

One size does not fit all: ensuring quality across HE sub-cultures

Society for Research into Higher Education, Qualifying the debate on quality
22nd June 2021

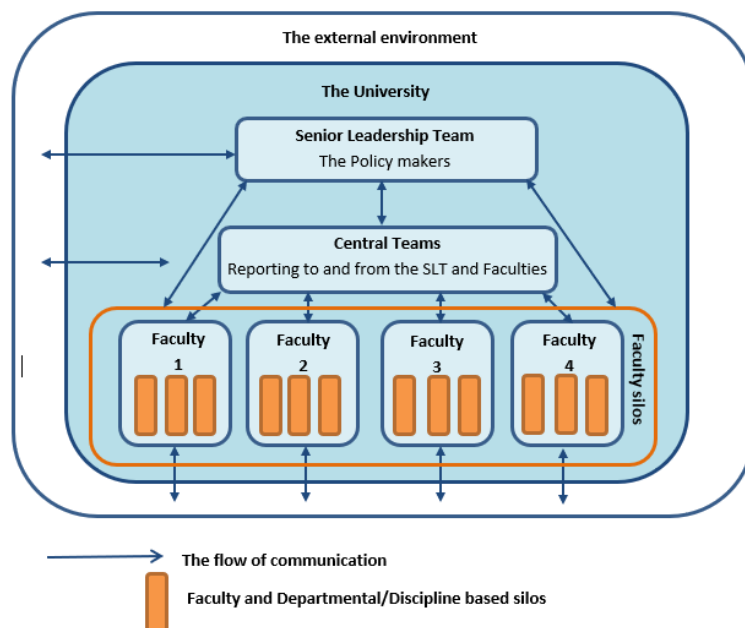
Laura Roper
Bournemouth University

Abstract

HEIs contain a number of sub-cultures based on discipline, department, role etc. Each of these sub-cultures have their own particular systems of conduct, principles and values. This paper will discuss how a quality approach can be embedded within an institution whilst acknowledging that one size does not fit all and that there is a need to acknowledge and adapt quality to meet differing needs. In doing so it anticipated that there would be improvements in collegiality, interdisciplinary and the breaking down of silos of working practice.

Introduction

We are all part of one larger institution. We all share the same policies and procedures, the same regulations, Human Resource requirements, admissions policies, we cohabit on the same campus, but each sub-culture is interacting with all of those areas in different ways (Bendermacher et al 2017). These differences in interaction and engagement also lead to differences in engagement with one another. The sharing of intellectual property, best practice, collaborative work, learning and teaching (Mintzberg 1979). This can be seen in the diagram below which illustrates how communication flows vertically from bottom, up and top, down but that there is a lack of communication horizontally between departments and faculties (Roper & Clarke, 2020).



Silos within a Higher Education Institution (Roper, L 2020)

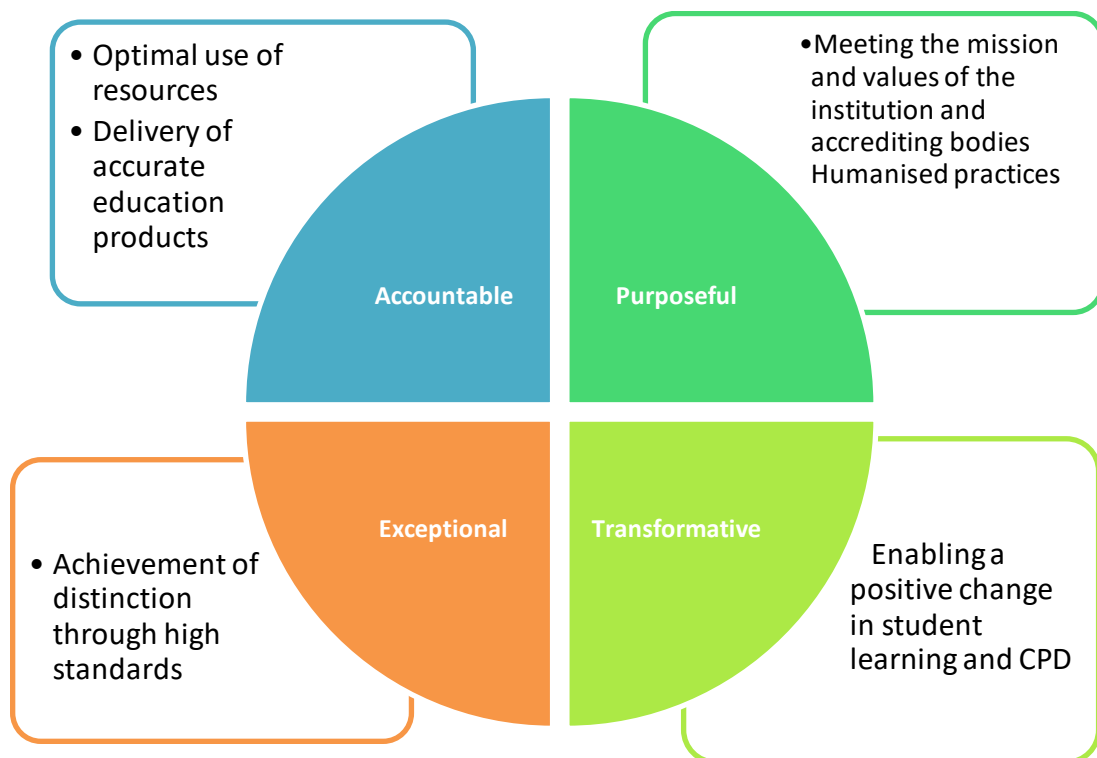
Quality in Higher Education

Quality in Higher Education (HE) means different things to different people. It is hard to find one definition that works for all stakeholders in HE (Bendermacher et al 2017). For example, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) definition has a clear focus on quality for students, which it should, but this definition misses the importance of ensuring staff succeed too.

“A comprehensive term referring to how, and how well, higher education providers manage teaching and learning opportunities to help students progress and succeed”
(Quality Assurance Agency 2018)

Instead, rather than a definition, the conceptual model developed by Schindler et al (2015) discusses how quality in HE focuses on four key areas and is inclusive of all stakeholders;

1. Accountable; which incorporates a focus on continuous improvement and ensuring your graduates are ready for employment
2. Purposeful; Being transparent in your aims, achieving standards and helping to attain the HEIs goals
3. Transformative; Being clear about outcomes, having a learner centered approach and engaging with others
4. Exceptional; which looks at reputation, ranking, credibility



(Schindler et al 2015)

Subcultures in Higher Education

“The deeply embedded patterns of organizational behaviour and the shared values, assumptions, beliefs, or ideologies that members have about their organization or its work” (Peterson & Spencer 1990 pg. 142).

A staff member's understanding of the institutions culture, priorities, values etc is based on their own interpretation and therefore open to misinterpretation from the message originally set. This is especially seen within Higher Education with regards to areas such as differences around expectations, office hours, procedures, pastoral care etc which can differ greatly from one subculture to another resulting in the alienation of staff (Bergquist & Pawlak 2008). This is due to the different way a sub-culture can interpret a message, policy etc based on their own values, assumptions and beliefs and potentially also misinterpret. However, these practices are rarely studied (Peterson & Spencer 1990).

Quality management has become an essential part of an HEIs approaches in order to ensure efficiency and a focus on the student experience. However, this approach lacks a focus on staff. HE institutions are busy looking externally but forgetting about those essential internal stakeholders who keep the wheels turning (Seyd 2000).

The potential for conflict

Quality management is often noted by academic staff as being seen as an attempt to control rather than to improve. Perhaps this is because the more human areas are not being valued; areas such as values and commitment as opposed to the structured areas such as strategy and procedures which can be easily formalised, documented and reported upon (Omerzel et al 2011).

Omerzel et al (2011) discuss how institutions which focus on quality culture (rather than management) demonstrate a shared goal, clear responsibilities and value educational quality (rather than having an over-emphasis on research output).

The shift from quality management to quality culture focuses on the idea that the institutions development and enhancement should be based on the experiences, knowledge and values of those who work within the HEI (Bendermacher et al 2017)..

Whilst an emphasis on quality culture for all is certainly the ideal, in practice it would appear that the focus is on creating a quality culture for students whilst also meeting financial and government requirements (Bendermacher et al 2017). This would suggest that there is a failing to focus on creating a quality culture for staff members themselves. This can cause academic staff to begin to feel despondent when policies and approaches are imposed and do not appear to take their needs or thoughts into account. This potential conflict and a feeling of a lack of autonomy leads to staff grouping together within their support networks, such as their teams and disciplines, and we begin to see the walls going up (Latta 2019).

Trust et al (2007) discusses how within the UK Higher Education system silos have been defined and strengthened by discipline focused funding and an increase in specialist journals. Whilst this has benefited many researchers and academics this has further increased the divide between disciplines and potential co-creation opportunities. Additionally, there is a

noticeable divide between those who focus on research and those whose focus is on teaching and learning (Latta 2019).

It is recognised that within higher education there is a need to specialise in an area of study; we cannot be experts in all subjects (Macfarlane 2006). However, by becoming too focused on one particular area and not looking above the parapet, silos create a lack of awareness regarding research taking place elsewhere that may overlap or bolster work being undertaken by the researcher (Trust et al 2007).

In moving away from silos so we can establish a wider focus on research, grow our academic communities and enrich our knowledge base and understanding with approaches and methodologies that we may not have otherwise been aware of (Macfarlane 2006).

Us and Them

Whilst stereotypes are often exaggerated it is agreed that they tend to contain a grain of truth and can demonstrate the different views, priorities and cultures that exist within UK HE. For example, academics are often characterised as being unreliable and lacking in an understanding of the necessary processes in running a HEI. Alternatively, professional services staff members are often viewed by academic staff as being bureaucratic, more concerned with process and lacking imagination (Seyd 2000).

These perceptions can often lead to poor working relationships and inefficiencies. However, when we acknowledge the importance of a suite of different approach, knowledge and strengths within a team we can use these complementary strengths to achieve so much more.

An academics' prime loyalty is to their subject discipline. Alternatively, a member of professional services staff tends to be loyal first of all to the institution in which they work (Seyd 2000).

What is clear is that we need each other. We are symbiotic, one cannot exist without the other. Academics do an incredible job of teaching and assessing our students and of producing new and innovative research. Our administrative staff keep all of the wheels turning. Seyd (2000) notes that despite a number of differences in approaches and priorities there is a shared vision of a commitment to providing a high quality and professional educational experience.

Ubuntu: I am, because we are

Ubuntu is a Xhosa word meaning "I am, because we are" and is at the core of this ancient philosophy which still thrives today. Ubuntu behaviours and methodologies can be found not only across African villages but also in businesses and Universities in Southern Africa. Ubuntu focuses on warmth, inclusiveness and solidarity. It acknowledges the value of each individual and recognise our differences and that those different approaches to a shared goal can be a positive (Sayers 2016).

The divisional structure within a Higher Education Institution "creates a false impression that the real world is divided into fragmented parts" (Bui & Baruch 2010). This practice is in opposition to Ubuntu, in which all of us form one larger community each benefitting from the input of another.

It follows the idea that individuals have an inherent need for interconnectedness. That in order for each of us to succeed and maintain overall wellbeing, we need to be part of a wider

community i.e. I cannot be me, and do the work that I do successfully, without all of you (Roper & Clarke, 2020).

The philosophy of Ubuntu does not provide a strict set of guidelines to which managers and team members must stick; it is rather a set of signposts and ideas as to how we should communicate with one another to ensure an environment in which staff feel valued (Sayers 2016) and included and so quality, in terms of being Accountable, Purposeful, Transformative and Exceptional, can thrive (Schindler et al 2015).

So with a focus on Ubuntu, a toolkit of approaches and practices that can work to ensure quality when working across teams, disciplines etc can be identified.

Quality in a varied landscape: Lessons from Ubuntu

Communicate clearly and effectively. Where possible, decisions should be made by consensus following open and honest discussion within a team. Yes, we are subject to regulation and procedures and these are important to ensure a consistent level of quality (Roper & Clarke 2020). However, within those rules, regulations and procedures, we do have the power to define our own collegiate working practices and behaviours. Allowing people, the space and the power to discuss these approaches openly, without fear of judgement and in the knowledge that their opinions are truly heard can have a dramatic impact on both individual and team wellbeing (Sayers 2016).

1. Trust and transparency are key. As a core value of Ubuntu, the importance of showing trust and feeling trusted cannot be oversold (Roper & Clarke, 2020). Through trust we allow an individual to be themselves and respect their individuality.
2. Accept that we all have different ways of working in order to reach a shared end goal. We cannot force our own approaches onto others (Roper & Clarke, 2020). Ubuntu is a philosophy, it is not a set of rules that we must each follow (Sayers 2016).
3. Acknowledge that each member of a team is different, with their own unique history, beliefs and thoughts. A healthy team/community will be made up of a variety of different people (Seyd 2000). We can access these by breaking down the silos and looking across teams, disciplines and faculties.
4. What works for one may not work for another. Identify the needs of everyone, what is important to them, and how we can help to fulfil those needs (Seyd 2000).
5. Everyone has something to teach us but we must be prepared to listen (Roper & Clarke 2020).

References

- Bendermacher, G. W. G., oude Egbrink, M. G. A., Wolfhagen, I. H. A. P., and Dolmans, D. H. J. M., 2017. Unravelling quality culture in higher education: a realist review. *Higher Education*, 73 (1), 39–60.
- Bergquist, W. H., and K. Pawlak. 2008. *Engaging the Six Cultures of the Academy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Bui, H., & Baruch, Y., 2010, Creating learning organizations in higher education: Applying a systems perspective, *The Learning Organization*, 17:3 (228–242).
- Latta, G. F., 2019. Modelling the interaction of leadership, culture and power in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* [online], 44 (9), 1188–1206. Available from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=cjfh20> [Accessed 11 Mar 2021].
- Macfarlane, B., 2006. Talking among ourselves? A personal journey across the silos of educational research. *Herdsa*, (January 2006), 216–221.
- Mintzberg, H., 1979, *The Structuring of Organisations: A synthesis of the research*, Prentice Hall, London.
- Omerzel, D. G., Biloslavo, R., and Trnavcevic, A., 2011. Knowledge management and organisational culture in higher education institutions. *Journal of Eastern European Management Studies*, 16 (2), 111–139.
- Peterson, Marvin W., and Melinda G. Spencer. 1990. Understanding academic culture and climate. *New Directions for Institutional Research* 68: 3–18.
- Quality Assurance Agency. 2018. *The UK Quality Code for Higher Education Glossary*, (available at [Glossary \(qaa.ac.uk\)](http://qaa.ac.uk))
- Roper L, Clarke S. *Ubuntu; strengthening the heart of your team In Humanising Higher Education A Positive Approach to Enhancing Wellbeing*. Editors: Devis-Rozental, Palgrave Macmillan
- Sayers, H. 2016. *Ubuntu: The Spirit of Humanity*. Oman: Oasis Life-skills Training Services.
- Schindler, L., Puls-Elvidge, S., Welzant, H., and Crawford, L., 2015. Definitions of quality in higher education: A synthesis of the literature. *Higher Learning Research Communication*. 5 (3).
- Schindler, L., Welzant, H., Puls-Elvidge, S., & Crawford, L. 2015. Definitions of quality in higher education: A synthesis of the literature. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 5 (3). DOI:10.18870/hlrc.v5i3.244
- Seyd, R., 2000. Breaking down barriers: The administrator and the academic. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 4 (2), 35–37.

Trust, T., Carpenter, J. P., and Krutka, D. G., 2017. Moving beyond silos: professional learning networks in higher education. *Internet and Higher Education*, 35 (June), 1–11.