Understanding Quality Culture in Assuring Learning at Higher Education Institutions

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"Quality lies in culture. Values are what constitute true quality" (Shafty, 2012*)*

Abstract

This paper sought to understand quality culture (QC) as a way of enhancing quality products and services at theUniversity of South Africa (Unisa), one of the leading open distance learning (ODL) Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The paper focused on reviewing literature that explains key dimensions ofQC, namely: culture, quality and the importance of QC in assuring the quality of HEIs'provisions. It is a conceptual paper that outlines the prevailing thoughts on QC as it relates to quality assurance (QA) and organisationalculture (OC).QC as a process operates best not just through evaluation and measurement procedures alone, but is best reflected in the values, practices and procedures shared and nurtured by varying levels of an institutional community. Measuring through predetermined standards is undoubtedly important for accountability but these processes cannot be regarded as quality guarantors. Quality is not a standard to be met but a process that is best achieved when those whose quality products or services are evaluated have willingly expressed aspirations and desire to ensure it.

Keywords: Culture, Quality, Quality Culture History

Preamble

This paper is one of a series of papers focusing on understanding what QC is in the context of QA in HEIs. QC is a concept with many dimensions that cannot be covered by one paper and this paper is an important first step of laying the groundwork for understanding what QC looks like. To understand QC, one must first understand organisational culture (OC) for improvement of organisational values, creating of cultural role models, cultural transmitters and institutional rites, rituals and customs. QC is about developing organisational value systems that result in an environment conducive to the establishment and continual improvement of quality. To change the culture of an organisation, managers would need to be conversant with QC's key concepts which are culture, quality and their dynamic conceptualisation. This paper lays the groundwork for understanding QC and learning what

it looks like when established. More papers will need to be written to answer many more questions about QC.

Organisations that develop and maintain a QC will differ significantly in their operating philosophy, objectives, management approach, attitude towards customers, problem-solving approach and supplier relationship (Ahmed (n. d.) PPT). Performance-improvement that encourages most academics, students and support groups to own and be actively involved in the QA processes should be the goal of all HEIs. QC enables the mastering of change of mind-sets from passivity to ownership of QA by individuals and the various subcultures, leading to active participation as champions of delivering quality services and products.

Introduction

Rapidly growing knowledge –based societies and economies, reduction of geographical barriers and the pressures of competing in the global marketplace entailed change in the organisational culture (OC) of (HEIs). Operational and service excellence has forced HEIs intending to remain globally competitive to disrupt their systems in order to generate skills and competencies fit for today's learners. Theconcept ofQCas aninstitutional organizing feature has become a key focus of HEIs (Shafty, 2012). QA in HEIs has moved from a mechanical focus on evaluation of pre-determined standards into a developmental, holistic and cultural perspective (Newby, 1999; Ehlers, 2009 & Harvey, 2010). Vettori, Lueger, & Knassmüller, (2006) considered predetermined quality control, assurance and management strategies measuredby a set of predetermined standards too technocratic and often top-down approaches which frequently fail to assure quality learning in higher education.A growing understanding globallyis that quality in HEIs can only be achieved through culture-based and shared values, competencies andmind- setsthat embrace lifelong learningthat would lead to a new professionalism and necessitate institutionalised QC (Saarinen, T., 2010) Cultural change has been recognized as an important aspect of improving quality butit has not been comprehensively studied in HEIs (Katiliute & Neveraukas, 2009).

While systems, procedures and rules are being laid down, creating much data, many reports and much attention (Stensaker 2003), there is still a lack of attachment and active involvement by most academics and students as well as the support staff in these processes (Newton, 2010). WhereQChas a taken-for-granted meaning attached to it, the process of teaching and learning has not improved. Quality procedures requiring singling out organisational processes and procedures as a way ofdescribing quality assuranceof modules is no longer acceptable (Harvey, 2010).Focus should be more on change than control, improvement/development than assurance, and innovation than compliance (Mintzberg, 1994:112). HEIs should no longer be focusing on mastering instruments of quality control and accreditation. Attentionshould be directed to mastering change, allowing qualityownership by individuals, developing and promoting of quality champions in organisations (Ehlers, 2009; Woof, 2004).Quality learning cannot be normatively pre-defined by experts; it has to emerge in open negotiations through stakeholder participation.

When working on QA processes, HEIs are ideally expected to develop internal quality culture which take into account their institutional realities as theyrelate to their organisational culture. Standards and guidelines developed by the Council for Higher Education to guide QA processes have to be in line with the QC and be embraced by everyone in a HEI, particularly by those engaged in teaching and learning.

High quality education is not a product of only formal quality assurance processes, but it is rather a consequence of a QC shared by all members of an institution. Mandatory change of mind-sets is considered necessary for a thriving QC that enhances learning (Shafty, 2012). The question is:could all employeesin a HEI changetobecome enthusiastic in delivering quality products and services?Institutionalising QC is one sure way of realizing this.

Methodology
The rationale for writing this paper was to understand the key terms for QC and to identify institutional processes and structures that support the development of an internal QC. The research methods were the review ofliterature and document analysis. Search for appropriate documents for this topic was made with the assistance of the librarian specialist for the Department of planning and quality assurance (DPQA) at Unisa. Curiosity to answer the question of how to change mind-sets and what QC is all about led to theformulation of ascientific problem of exploringthe meaning of QC. QC comprises two concepts; quality and culture, each with differing theoretical explications that need to be well understood before determining what QC is all about. The research methodadopted was reviewing literature and scholarly work followed by content analysis of documents.

This paper follows the following structure:

- Introduction, where the concepts of QC namely culture and quality are explained
- Culture; its characteristics and brief history is explained
- The complexity of defining quality and its various perspectives.
- Meanings of quality culture as a complicated concept
- Suggestions of how to instill QC in HEIs and
- Demonstrations of QC in institutions

The concept of culture
Cultural change is recognized as an important basis fororganisational culture (OC). Cultureisnot a fixedconcept but has a multiplicity of interactions involving various participants with diverse languages. Geertz's (1993: 145) definition still holds …"culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action; social structure is the form that action takes, the actually existing network of social relations". Culture is thus a result of multiple interactions depending on specific contexts. Organisational culture (OC) is in a state of continuous and dynamic change and isnever homogeneous to be judged by standards.An interpretative process takes place permanently depending on specific contexts of action,making OC a state of continuous and dynamic change. Culture is not homogeneous but it reflects an organisation's internal complexity. The culture of institutions has to be comprehended as a historically grown social phenomenon differentiated by several subcultures even though the participants are completely unaware of any of its components (Vettori, Lueger, & Knassmüller, 2006, Harvey, 2010).

A brief historical account of cultureconcept will facilitate an understanding of QC.Culture is considered one of the most complicated words in the English language derived from the Latin wordcolere, meaning "cultivate", "protect", "inhabit", "honour" to the German wordKultur, synonymous with civilisation (Harvey, & Stensaker, 2008). Over time, culture was considered the study of perfection. Eliot (1948) quoted in Harvey, & Stensaker, 2008) argued that Western European Christian culture is the highest form of culture in the world. Herder (quoted in Harvey, & Stensaker, 2008), a German scholar, refuted such cultural

imperialism as an insult to different cultural groups living in different social and economic settings. Anthropologists considered people living away from Europe to be primitive and uncultured, afallacy that dominated the colonial discourse. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952 quoted in Harvey, 2005; Harvey, 2006) identified 156 different anthropological definitions of culture which were reduced by Bodley (1994) to the following:

- *Topical:* culture consists of everything on a list of topics, or categories, such as social organisation, religion, or economy.
- *Historical:* culture is social heritage, or tradition, that is passed on to future generations.
- *Behavioural*: culture is shared, learned human behaviour, a way of life.
- *Normative*: culture is ideals, values, or rules for living.
- *Functional*: culture is the way humans solve problems of adapting to the environment or living together.
- *Mental:* culture is a complex of ideas, or learned habits, that inhibit impulses and distinguish people from animals.
- *Structural:* culture consists of patterned and interrelated ideas, symbols, or behaviours.
- *Symbolic*: culture is based on arbitrarily assigned meanings that are shared by a society.

These categories show that culture is shared (social), learned (not by instinct) and symbolic (sign, codes emblems) identified by a cultural group and transmitted across generations.

Culture became a key quality issue

Culture as shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts has evolved to become a perspective for understanding social and organisationalbehavior (Pedersen & Dobbin 2006: 899). Culture became the umbrella term for all possible intangible factors in organisational life, a perspective that dominated business and industry. Management started referring to continuous improvement as a culture, and it became one of quality's ideas central toorganisational behavior. Culture as an instrument for improving organisational performance has become the QC (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008:8). Culture as an instrument for improving organisational performance and how managers can change from being locked in traditions to becoming flexible and responsive to continuous change is noted in late 1990s. QC was at the time conceived as some manipulative way imposed on organisations by clever managers.

QCbecomes useful for analysis, questioning and dialogue in higher education taking culture as a way of life as a development from management processes. This implies a change of perspective concerning the purpose associated with QC. Advocates of QC had to refrain from asking "who or what do we want to be", the better question being"who are we and how can we improve?" The implications are to seek tools that could be helpful in answering more fundamental questions about individual, group and organisational functioning (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008:7).

QC carries the following from the historical origins of the term culture:
- Culture is not homogeneous and isnot for an elitist group.
- Culture still retains a sense of creative endeavor.
- Culture as a learned way of life has a context for knowledge production.
- Culture is symbolic but also material.
- Culture relates to ideology.

- There is a relationship between culture and economy.
- Culture is uniquely possessed by people and it transcends the human actors.
- Subcultures can be sites of resistance.

The search for excellence led to a need to develop an internal quality culture in universities to aid wide dissemination of existing best practices, to promote the introduction of internal quality management and improve quality levels. Universities would be in a better position to approach external procedures of quality assurance in a constructive way.The following paraphrased caution should be considered when institutionalising QC in HEIs according to Harvey & Steinaker(2008:13):

- There is an implicit cultural imperialism associated with adopting QC, such as an assumption that best practice of knowledge transfer is from Western European or North American educational cultural practices. There is danger when culture is imposed from one context to another.
- Avoid viewing QC as pre-defined processes as it is a holistic way of life. QC is not mechanistic or a codified system produced by specialists for adoption by others.
- QC is an iterative, dialectical, process that focuses not just on internal processes but it relates them to a wider appreciation of social and political forces located to the history of an institution. QC is not a panacea, something that can be disengaged from a wider lived reality.
- QC as a lived and learned experience that in itself generates knowledge that is innovative and does not simply fit into processes.
- QC is not just about checking outputs at each stage but is also a frame of mind widely located in the management literature.
- QC is an ideological construct, a fact that cannot be glossed over by a set of prescriptions or recipes for implementation.
- QC is not likely to be constructed as a form of knowledge transfer irrespective of the context in which it is located.
- QC is nothing if the people who live it do not own it.   They should be capable of raising issues and of dealing with resistance that is endemic in higher education where academics view QC as a managerialism fad, meant to reduce their academic freedom and disempower them.

Quality

Defining quality as a term is wrought with controversy, some scholars assert that it can neither be defined nor quantified while others insist that it is a subjective term that is dependent upon individual perspectives (Bobby, 2014; Martin & Stella, 2007; Mishra, 2007). Despite the lack of consensus it is imperative to define quality as way of understanding QC. One must be aware of what quality is before determining how to assure it (Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, & Crawford, 2015).Determining whether the terms of quality and QC are applicable across cultures is critical as there are distinct regional and national meanings of these terms.

Schindler, et.al. (2015) have expanded on the four broad conceptualisations of quality by Harvey & Green, (1993); Harvey & Knight, (1996) namely: quality as purposeful, exceptional, transformative, and accountable in table one below:

Table1. Classifications of Quality

Classifications	Definitions
Purposeful	Institutional products and services conform to a stated mission/vision or a set of specifications, requirements, or standards, including those defined by accrediting and/or regulatory bodies (Cheng & Tam, 1997; Commonwealth of Learning, 2009; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Peterson, 1999)
Exceptional	Institutional products and services achieve distinction and exclusivity through the fulfillment of high standards (Bogue, 1998; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Peterson, 1999)
Transformative	Institutional products and services effect positive change in student learning (affective, cognitive, and psychomotor domains) and personal and professional potential (Biggs, 2001; Bobby, 2014; Bogue, 1998; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Haworth & Conrad, 1997; Pond, 2002; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2012; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007).
Accountable	Institutions are accountable to stakeholders for the optimal use of resources and the delivery of accurate educational products and services with zero defects(American Society for Quality, n.d.; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Green, 1994; Harvey,2005; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Nicholson, 2011).

Source: Schindler, Welzant, Puls-Elvidge, & Crawford (2015:5)

These authors also identified four distinct categories of quality indicators namely: administrative, student support, instructional, and student performance as show in table2 below:

Table 2 Categories of quality indicators

Categories	Definitions
Administrative indicators	Institution, including developing a relevant mission and vision, establishinginstitutional legitimacy, achieving internal/external

	standards and goals, andprocuring resources for optimal institutional functioning (Cheng & Tam, 1997;Commonwealth of Learning, 2009; Hill, Lomas, & MacGregor, 2003; Iacovidou, Gibbs, &Zopiatis, 2009; Mishra, 2007; Online Learning Consortium, 2014; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996; Zineldin, Akdag, & Vasicheva, 2011)
Student support indicators	A set of quality indicators that pertain to the availability and responsiveness of student support services, for example the degree to which student complaints are adequately addressed; (Garvin, 1987; Hill et al., 2003; Iacovidou et al., 2009; International Organization for Standardization, n.d.; Lagrosen et al., 2004; Mishra, 2007; National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2015; Oldfield & Baron,2000; Online Learning Consortium, 2014; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996; Quality Matters, 2014; Wong, 2012; Zineldin et al., 2011).
Instructional indicators	The competence of instructors, for example programs and courses that prepare students for employment; (Biggs, 2001; Commonwealth of Learning, 2009; Harvey & Green, 1993; Hill et al., 2003; Iacovidou et al., 2009; Online Learning Consortium, 2014;Quality Matters, 2014; Tam, 2014; Wong, 2012).
Student performance indicators	A set of quality indicators that pertain to student engagement with curriculum, faculty, and staff, and increases in knowledge, skills, and abilities that lead to gainful employment (e.g., increased critical thinking skills; Bogue, 1998; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Haworth & Conrad, 1997; Iacovidou et al., 2009; Scott, 2008)

Source: Schindler, Welzant, Puls-Elvidge, & Crawford (2015:6)

Quality can be conceived as a construct with multiple dimensions that are to be contextualised, i.e. each quality notion needs to be specific. As such, quality (and each understanding of quality) is already embedded in several contexts, of which an organisation's culture (OC) is one of the most important one. The next section highlights an understanding of what quality culture is.

Quality culture (QC)

Harvey and Green (1993: no pages) outlined the nature of QC at a time when it was only conceptualised as part of industrial manufacturing. By then a culture of quality was one in which everybody in an organisation, not just the quality controllers, was responsible for quality. "A central feature for such an organisation was that each worker or team of workers was both a customer of, and supplier to other workers in the organisation. The workers formed a chain of internal customers and suppliers. It was the responsibility of each unit to ensure that their own work was done right the first time, thereby ensuring quality. When this does not happen, then the process that has led to an unsatisfactory output is analysed so that corrections can be made in the process to ensure that the problem does not arise again. In a QC there is no need to check final output because to do so, is to shift responsibility away from those involved at each stage". The next section defines QC from various perspectives.

Defining QC

QC refers to a set of shared, accepted, and integrated patterns of quality (often called principles of quality) found in the OC and the management systems of institutions. QC requires awareness, commitment to learning that builds a solid evidence of quality learning that is efficiently managed through flexible quality assurance (QA) procedures. Various elements constitute quality change over time and it is imperative that an integrated system of quality that supports QC change to support new quality paradigms in higher educationis identified (Mehta, 2008).

Why is QC important?

It is the most effective and meaningful way to develop QA mechanisms that would ensure improved quality at all levels and support a dynamic of change in universities (Rapp, 2011: 6). Berings et al. (2010) confirmed this by insisting that quality culture is an organisational culture (OC) contributing to the development of effective and efficient care for quality. Culture is a specific aspect of OC, a group of values that guide how improvements are made to everyday working practices and consequent outputs (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

Powell (2011) referred to culture as a simple way of saying how an organisation expresses itself internally and externally. Culture is driven by values, whether by purpose or default. It is driven by leadership that determines how the organisation responds to all things, both good and bad. There is no part of an organisation that is not influenced or affected by the type of culture that has either been developed or allowed to exist.

No organization is without culture,as an indicator of the lowest accepted common denominator for all its workers. Culture dictates how employees interact with leadership and with one another including responses to conflict. Customer care reflects prevailing culture no matter how much training is put to do the contrary. The overall feel will be a raging testimony of the institutional culture. Culture dictates the tangible representation of interactions among those affiliated with anorganisation in any capacity (Powell, 2011). Quality culture starts with a leadership that understands and believes the implications of the system's view toknow the necessity of serving customers well in order to succeed. Such an understanding of culture is where a positive internal environment and the creation of delighted customers go together. A culture that naturally emphasizes continuous improvement of processes and one that upholds a healthy workplace satisfies customers leading to a profitable institution (Shafty, 2012).

Actions by those in leadership demonstrate institutional culture which must not be relegated to a few finely framed posters strategically positioned at work spaces. Institutional culture must be more than a few paragraphs in the employee handbook for orientation that is never referred to again. The people in any organization will only take the culture that is prevalently demonstrated by the leadership.

How QC in HEIscan be ensured
Singh (2010:2, 3) raised a question when she asked "What benefits has the proliferation of quality assurance (QA) jurisdictions, structures and activities produced and for whom? Is it clear that the educational benefits are significant even if they do not outweigh other political and economic rationales relating to external accountability and cost efficiencies? According to Newton (2000; 2010) QA can only save itself by re-balance regulation for accountability and quality enhancement; to link quality evaluation more explicitly to learning andprioritising quality improvement for student learning.

Powel (2011) presented the following seven essential elements that demonstrate solid and purposeful QC as follows:

- **Consistence:** QC is usually destroyed by any appearance to have double standards. Values serve as an anchor and reference point for those difficult circumstances. People may not always like it, but they will appreciate knowing where things stand and not some ambiguous idea built in the spur of the moment.
- **Useful**: Institutional culture must be of use relative to its mission and vision. If not, it will be received for what it is…"manipulation and micro-management under the innocuous banner of 'culture'". People know what a farce is and accord it minimalist attitude devoid of productivity. Micro-managing people will force you to continue to do so in order to accomplish anything.
- **Learning:** People want to know that you care and by developing them professionally they are assured. QC not only supports, but champions learning and development. A learning environment leaves room for mistakes and errors without the fear of being chastised unnecessarily. Honest mistakes happen and a learning environment reduces the stress of making them. Less stress means more productivity,fewer health issuesusually translate into less absenteeism.
- **Truthful:** No matter what past experiences, people want and can handle the truth. It isoffensive and insulting to be treated with kiddie gloves under the assumption one is not educated enough or mature enough to hear the truth. Many innovative solutions can be developed when the truth is consistently shared throughout the organisation.
- **Utilitarian;** No matter what is in place, there will always be those who choose to operate on the fringes. Make sure that the overall focus of institutional values and culture support the largest majority. There may be an occasional opportunity to make special concessions as long as habitual naysayersare not allowed to contort how QC is developed. Culture acts as a governance of a community based on commonly accepted behaviors. There will always be those who feel they should be able to operate outside these boundaries and these will be dealt with accordingly.
- **Respectful:** Conflict will always occur. There is no way to avoid differences, nor should you try. Everything can be dealt with via the lens of respect. Respect does not automatically mean compromise or common ground has to rule the day. A respectful dialog can take place for the sake of understanding the position of another.

- **Empowerment**: Let people explore their creativity. Give them the freedom to be as autonomous as possible. Empowered people make positive changes. Sure you will have a few irresponsible persons but that is the price of progress. Do not let the irresponsible ones diminish the opportunity to experience the successes. Shafty (2012) expounds on this by outlining five main ingredients for developing QC as:
- A mentality of "we are all in this together" (the institution, suppliers, and customers).The institution is not just the buildings, assets, and employees, but also clients, customersand suppliers. The goal is consistently to ensure a win-win situation for all parties.
- Open, honest communication is vital. An important way to encourage truth-telling is by creating a culture where people listen to one another. This is a culture where open, honest communication is understood as necessary for people to function best.
- Information accessibility: Information accessibility is at the heart of the work we do. Leaders should be open about sharing information on the institution company's strategic goals because this information provides direction for what will be done next and moreimportantly direction for how to improve.
- Focusing on processes where everyone moves away from a "blame the person" mentality to a "blame the process and let's fix it" approach to problems and improvements.

Developing QC is synonymous with developing a self-critical and reflective community of practitioners who are highly motivated. Imposing compliance requirements does not achieve much as there is no checklist or a codified manual that guides the establishment of an appropriate context for QC (Harvey, 2006:9). Externally-driven quality assessments are not only cumbersome but they tend to demoralise and place responsibility away from professional competences of the service deliverers. When quality is something that is "done to you" one tends to lose their sensitivity to the indications of change and before long they have little incentive to be innovative. Professionals will be in danger of becoming irrelevant to the requirements of their professions as they spend time trying to comply with the quality demands (Newdy, 1999:12). The challenge for HEIs is to consider less evaluation of standard and more on re-professionalised employees.

Conclusion
This paper began by noting that higher education has changed since the late 1990s as there is a greater demand for quality provisions by the governments and society locally and globally. Quality management systems seeking accountability and quality improvements are required in all institutional systems.Despite these changes QC has not received adequate attention from research in HEIs other than in management literature. This paper had to start by shedding light on QC constituents' quality and culture that make up QC in HEIs.
Cultural change in any organisation is a complex process requiring conceptual understanding andthe need for long term effort and to develop QC. At the outset we asked: What is quality culture? How does an institution of higher learning impart the need for all its employees to willingly embrace a comprehensive culture of quality? Do the current well-defined procedures of quality evaluation of all workers in an institution improve learning? These questions led to asearch ofexisting literature on culture and quality concepts and gain insights of how QC is conceptualized as a structural component representing all the efforts to assure quality of provisions internally and externally. Observing standards and guidelines from

external quality agents like Council for higher education (CHE) in South Africa is not enough. There is need to add a second component representing the enabling factors such as personal commitment and quality competences of individuals. Negotiation within different cultures and sub-cultures is necessary. Cultural factors such as: values, rituals, symbols and many other aspects of symbolic culture have to be clearly understood by all those involved in ensuring quality delivery. QC enables effective communication and participation of individuals and groups through social interactions aimed at building trust.

Viewing quality in the light of a cultural perspective means taking a holistic stand point: QC combines cultural elements, structural dimensions and competencies into one holistic framework, supporting stakeholders who desire to develop visions, shared values and beliefs. A combination of top-down and bottom-up interactions that are well communicated and where everyone participates iscritical to an effective QC.

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