scottish Teaching Quality Forum (TQF) and to student representatives.

Participants were asked to reflect on what they understood to be the main components of a quality culture and to consider the characteristics of an effective management system to support that culture. All the groups of participants readily described an idealised culture of quality that might be an aspiration for institutions. These cultures encompassed ideas of free communication, collegiality, personal and collective responsibility and openness to innovation. However, a number of tensions contribute to the reality of how many institutions manage and encourage quality development. For example, most of these ideal cultural landscapes did not highlight quality assurance activities, but these activities were often referred to as the “bedrock” of a quality culture by senior managers. Similarly, a number of participants recognised that the reality of academic job design and the many challenges facing academic staff created a significant challenge to the creation of a free and collegiate culture open to innovation.

Participants from all groups questioned whether a single institutional culture was an achievable aspiration. In reality, an institutional landscape comprising many sub-cultures can create tensions, not least because of a widespread assumption that the academic culture should be privileged. However, academic territories are not the only point of contact for students and other areas of institutional endeavour have the potential to profoundly affect the student experience. Administrative and support staff, contract researchers and others are part of the university community and might also be given the opportunity to reflect, engage in discussion and debate and enhance their practice, preferably in collaboration with academic colleagues. Otherwise there is a risk that enhancement remains the domain of a privileged few and the net impact on the student experience may be diminished.

Students in particular were critical of the rhetoric of quality in their institutions and some questioned whether the attention paid to the development of quality activities was simply “for show”. Whilst students agreed that efforts to involve students in discussions and decision-making about the quality of their education were beginning to have an impact, there is little evidence of the development of a shared culture between students and (academic) staff members.

These tensions create significant challenges for higher education institutions, not least in building consensus and trust between sub-cultures. Institutions might consider how groups of community members could be given the opportunity to develop a shared understanding of the characteristics of a quality culture within their own organisation and to consider how that culture might be nurtured. Findings from this study suggest that community members with linking roles within the institution (for example, vice-deans academic, heads of department) and those who work across the institution (for example, education development departments) might have particular influence in this area.

## References

EUA Quality Cultures Project

<http://www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/quality-assurance/projects/quality-culture-project.aspx>

Harvey, L and Stensaker, B (2008) Quality Culture: understandings, boundaries and linkages. European Journal of Education. Vol 43, No 4