

Does Self Evaluation of Quality Contribute Towards the Instilling of Quality Culture in HEI's?

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Quality is a measure applying to transactions among bodies. The level of quality is high if all involved bodies' needs have been met.

Consider a simple transaction along a simple supply chain – the purchase of an appliance in a retail shop. There are seemingly two bodies involved in this transaction: the buyer and the seller. But in fact there are many more bodies involved, all are stakeholders in this transaction: other users of the item bought, passers-by who may be influenced by its noise or pollution etc., the item's manufacturers and distributors, service sites and personnel, government (regulations), local authorities and more. But if we concentrate on the basic side A (seller) and side B (buyer), the needs of the seller may be the making of a reasonable profit, enabling him to survive and prosper. The buyer's needs may be to receive an expected service from the item to his complete satisfaction, with no unwanted effects (the emission of noise, smell, gas, radiation, vibrations, failing official safety inspections, excessive energy intake etc.). High quality describes a win-win transaction, in which all parties are rational, understand the rules and regulations of the trade, understand each other's needs, and are basically cooperative and trusting.

In real-life situations, transactions in general are not symmetrical – involved parties lack some information about the others. Buyers usually lack the know-how, skill, capability and capacity to pre-examine every purchased product in order to verify that it meets all needs. In order to remain in business, most suppliers will not betray the trust they receive from prospective customers; but some cannot resist the temptation of making a quick profit by deceiving customers. Maynard Smith and Price (1973) described a similar dynamics in a model of animal conflicts (easily extendable to social, political or economic group behaviour). An evolutionary stable strategy for a population may tolerate a certain proportion of individuals who are using an aggressive strategy against the others. We can see this phenomenon at the national level, where populations tolerate a certain proportion of criminal activities. Thus, aggressive suppliers (who cheat customers) are more susceptible to retaliatory actions than peaceful, honest ones. This group behaviour keeps the proportion of aggressors below a certain, tolerable limit. But what suits a whole population might not suit an individual who may feel uncomfortable with the prospect of possibly bad, damaged purchases. Powerful customers, such as government agencies and very large companies, can take it upon themselves to keep the suppliers to tight measures of incoming quality assurance. But this defensive measure cannot be taken by individual purchasers or by small organizations. Therefore some bodies, both government and self-appointed, take upon themselves the task of representing and defending the customers. The economy must equip itself with certain retaliatory capabilities in order not to stoop to an aggressive (non-survivable) economy.

In quasi-markets [Amaral, 2006] (food, health, transport, education services etc.) the customer is usually the public. In a quasi-market, customers lack the knowledge and capability to ensure safe and effective products and services rendered. The public's representing agencies are usually government bodies, taking the form of licencing, accrediting and regulating bodies.

Higher education, too, operates in a quasi-market. The customers must trust the ability of the HEIs to effectively provide them with the knowledge, tools, capabilities and skills they need in order to succeed in life. Higher education determines the types of services it provides, the contents, processes and methods. Do customers completely trust the HEI's

ability to plan and provide their services? In a quick poll among more than 100 postgraduate students of quality, roughly 60% of them preferred to see an external body inspecting and regulating the quality of their university's teaching processes. Although regulation is expensive and weighty, five years ago we witnessed the effect deregulation might have on the economy, given the above-mentioned small proportion of deceptive organizations. But, despite this, as we see when we observe any dynamic economy, transactions must carry reasonable degrees of mutual trust.

Regulatory bodies have only limited means and they lack the capacity to closely and intensively inspect and examine all of their subjected organizations. They therefore assign most of the preparatory work to the regulated organizations themselves, limiting their own involvement to periodic audits or inspections. This is not unique to the higher education sector – most organizations subjected to periodic external assessment carry out the bulk of duties themselves, spending time and manpower in the preparation of large masses of data, information and reports for the external bodies.

Of all quality management frameworks – inspection, test, supervision, control, auditing, qualification, accreditation – self responsibility for quality is the most enlightened and progressive one. It deposits the responsibility for quality in the hands of the body best able to quality-manage all aspects of the organization – the organization itself. It places the interface between supplier and customer on the most advanced parameter: trust. External regulation does not really fit naturally into this concept. An economy cannot exist without certain degrees of mutual trust; but, as explained above, complete trust can never be observed, so, a trust-based economy is difficult to maintain in the long run.

Self evaluation of quality in an organization is similar to a self-search process which a person goes through. Both search for existential purpose and aims, goals, challenges, achievements and perpetual improvement. Learned external opinions are welcome in this process. When goals are defined, the organization, or person, embarks upon a long journey of achieving them. The self evaluation of quality is but a first step in a long process of serial improvement programmes and achievements. HEI's are required to go through thorough self-search or self-evaluation processes as the main activity prior to the regulator's intervention. But here lures a danger of a built-in contradiction between the pure self-made evaluation effort and the external regulator's eye and pen.

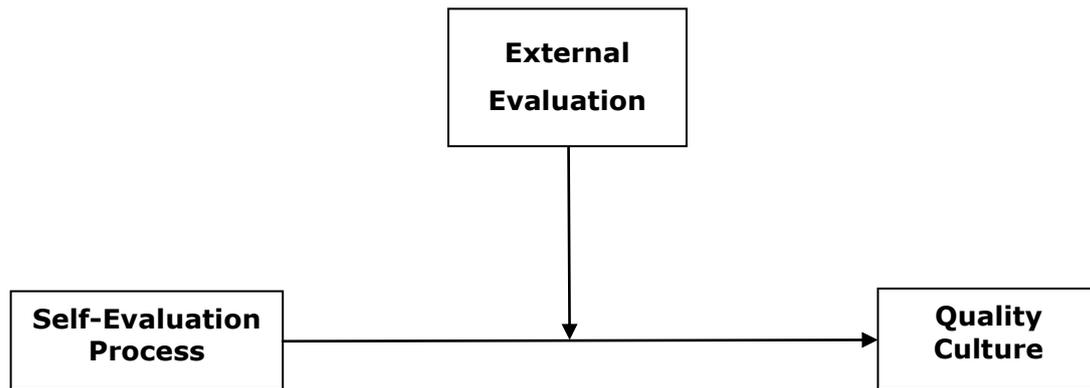
The Research Outline

Organizational Culture is the collection of values, norms, concepts, beliefs, behavioural and other rules, shared by individuals and groups in an organization, which are considered important to the organization (e.g., Schneider & Bowen, 1995).

Quality Culture is a topic-specific aspect of organizational culture. Quality Culture is the collection of values, norms, concepts, beliefs, behavioural and other rules, shared by individuals and groups in an organization, which are related to the importance of quality to the organization (how important it is, and why). Quality Culture is modelled on eight dimensions (Detert, Schroeder & Mauriel, 2000): management by facts; long-term orientation and strategic thinking; motivation – management involvement; workers empowerment and participation; perpetual improvement; focusing on results; cooperation and collaboration; focusing on the customer.

As the discussed academic quality efforts began in Europe more than twenty years ago (ten in our country), it is interesting to see whether these great efforts promoted the level of quality culture in academic units that were taking part in this process. We cannot ignore the above-mentioned involvement of the national regulatory bodies, so we wanted to see whether these external activities, as sensed and felt by the units' academic staff, contributed to the promotion of quality culture levels in their respective units.

The examined model, therefore, is the following:



Quality Culture, being a latent variable, was measured (level and strength) through its eight dimensions. As no reference was found for the measurement of these dimensions (mentioned above), we had to verify and validate an appropriate questionnaire, which was indeed done successfully (NFI = .920, RFI = .896, Incremental Fit Index = .968, Non-Normed Fit Index = .957, Comparative Fit Index = .967, RMSEA = .044).

We similarly had to define variables indicating the level of performance of the self-evaluation process. First, we defined "success" of the self-evaluation process in two plains – the operational one and the performance (results, output) one. We collected 55 questions and statements from organizational success verified and validated questionnaires and managed to adapt five of them to the self-evaluation process (these statements are for either plain mentioned): active participation in the evaluation process; level of support by the institute's management; improvement in study programs; drawing of personal benefit from the process; general satisfaction from the process.

The external involvement's effect was measured by the following: "The external evaluation committee provided us with beneficiary external perspective."

Having established the validity of the questionnaires, we collected some 320 members of staff from 45 academic units in 10 institutes of higher education in Europe and in Israel.

Some findings

1. In one country where the regulatory authority was observed to be using a more supportive, quality-oriented attitude, with less inspecting and judging, the self-evaluation marks were high and all eight quality culture dimensions were higher than those of the country where the regulating authority was not visibly involved in the process and limited its role to the appointment of external committees.
2. Analysing the results of the surveys per institute, we notice that those (few) HEI's which were observed to have high levels of top management involvement and support for the internal evaluation process, together with a close guidance and support by a quality methodological knowledge centre, performed better in the self-evaluation process and drew higher overall benefits from the process.
3. Analysing the results of the surveys on a departmental (unit) basis per institute, we found large differences between units in both self-evaluation activities and quality culture levels. This concurs with Zohar & Luria's (2005) findings, that the effect of local leadership at the unit level was significantly higher than that of top management's on the degree of adoption of internal evaluation activities and on the ability of the process to raise the unit's quality culture dimensions.
4. The two self-evaluation process variables most influential on quality culture dimensions are active personnel participation in the evaluation process and the sense of improvement in study programs. All their effects were positive.

5. The main effect of the external assessment on the eight dimensions of unit quality culture was mostly negative. In too many cases, especially when the self-evaluation process was deep-searching, thorough and brave, the attitude of the external committee (which ignored the improvement efforts and emphasized the faults and shortcomings exposed) generated an anti-climax in the academic unit, discouraging its members from any further association with any "quality" issues (Also, see Harvey, 2005).
6. The moderating effect of the external assessment on quality culture was generally negative by self-evaluation process variables and quality culture dimensions. The most noticeable negative moderating effect was with the variable "level of support by the institute's management". The stronger the support given to the unit, the stronger the negative slope of the significant interaction effects on quality culture dimensions. But some interaction (moderating) effects were positive (although most of them were not significant): some quality culture dimensions were not reduced by the interaction effect between external involvement and 1) a general satisfaction with the process, 2) a general sense of improvement in the study programs.
7. Answers to open questions and interviews showed that not all was "bad" in the external committee's intervention. Some academic staff in a small number of units reported satisfaction with the external committee's contribution. but, we could classify the units that were positively impressed into two classes:
 - a. The unit expected a peer review, not an external quality evaluation process, and peer review is what they got. The whole idea of quality evaluation was lost, but neither side was really interested in a true evaluation process.
 - b. The external committee members had experience in quality; for example, in some cases its members came from non-government accreditation agencies and were fluent in quality practices. Such committees indeed provided helpful feedback about the evaluation process and added a new perspective to the processes the unit had gone through.

In the following table, overall results of the survey are displayed. Results are more significant at the institutional and departmental levels, as overall averaging tends to smooth the results. Only slope values are displayed in each cell, which of course are scale-dependent, but significant p-values are marked with asterisks; $p < 0.05$ is marked *, $p < 0.01$ is marked ** and $p < 0.001$ is marked ***. All eight dimensions' F values are *** significant.

Quality evaluation variables	Dimensions of Quality Culture							
	management by facts	strategic thinking	management involvement	perpetual improvement	focusing on results	cooperation and collaboration	workers participation	focusing on the customer
Internal evaluation								
active participation	.18**	.18**	.09	.18	.15	.18	.32***	.53 ***
personal benefit	.05	-.04	.27***	.07	-.01	.05	.15*	-.02
general satisfaction	.17*	.26***	.05	.13	.09	.12	.11	.05
Management support	.15*	.04	.20**	.12	.07	.13	-.15*	.10
improvement in study programs	.09	.32***	.12	.29***	.28***	.17*	.06	.22**
Moderator								
External evaluation	-.19**	-.06	-1.2	-.14*	-.06	-.07	.04	-.12
Interactions of ext. evaluation								
active participation	.01	-.11	-.01	-.11	-.04	.01	-.06	-.04
personal benefit	.04	-.01	.28	.05	-.09	.04	.07	-.05
general satisfaction	.25***	.09	-.04	.11	.23**	.15*	.04	.05
Management support	-.23**	-.10	-.13	-.10	-.18*	-.05	-.02	.03
improvement in study programs	.04	.17*	.15*	.06	.20**	-.04	-.01	-.01
R ²	.24	.40	.21	.25	.33	.31	.36	.22
F value	6.71***	14.57***	5.86***	7.17***	10.57***	9.81***	12.04***	6.29***

Some Comments

The dynamics between academe and the regulatory bodies seems to have veered towards a more traditionally comfortable state of periodic reaccreditation activities. From a quality theoretic point of view, self-evaluation is a self-search effort, as explained above. One does not periodically repeat self-search efforts unless great progress and change were made since previous self-search efforts. This means that perpetual improvement must be the name of the game, and quality evaluation efforts must be the starting point only, with limited strategic reviews made not too frequently along the way.

In order to achieve this state, a deeper understanding of quality must be instilled in the whole system: both HEI's and the regulator must understand that they are serving the very same customer: society, present and future. Academic institutes must persistently increase the effectiveness of their services to society - the creation and teaching of knowledge, tools, methods, capabilities and values. Society, just a little suspicious of service providers in a quasi-market, may appoint a public body which will overlook the academic units' operations, effectiveness, efficiency, progress and integrity. This must be done with full openness and cooperation by all parties in order to ensure the provision of best services to us all. This also means that the core tool is a high perpetual improvement climate in institutes of higher education, with an appointed public body as the representative of society's present and future needs.

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Questions for discussion:

1. If self-made quality effort is helpful and external intervention is not, is there room for the granting of complete autonomy to HEI's in planning and maintaining their quality of work? Is total de-regulation really the answer?
2. Theoretically, the regulatory body's intervention should help the academic units by providing an external perspective to their internal evaluation processes. Why does the external intervention not assume this role?
3. Some European HEI regulation authorities allow the HEI's to appoint their own external evaluation teams. Is this the solution to the problems cited above?
4. How did self-evaluation of quality turn into periodical reaccreditation activities? Is this a welcome transformation of the intended process?
5. Can the recommendations for betterment of the quality evaluation processes be applicable to all HEI's?