Cultures of Quality Enhancement: a short overview of the literature for higher education policy makers and practitioners

George Gordon and Catherine Owen

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1. This briefing paper

This paper is one output from a study commissioned by the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) and QAA Scotland. The study is focussed on the general and key question of how to create and nurture cultures of quality enhancement in learning and teaching activities within higher education institutions. This work is informed by ideas of 'learner-centeredness' and reflection already promoted through the Scottish higher education sector's quality enhancement programme.

This short paper focuses on the impact of current quality-related activities on university cultures, considers alternative strategies and synthesises recommendations for action from the literature.

2. Introduction to culture

Our rapidly changing landscape means that it is no longer helpful to think about quality merely in terms of maintaining standards **(Stensaker, 2007)**. Instead, higher education institutions, like many other organisations, are being encouraged to take a developmental approach to quality **(Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003)**. This implies that organisations, as well as individuals within those organisations, are continually changing and learning as they cope with new situations and expectations. The ability of any organisation to adapt effectively is influenced by its culture. The most straightforward definition of organisational culture is "the way we do things around here" and it is easy to recognise that things are done differently in different organisations, even when those organisations share similar aspirations.

Two views on the culture of organisations compete for dominance in the literature. From one perspective, culture is something that can be created, influenced and managed. Induction exercises, staff handbooks and training, policy initiatives or the university's mission statement are all attempts to manage culture by setting standards and expectations of behaviour which are reinforced by reward or disciplinary policies. Other aspects of culture may be more or less controllable or managed but may exert a powerful influence: for example, the design of university buildings or the location of the campus inevitably has a considerable influence on the way people work and interact.

Critics of this managerialist perspective **(Wieck, 1976; Van Maanen and Barley, 1985)** tell us that culture is never straightforwardly created or controlled. In large organisations like universities there are likely to be multiple cultures or subcultures competing to operate in the way that they believe is most appropriate **(Becher, 1989)**. These subcultures might be disciplinary (for example, a Physics department might see the world differently from their colleagues in History). Equally, the division might be between the academic staff and their administrative counterparts. New staff members joining the university will bring different assumptions to the mix, either from other institutions or from their own experiences as a student. Induction or training is

unlikely to fully replace deeper beliefs about what higher education is for and how it should operate.

Perhaps most importantly, the beliefs and practices that members of the organisation care most deeply about might not be the same as those to which management would like them to pay attention **(Silver, 2003)**. In some types of organisations this isn't a problem because managers can dictate the detail of working practices and insist on compliance. Universities are traditionally organisations in which academics have enjoyed a considerable level of freedom and professional autonomy **(Mintzberg (1979)**. Managers are less able to control how the two primary functions of the university, research and teaching, might operate and are likely to meet considerable resistance when they try. Instead, members of the university community must collaborate to make sense of the changing landscape, begin to understand what works effectively and work together to implement new practices. The challenge is to create an environment in which these activities can take place.

3. The impact of 'quality'

Over the last twenty years, the higher education sector has been subject to structural and cultural changes associated with a focus on accountability and value for money which have profoundly affected academic life **(Henkel, 2004)**. In this new reality the term 'quality' became synonymous with data collection, performance scrutiny and a massive increase in bureaucracy.

'Quality' in the form of assurance processes (e.g. TQA or subject reviews) was often met with resistance, being perceived as the concern of administrators or managers rather than academics. A perceived danger was an overt display of compliance masking minimal real change to teaching practices.

4. New approaches to quality

Alternative approaches to revitalising the quality agenda have taken a number of forms in the UK and internationally. Many universities, particularly in the US, have adopted ideas from industry. Commentators including **Newby (1999)** and **Middlehurst (1999)** have made compelling arguments for Total Quality Management (TQM) as an organising principle for higher education. TQM embodies ideas of collegial discussion and consensus-building about processes with a view to reducing inefficiencies or waste. Instead of retrospectively evaluating the success of an activity with the hope of improving it in the future (the assurance model), staff work together to ensure that all activities are designed to minimise any failures from the very start **(Yorke, 2000)**. It is easy to see how these ideas might be useful in, for example, designing student assessment or registry processes.

However, using the language and methods of business to address the needs of higher education is controversial. The TQM emphasis on "right first time" sits uneasily with academic concepts of the provisionality of knowledge and the value of enquiry and exploration. Academics have traditionally enjoyed a high level of autonomy in the classroom and may not always welcome the team-working, consultation and continual information-gathering that are the keystones of TQM.

It is also hard for many universities, which are often large and disparate organisations, to develop a clear mission or even a broad institutional consensus about a high quality student experience. Even in universities with relatively well-

established communication channels amongst the academic staff it may be hard to include students, employers, parents and other stakeholders in discussions **(Silver, 2003)**. Students are not the same as customers and their ability to judge the value of their higher education experiences may vary substantially according to what is asked and when it is asked; for example, students may be more able to assess the value of their education in enhancing their employability after several years in the workforce **(Yorke and Knight, 2000; Williams and Cappucini-Ansfield, 2007)**. Many commentators have questioned the reliability, meaningfulness and insightfulness of national comparative surveys like the National Student Survey **(Harvey, 2003)**.

Learning together as an organisation to create a high quality, learner-focussed culture implies moving beyond improving existing processes or structures and moving towards a state in which review and reflection are an embedded and internalised way of life (**D'Andrea and Gosling, 2005)**. This depends on institutional support for staff development and a focus on the learning experience through the lens of scholarly reflection and academic judgement and involves multiple stakeholders including students. An effective learning organisation recognises good ideas and expertises at all levels and encourages all members to develop their skills in an environment of trust, honesty and respect **(Yorke, 2000)**.

5. Implications for policy-makers and practitioners

For many universities, creating an effective learning culture means overcoming a considerable number of barriers including rigid hierarchies, functional divisions and stratified knowledge bases (**Avdjieva and Wilson, 2002)**. Resource constraints and massification create further pressures for staff members, limiting the amount of time they can reasonably allocate to data collection, analysis or creative dialogue. Many institutions also suffer from poor physical design that prevents informal sharing of knowledge between staff members or the development of communities of practice **(Randeree, 2006)**.

Learning also means risk-taking. Collecting data about the student experience of teaching interactions may uncover uncomfortable revelations; sharing practice with colleagues requires trust. As **D'Andrea and Gosling (2005)** argue, these activities must take place in an environment free from the fear of punitive outcomes. Most importantly, developing a real culture of quality through effective learning means moving away from preserving what higher education already *is* towards an aspiration towards what it *could be*. **(Stensaker, 2005)**

In Europe, approaches to quality (for example, the EUA Quality Cultures Project[1]) have moved away from earlier guiding principles of 'fitness for purpose' and 'value for money' towards the ideal of searching for excellence through the demonstration and sharing of best practice. The EUA projects reported that any quality culture was based on shared values, beliefs and expectations but also included a managerial element that defined processes, co-ordinated efforts and established responsibilities and goals.

The challenge for leaders, as **Gordon (2002)** has identified "is one of adjusting prevailing cultures to secure closer alignment of individual and collective goals". In a forthcoming paper, Lee Harvey and Bjorn Stensaker argue that successful quality initiatives will depend on investment in the culture, the identity and organisational climate of institutions. They suggest that different universities will respond differently

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[1] See: http://www.eua.be/index.

to quality policies and practices according to how their cultures have developed in the past. Examples of different institutional cultures might include:

- **Responsive quality culture**: governed primarily by external demands, takes a positive approach to opportunities and seeks and shares good practice, but tends to view quality-related activities and strategies as a solution to externally-driven problems or challenges and lacks sense of ownership or control

- **Reactive quality culture**: driven primarily by compliance and accountability, seeks opportunities for reward, tends to delegate 'quality' to a delineated space (e.g. quality office)

- **Regenerative quality culture**: is focussed on internal development and has co-ordinated internal plans which include clear goals. External initiatives are recognised but are secondary to a taken-for-granted commitment to continual improvement and organisational learning. Embodies the potential for subversion of externally-driven initiatives

- **Reproductive quality culture**: manipulates situations to minimise disruption from eternally-driven quality initiatives in order to maintain the status quo. Has established norms, good internal practices and quality are an encoded and unremarkable part of daily practice and professional conduct. Resistant to reflection or re-conceptualisation of goals.

As **Harvey (2007)** argues there is no point implementing quality assurance processes if they do not reflect the normal working practices of staff, but the ultimate aim may be to negate the requirement for external assurance activities altogether because the institution has developed a solid basis for measureable and defensible improvement. This also means finding ways of engaging with students that recognise and support their role as co-creators in effective institutional cultures.

6. Concluding remarks

It is clear that the Scottish sector is making real progress in developing reflective cultures. The most recent ELIR reports describe re-designed buildings that help students and staff to learn and communicate effectively, new structures and simplified decision-making processes and training and staff development opportunities.

Areas for further attention including developing effective mechanisms for the dissemination of good practice, targeting resources to support enhancement and, importantly, promoting deeper staff and student (through student associations) engagement with enhancement. Of course, the particular mix will vary from institution to institution, as indeed will views about the desired trajectory and priorities for further development.

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