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Quality in context – embedding improvement

Paper proposal form

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Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Short bio (150 words max):

Vanja Perovšek is a Quality development advisor at the University of Ljubljana, at the University unit for quality, analyses and reporting. Her focus is the development of quality system and culture at the university and fostering of quality at the faculty level. She is fostering the use of participatory methods in order to creatively connect different actors in quality development. She is involved in the development of quality culture through providing opportunities for skills developments and trainings of the employees, different conferences, and other events for knowledge transfer. She is involved in international projects for development of quality systems and culture in HE. In addition to her work at the university, she is an external evaluator of HEIs, and conducted several trainings for external evaluators as well as other workshops.

After the Forum, the full text of all papers presented at the Forum will be published on the Forum website. If you do not wish your paper to be published, please indicate so here. This has no consequences on the selection of the papers.

Proposal

Title:

The Quality Culture Paradox and its Implications – is there a Way Out?

Abstract (150 words max):

In addition to exploring the quality culture paradox in the HE area the paper is identifying practical ways for in-depth quality culture evolution and change, drawing both from literature and practice. Authors' master's thesis is an important basis for the paper, including a case-study of quality culture shift at the University of Ljubljana by employing empowerment based approaches.

The quality culture definitions used in HE neglect the complexity, defining it as an ideal quality culture - an improvement-oriented culture and not as an organisational culture focused on quality aspects (more narrow than the organisational, but just as diverse).



The concept further neglects the need of a learning experience as a necessary factor in the culture development and favours the setting up of pretence quality cultures, without in-depth organisational change.

In contrast to mechanistic, new change approaches are dialogue-based and see organisations as living human systems. They prove influential, since the dialogue has a formative or degenerative influence on the organisations.

The paper is based on: research / policy / practice (select one)

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

The intent

This paper intends to question the existing assumptions in the HE QA community by identifying the “quality culture paradox”, to point out the vicious circle of “quality game” stemming from these assumptions, and to gain more understanding for the mistrust and the reluctance of people we would like to engage into quality improvements, towards quality assurance and development.

In addition, the intent is to bring more awareness of the possibilities for in-depth influencing the quality culture, by engaging the organisation/group into a meaningful learning/social experience, which enables the evolvement and change of the culture.

This paper is pointing out the lack of both conceptual coherence and practical approaches when planning and implementing changes in HEIs, as well when evaluating them.

Poor understanding of how to facilitate development of an organisation in practice by empowering it, instead of implementing senseless changes is a source of perpetual dissatisfaction amongst the HEI leadership, QA practitioners as well as people we would like to involve into quality development.

Organisational change

QA&D is closely connected to the way we think about organisations and the organisational change. Most of the assumptions about organisational life and change



are not conscious however they strongly affect governance, approaches to quality, everyday organisational life and attempts of change.

The **mechanistic paradigm** (e.g. viewing an organisation as a machine, employees as cogs in the mechanism, focus on problems) is still influencing almost all aspects of organisational life, reflecting in poor workplace engagement (Gallup 2014) and signalling something is very wrong with the way organisations function and attempt changes (Laloux 2014, 62).

However, emerging approaches to organisational change are conversation based, they are understanding organisations as **living human systems** (Lewis et al. 2008, 7). Dialogical change methodologies as discursive coordination with a specific purpose prove to be more effective than old mechanistic problem-based practices (Gergen 2004, 3–9). The shift of the paradigm is a very distinct one, since it is attempting change from a surplus, abundance (e.g. “what works around here?”), leaving behind old scarcity logic, the focus on weaknesses, shortage, blame-finding, problem-solving... (Laloux 2014, Lewis 2008).

Unfortunately within the HE QA community we can find the prevalence of the mechanistic paradigm. The examples are the QA manuals, the ESG, the relentless pushing of the “good” or even “best” practice “copy-paste” principles, the prevailing discourse in the documents, as well as at the events, the continuous demand of better and more detailed recipes...

Even the quality culture, as understood in the European higher educational area, which is often understood or presented as a concept more in tune with the complexity and the diversity of HE, and further away from the industrial approaches to quality, is heavily afflicted with the mechanistic paradigm. It seems to be hijacked by the value of efficiency, and we are confronted by demands that HEIs need to have quality culture with the same elements as the most successful (now known) organisations, having great leadership, wide participatory deeply embedded practices, all employees passionately living the values and the purpose of the organisation in every moment, strong improvement focus, empowerment of the employees... (Adebanjo 1999, EUA



2006, Muresan 2007; EVALAG 2012; Greenberg 2014). Perhaps a good ideal to be striving towards, and a very admirable situation if the quality culture of a particular HEI has these traits but a very demanding and even detrimental standard to push to every HEI and every country.

The quality culture paradox

In addition, from the definitions it is possible to identify a core misunderstanding of the quality culture concepts, since quality culture definitions used in HE are in conflict with concepts about the organisational culture, which is very stable and thus challenging to change. The definitions are neglecting a crucial element – a necessity of a common social/learning experience for the development of an organisational culture. Quality culture is a culture with a more specific focus, a culture related to how the organisation or a group goes about quality. It is part of the broader organisational culture, however it varies considerably from organisation to organisation (as does the organisational culture).

The quality culture as understood and used in HE (and also in some other areas) reveals a deep misunderstanding of the organisational culture, its nature, stability, how it emerges and the existing possibilities to change it.

Engaging into Quality Culture Project, EUA puts this definition forward:

“quality culture refers to an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and it is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand the cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts. Thus the cultural/psychological element refers back to the individual staff members while the structural/managerial refers back to the institution. These two aspects, however, are not to be considered separately: both elements must be linked through good communication, discussion and participatory processes at institutional level.” (EUA 2006, 10)



The EUA definition reveals quality culture is defined as a **particular kind of an organisational culture**, one that intends to **enhance quality permanently**. It also reveals the usual misconception of **mixing the quality culture with structural elements** – the quality system, which both influences the quality culture and is an expression of it, but cannot be part of the quality culture itself.

This is not an isolated view, other definitions reveal **idealistic version of quality culture**, mixing it up with the learning organisations properties (Muresan 2007) and demanding of all the participating in the organisation even passion about quality (Greenberg 2014).

In a different approach Cole and Scott (2000, 274–275) emphasise quality culture **“represents a way of thinking about and defining quality”**. It can be internally or externally oriented, focused on complying with standards, innovation... They point out three prevailing quality cultures that can be dominating in an organisation, regarding their strongest focus: error detection, error prevention and continuous creative quality.

This means the quality culture is the existing organisational culture within the organisation, connected to quality – the focus is on quality, but it is **part of the existing organisational culture**. It includes all the assumptions, behaviour, symbols, values... connected to quality. E.g. it can be blame or empowerment oriented, controlling or trust oriented... Even the mistrust and defensiveness we often encounter in HE upon introduction of changes is part of the existing quality culture within an organisation.

The concepts about organisational culture could be useful to understand the complexity and also to further emphasise the prevailing misconceptions about quality culture in HE.

Schein (1985 in Dauber et al. 2012, 4) developed one of most cited models with a high level of abstraction and complexity reduction, mainly consisting of three domains: basic underlying assumptions¹ (not visible), espoused values² (may appear through

¹ Not visible, taken for granted

² May appear through surveys



surveys), and artifacts³ (visible); Schein distinguishes between observable and unobservable elements of culture.

Organisational culture is determining people's behaviour in the organisation, the way people dress, joke, and deal with conflict... Schein (2010, 28) emphasised organisational culture concept implies "structural stability, depth, breadth, and patterning or integration."

Since it is **developed together with the identity of the group**, it gives the group predictability and meaning, thus it is **easier to distort the new data than leave the existing culture** behind. Due to its' unconscious aspect it is not possible to observe the organisational culture, only its' manifestations (interactions, rituals, group norms, espoused values, formal philosophy, rules of the game, climate, embedded skills, habits of thinking, mental models, and/or linguistic paradigms, shared meanings, "root metaphors" or integrating symbols, formal rituals and celebrations). When culture is developed, it is dominating all activities of the group. Schein sees it as a product of a social learning:

"The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore to be thought a new member as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems." (Schein 2010, 18)

However, not all groups develop an organisational culture, due to the lack of a shared social learning experience (a major turnover, change of mission or primary task...) (ibid. 18). He is also mentioning splitting into subgroups, or a differentiated and/or fragmented cultures (Martin in Schein 2010, 18), which is a situation we can often encounter within HEIs due to the complexity of the (competing) purposes and other factors.

³ Visible



The existence of fragmented organisational/quality cultures is very present at the University of Ljubljana, thus the development of shared culture is very challenging. In line with Schein (2010,018) the importance of a shared learning experience in evolving a shared organisational/quality culture can be observed in case of the University of Ljubljana in two recent instances:

- the preparation for institutional reaccreditation during 2012 used as a learning experience, influencing an emergence of shared quality culture connecting 26 very diverse faculties and academies;
- Project KUL (2013–2015) employing empowerment methods resulting in deepening and evolving quality culture.

Why the misconceptions?

The idealistic definitions of the quality culture and high demands are an expression of the aspirations within the HE QA community, as well as the society. A very valid need to change the existing way organisations function however can be used in a constructive way in order to achieve the desired changes and break out of the deficiency-focused logic, the vicious circle of constant improvement pressure and relying on standards and recipes. Though this usually means giving up some control, sharing some responsibilities in terms of the process as well as goals, since they can be emerging and changing through the process of organisational change.

EUA acknowledges, that “developing a quality culture takes time and effort, and it is closely related to values, beliefs and a cultural element, which cannot change quickly” (Lukkola and Zhang 2010, 11).

This is indicating that the quality culture is regarded as an ideal, that needs to be developed and not as the existing quality culture in the organisation. In addition, the necessity of stating the obvious - the cultural element in quality *culture* is indicative of the prevailing presence of assumptions and beliefs that have nothing to with culture (e.g. structural aspects) – the culture being overshadowed by the prevailing beliefs and assumptions about quality. And this is indicative of the (lack of) awareness and



knowledge in the QA community in HE – of the existing quality culture in QA HE community.

EUA EQC's part three workshops identified "a number of assumptions that seem to be deeply encoded in the language of quality assurance" (Vettori 2012, 9). The idea of continuous improvement seems to be a universally acceptable one and can be found across a great number of QA policies and strategies but can, in combination with output logic, transform into a demotivating threat (ibid, 9). Furthermore, it is indicative of the presence of mechanistic paradigm in quality assurance and present within how we perceive quality culture.

In this paper I would like to strengthen the awareness that the existence and the maturity of a quality culture is dependent of the existence, kind and maturity of an organisational culture in the organisation or a group. After asking whether there is a shared quality culture present (or it is perhaps emerging or fragmented), we can ask the question of the prevailing features (like standard and stability or risk and innovation oriented), and not evaluating HEI as good or bad by stating whether (ideal) quality culture is there or not.

An organisational/quality culture is existing in case it was developed through a strong learning/social experience. This means it is not possible to successfully force, or simply standardise the development or change of the organisational culture (thus also not quality culture) at least not in the desired direction.

The effects of the quality culture paradox: institutions playing the "quality game"

Due to the limited resources, pressures and the lack of practical means to facilitate organisational change organisations often shift their focus towards making good impressions, by changing structures, inventing new fancy units, projects and names. Alvesson (in Gaber et al. 2015, 16) notes the organisations resort to grandiosity, illusions and zero-sum games, chasing short-term goals, being the best, most different, and attractive...which in HE, in addition expresses in chasing the rankings by all means possible.



The implications of the misconceptions of the quality culture in HE are profound. Both the HEIs and the agencies are putting vast amount of energy and resources into playing the “quality game”, trying to mimic the features of very successful organisational cultures, forgetting that the elements of these organisational cultures are context dependant and mostly took these organisations decades to develop. These are mostly organisations that are “living their purpose”, embodying it in all their activities (Laloux 2014, 3–4, Valve 2012). Most of them are very connected to their purpose, they developed meaningful participatory practices to involve employees into a vast spectrum of decision-making (from strategic to operational), have a very flat organisational model, and are investing a lot into employee empowerment.

In case we would agree that “ideal” organisational/quality culture in HE would have these elements (e.g. manifesting the purpose and values through the activities, empowerment of employees and students, meaningful participatory decision-making processes), the institutions could use the time, energy and resources, to map the elements and features of their organisational culture, then question whether the “ideal” organisational culture makes sense to them, employ some activities towards changing, but keeping in mind their specific context and purpose.

The “copy-paste” principle inherent in the notions about quality culture in HE is hindering the development of successful quality cultures that would be aligned to the existing HEIs’, thus hindering organic change and the growth of a more meaningful organisational/quality culture. Instead, the “copy-paste” principle is fostering pretence quality cultures and “quality games”.

This means also hindering the possibility of the development of quality cultures that would possibly have even better features then the now required “ideal” ones.

Possibilities to influence the quality culture change

The awareness of the stability and thus the difficulty in changing the existing organisational/quality culture leaves us with a question whether there is a good way to facilitate its change. Since most organisations are not aware of these possibilities, even with awareness that something is clearly not working, they resort to old recipes and try

to instigate change from a mechanistic point of view (e.g. prescribing the change by pushing new standard).

Some authors are raising awareness about the dilemmas and wrong assumptions in quality assurance and development (Harvey 2009; Vettori 2012), however most organisations are still left with the **dilemma what to do in practice**, pushed by the internal and external demands for change and a very scarce knowledge of how to facilitate the change in practice.

Harvey (2009, 9) in his critical analyses of quality culture concept asserts the key point “that quality culture is not a process or set of procedures, much less one that can be imported and imposed”. He is asking the question whether it is possible to “encourage the development of the quality culture” and suggest to **entirely disengage the development of quality culture from sets of assurance procedures**.

He states that the “developing a quality culture is synonymous with developing a self-critical and reflective community of practitioners” which is in line with the concepts of the organisational culture – as opposed to the prevailing quality culture assumptions in HE.

In developing quality culture Harvey (2009, 9) proposes the use of a **transformative learning approach**, which demands a critical dialectical approach from both the teacher and the student, a reconceptualization of the pedagogical process and the purpose of learning and, depending on that, of the evaluation of quality. A quality culture thus embodies professional reflection as a learning community, “intrinsic to a way of life, a way of thinking and a way of coming to understand” (ibid., 9).

Vettori (2012, 9) emphasises **conflict plays an important role** “for understanding and enhancing our institutional quality cultures”.

Similarly Gergen (2004, 9) analysing dialogic change methodologies identifies inclusivity of the dialogical processes and the equality of diverse voices (polyvocality) as important factors needed for the **transformative mode of the dialogue**.



University of Ljubljana employed constructive transformative dialogue involving all the faculties and academies into shared quality development during a project KUL (2013–2015), by using **empowerment based approaches**, mainly appreciative inquiry in combination with other dialogic change methodologies. Appreciative inquiry is especially useful since it is both philosophically coherent and very practical (Lewis 2008, 33). It proved as a very useful approach for facilitating meaningful learning/social experiences.

The project resulted in **evolvments and shifts in the quality culture**, both visible from the feedback of the participants in the activities and the ripple effect noted in the analyses of the self-evaluation reports at the faculty level towards the end of the project. The participants were on numerous occasions engaged in **constructive discourse**, which engaged them into quality development despite of usual mistrust and reluctance towards quality assurance and development. The change in perception of quality assurance and development was noted (shift from QA as administrative burden or even a threat towards enjoying the cooperation and empowerment), changed perception of the central administration and increased intrinsic motivation for engaging in quality development. From the reports a shift towards more awareness of quality and reflection was noted. The success of the employed empowerment approaches can be noted also from the **formal inclusion of empowerment methods into the quality system of university** (enhancement-led visits to the faculties) (Perovšek 2016, 124–130).

Implications for the HE QA community

The possibility for the in-depth involvement and change of the existing quality culture lies in **facilitating meaningful shared learning/social experiences. It means engaging into quality as transformation, attempting changes from the “organisation as a living human system” perspective and employing transformative discourse, the dialogic change methodologies.**

Drawing from the presented quality culture paradox there are at least three areas that require further attention:



- The definitions of quality culture, used in HEIs and especially the QA agencies need to be developed in line with the theoretical understandings of the complexity of organisational culture. The inclusion of the quality culture as part of QA criteria in evaluations needs to be questioned.
- The awareness of the nature and complexity of the quality culture needs to be further raised in the HE community through the understanding of its concepts.
- The empowerment based approaches to facilitate change and development, as well as viewing the organisation/group as a living human system need to be further investigated in QA.

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Discussion questions:

Is there a difference between the notions of the necessary perpetual improvement and the in-depth quality culture evolvement and change?

How is it possible to distinguish between the “quality game” and quality culture?

Where are the possibilities to facilitate meaningful shared learning/social experience through dialogic change methodologies?

What are the practical experiences in engaging dialogic change methodologies?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 25 July 2016 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.