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Paper proposal form

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Proposal

Title:

Dealing with engagement issues – an examination of professionals' opinions on stakeholder involvement in quality assurance

Abstract (150 words max):

In essence, quality assurance is very much a complex issue, with different perspectives, normative ideals and interpretive patterns on the nature of quality and the functions of quality assurance that

compete and sometimes conflict with each other. The diversity of stakeholder perspectives and values is taken up by concepts such as the "quality culture" idea promoted by EUA. Here, quality assurance is very much understood as values and practices that are shared by the institutional community and that have to be nurtured on many levels and by various means at the same time. How institutions could come to such shared understandings, however, and how they can develop ways of engaging all of their major stakeholder groups in the joint development of such a quality culture continues to be a challenge. Drawn from discussions in a series of workshops with QA practitioners from all over Europe, this paper will analyse the most critical factors with regard to stakeholder involvement and propose a number of actions on how the problem can be tackled — or at least reframed in a constructive way.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

From a certain perspective, quality assurance (QA) in higher education seems to be an overwhelming success story. In 2008, an OECD publication declared the development of external QA systems one of the most important trends in higher education in the last decades (cf. Riegler 2010: 157). EUA's Trends 2010 report shows that for more than 60% of the surveyed institutions, the implementation of internal QA counts as one of the most important changes of the last ten years (Sursock & Smidt 2010). And Loukkola & Zhang (2010) found a considerable trend towards institutional QA systems since 2005, with more than 80% of the surveyed institutions having had developed such systems by 2010.

Yet, such developments resonate far less with some of the key stakeholders who are intended to benefit from and/or contribute to the institutional QA systems. Criticised as being overly managerial and formalistic, QA is often met with a distinct lack of enthusiasm from most academics (cf. Anderson 2006, Newton 2002, 2000). From this perspective, QA is very much perceived as an externally imposed burden that seems to be more about window-dressing and "feeding the beast" (Newton 2002) of bureaucracy, than about achieving the kind of excellence in teaching or even "transformative learning" (Harvey & Knight 1996), the approaches are supposedly aiming for. In essence, QA is very much a contested issue, with different perspectives, normative ideals and interpretive patterns on the nature of quality and the functions of QA competing and sometimes conflicting with each other (cf. Vettori 2012).

By complementing the structural dimension of QA (i.e. quality management handbooks, process descriptions and typical QA instruments such as surveys) with the dimension of values of an organisation – relating to the commitment of its members, the underlying values, skills and attitudes (Ehlers 2009: 346) – frameworks such as the quality culture concept promoted by the European University Association (EUA) attempt to respond to the concerns of the academic community. In essence, the concept of quality culture is highly political, carrying the hopes of policy makers, university leaders and QA officers alike that it may somehow reframe QA as a core value of higher education institutions instead of an externally imposed chore (Vettori 2012: 28). In the EUA's quality culture concept, quality is not beheld as a process that can be operated through evaluation and measurement procedures alone, but as values and practices that are shared by the institutional community and that have to be nurtured on many levels (e.g. by considering the subcultures in the respective academic subunits) and by various means at the same time. The approach demands the involvement of multiple internal and external stakeholders, acknowledging the fact that a quality

culture cannot be implemented from above, although strong leadership is necessary for starting and promoting the process in the first place (cf. Vettori et al 2007: 22).

Dealing with engagement issues

Even though the concept's focus on communication, participation and trust offers – at least in theory – a much more attractive "entry point" for key stakeholder groups such as the academic staff and the students, it still does not offer practical solutions on how these stakeholder groups could actually be enticed to "enter" the field. In other words, one of the strengths of the quality culture concept is that it places utmost importance on stakeholder participation in quality assurance, yet it also draws attention to the question of how this participation can actually be achieved – not least as there does not seem to be ready-made solutions for actually achieving a desired level of participation. How can we find ways of encouraging the key actors (and supposed beneficiaries) of institutional quality assurance processes to participate in the development of these processes while avoiding the pitfall of enforcing their involvement? How can we reach a "shared understanding" of quality assurance that is not just a euphemism for every actor being able to recite the European Standards & Guidelines? How can students and academics be assisted in finding meaning in daily QA routines – and even help to improve them?

Such questions were at the heart of a series of workshops conducted in the context of a European project "Promoting quality culture in higher education institutions" (PQC), coordinated by EUA in partnership with the European Association for QA in Higher Education (ENQA), the University of Duisburg-Essen, the University of Lisbon and the University of Zagreb. Bringing together more than 60 QA professionals from universities all over Europe, the workshops focused on sharing experiences and ideas on how to incentivise all internal stakeholders (most notably students, academic and administrative staff) to get actively involved in the development of the institutional quality cultures.

In this paper, we are drawing from the discussions in these workshops and basing them around three central issues that seem to be pivotal for strengthening participatory structures: ownership, sense-making and communication. However, it should be noted that the ideas being presented in this paper do not constitute an official project report, but rather an analytical re-organisation of recurring themes in the workshop discussions. The aspects and recommendations, which were analytically and interpretatively derived from these discussions, are further complemented by insights from current literature on QA and evaluation theory and the authors' own professional experience in the field.

The ownership issue

"A culture of quality is one in which everybody in the organisation, not just the quality controllers, is responsible for quality". This quote by Crosby (1986 cited in Harvey & Green 1993: 16) neatly sums up the main idea of the stakeholders' role in a joint quality culture. Within a functioning quality culture every actor is working towards the same goal, and the QA officers are merely moderating the relevant processes instead of being the only ones feeling obliged to keep them alive. The workshops, however, soon uncovered a major flaw in the way most QA systems are designed. In spite of all ambitions to reframe QA as a core value of higher education institutions instead of an enforced chore, the top-down implementation logic inherent in most QA activities usually means that all stakeholders enact (and thus potentially reject) an externally imposed "script". By the time students

and academics are invited to engage themselves and to "take responsibility", most parameters are usually set and responsibility is rather assigned or delegated than allowed to be taken. The same analogy applies to university leadership as well: they may also feel as if the external QA requirements are imposed on them rather than being in charge of developing institutional QA systems that genuinely would serve their needs and thus can demonstrate a lack of commitment.

In other words, the stakeholders are required to engage themselves in processes (or are even made responsible for their outcomes), which they do not own – or at least do not feel as if they did. The idea of collegiate feedback can thus get quickly subverted, once it becomes a formal process that is defined, implemented and maybe even controlled by the QA office. Creating such a sense of ownership, on the other hand, is not as easy as it may sound. Most guidelines (and external assessment criteria) for QA systems require clear and formal roles and responsibilities as well as standardised process descriptions. Even if every academic was left to his/her own ideas of how to ensure the quality of his/her own teaching and research, the institution would still need to come up with a meta-process to ensure that everyone is fulfilling the same minimum standards or at least is transparent enough in what they do. Making everyone an owner of his/her own performance monitoring, however, seems downright impossible.

The workshops showed that representative structures (with QA boards and curriculum committees that do not only enact procedures but have the freedom to define them) might be at least a partial solution to this problem. With student and academic staff representatives sitting in the steering groups that define the main parameters of a system and its core processes and criteria and monitor the effectiveness of such efforts, the stakeholder groups are at least formally involved in a way that signals ownership for the system. Nonetheless, higher education institutions usually consist of highly individualised and loosely coupled experts (cf. Pellert 1999). Thus, taking the ownership idea to the level of the individual actor might well require that the different actors are challenged as well as enabled to formulate their own goals and to develop their own activities within a shared framework. This would also require taking responsibility for the consequences as well knowing that within a quality culture approach shared responsibilities also means shared opportunities and risks.

The sense-making issue

When taking a close look at the workshop discussions on the potential lack of stakeholder engagement and actors' reluctance towards QA, it soon becomes clear that the problem is not that people object to the key idea as such. Hardly anyone ever argues against quality and improvement. This is strongly mirrored in the scholarly discourse — quality improvement appears as a generally desirable objective, with even cost-arguments seeming to be eclipsed by the concept's universal radiance (cf. Blackmur 2007). In a way, improvement is arguably the most accepted among the different functions of QA, possibly because "it is [..] seen as being relatively unthreatening to, and by, the academic community" (Williams 2009: 52f). And yet, most QA policies and processes seem to be unable to build upon such positive connotations and shed the image of a bureaucratic burden that hardly adds any value to the lives of students and academics.

During the workshops, several possible reasons were discussed, yet many of them led to the same conclusion: the language of the profession plays a pivotal role. Policy documents developed on a national or even European level are "adopted", yet hardly ever translated and specified for the needs of a particular institution and the actors within often underlining the accountability function of QA. In addition, many attempts to engage internal stakeholders in the QA processes draw on technical

terms and concepts that are hardly a part of their usual environment and hold little relevance for them. The underlying assumption seems to be, that every actor needs to know how the system works and is able to name its components (as an indicator for his/her "engagement"), but this assumption is very likely to thwart the actual goal of bringing people together in an attempt to change for the better. Further, it was found, that even seemingly "harmless" terms and expressions that are part of the stock vocabulary of any QA officer, can be interpreted in a way that is causing rejection rather than acceptance. The much favoured practice of identifying and disseminating "good practices" or even "best practices" often overlooks the normative connotations that come with this label. A "best practice" usually sets an example to be followed, yet at least semantically ignores that other practices might be at least equally effective and that they could also be equally valued by the institution. Consequently, framing activities as "best practices" can potentially even discourage people from participating in these model activities.

Overall, the norms that are encoded in various QA policies and processes are a particularly important yet sensitive aspect, which too often might get overlooked. As with any construct that is bound to values, it is highly unlikely that the same normative ideal manifesting in a specific QA activity would appeal to every institution and actor. In other words, something that is viewed as an improvement by a student can be regarded as a change for the worse by a teacher and vice versa. Key factors in this regard are the patterns of explanation and interpretation that prevail in a certain organisational context (see also Vettori 2012b). Influencing these patterns and helping different actors to make sense of the logics that influence themselves and others might – at least in a long-term perspective – constitute a step forward towards "shared understandings" that fuel the quality culture. In this regard, the QA professionals might find it useful to use alternative evaluation approaches (such as Fourth Generation Evaluation, cf. Lincoln & Guba 1985) that pay particular attention to investigating and negotiating the different perspectives and constructions involved in QA, and thus favour sense-making over measurable results.

The communication issue

The fact that the QA professionals participating in the workshops continuously emphasised the importance of communication is hardly surprising in itself. Every organisation relies on communication as well as on building trust, and participation through regular stakeholder communication is one of the fundamental principles in EUA's quality culture concept (cf. EUA 2006, 2005). However, the workshops soon revealed that while this principle may be understood in theory, it is all too often ignored in daily practice. It seems that the dominating communication model is still to simply transmit information from sender to receiver (such as in the Shannon-Weaver-Model (1949)) instead of a two-way process of generating and negotiating meaning (and consequently assist people in their sense-making efforts, see above). On the surface, most QA systems emphasise the importance of feedback cycles and stakeholder involvement, yet when taking a closer look, the flow of the communication indeed goes only one way. Students and graduates, for example, fill in surveys and thus provide feedback on certain occurrences, yet the loop is seldom closed in a way that makes how this feedback was dealt with transparent (cf. Loukkola & Zhang 2010). Even the academic staff – who are the primary addressees of QA's most favourite instrument, i.e. the omnipresent course evaluation questionnaires – rarely know what is being done with the data; or what they are supposed to do with it. Having open discussions on the value and impact of stakeholder feedback seems even more essential, because acting on feedback received is not as easy and unidirectional in practice as the political and managerial models imply. Most feedback is contradictory and does not offer clear

and precise information on the causes of a problem or the potential solutions and thus needs to be interpreted and – in terms of the measures to be taken – even negotiated. The workshops therefore discussed a number of recommendations on how feedback and survey data could be used as the starting point of a communication process instead of its result, e.g. by regularly interpreting survey results among different stakeholders or institutional workshop series.

It also needs to be taken into account that communications can hardly be fully managed or controlled — information is not necessarily interpreted in the way the communicator intends it to be. Even communication channels are usually charged with meaning and are often treated accordingly. For example, the latest QA achievements in the institution's newsletter might arouse the interest of external stakeholders, but can also lead to the internal view that this is just "another marketing trick". Even the language that is used makes a significant difference. Whether an activity is framed as a "developmental talk" or an "annual performance appraisal" makes a huge difference, and launching a new process as "a necessary new QA instrument" signals something completely different than calling it "a way of making the curricula development process more efficient".

Conclusions: overcoming engagement issues?

The three aspects of participative quality cultures discussed in this paper – ownership, sense-making and communication –, appear to be key issues when discussing how to engage the internal stakeholder in order to work together for a common good. In this paper we have made an attempt to address them separately to some extent to give each of them the weight they deserve. In daily practice, however, they seem to be and should be intrinsically interlinked, which makes them impossible to tackle in complete isolation.

Consequently, the practical proposals made above are also related to more than one single aspect. Summarising these proposals, we come up with the following suggestions that could be considered when developing an institutional QA system that should include rather than exclude people:

- Set in place representative structures that are given a role and encouraged to take the lead in defining QA system's characteristics
- Step into a real dialogue with the actors and make them aware of the different perspectives they are bringing to the table
- Revise the language used when presenting and discussing QA and try to translate concepts into the daily language and relevance structures of the actors that are meant to be addressed
- Let the actors contribute in those areas where they are already versatile (e.g. not everyone needs to know the technical components of the QA system by heart).

Based on the discussions with the QA practitioners, it seems obvious that the success of QA officers in their capacity to foster quality culture is directly linked to developing QA adapted to the respective institution thus being able to take a step back from the formalistic requirements of external QA (while taking them into consideration) and being associated with their academic community. In this context, keeping in mind the different roles of a QA officer identified by Sursock (2011) –support and expertise, coordination, interpretation, monitoring, administration – may provide an interesting framework for re-considering the relationship between QA officers and the rest of the institutional community. Ultimately, the key to success in engaging stakeholders in the internal QA system might ironically lie in avoiding framing it like this – even for the "architects" of the QA system themselves.

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Questions for discussion:

- Do you recognise characteristics and challenges of your own institution in the observations made in the paper?
- Would you agree or disagree with our conclusions? Why?
- How does your QA unit interact with the staff?
- How do you, in your own institutional context, ensure that a variety of methods are used for communicating on QA and that they complement each other?
- How do you sustain horizontal communication in your institution?