

STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS OF QUALITY CULTURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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Annotation

In the last few decades the ideology of quality has become one of the most important and ambitious directions of activity for institutions of higher education. Volatile external environment and fast paced internal academic life of higher education poses big challenges for the development of the concept of quality and quality culture in an institution of higher education. The concept of quality is dynamic and multidimensional in all the sectors of activities which are included within the scope of the topic of quality (production, services, etc.); in the sphere of higher education, its complexity is supplemented by specific aspects of the development of higher education, i.e. academic freedom and autonomy, value systems, and the problem field of education paradigm change.

The actualisations of quality are presupposed by the changes which occur in the external environment of an institution of higher education, i.e. implementation of a market model, globalisation and internationalisation, the change of the needs of external social shareholders and the labour market. A large amount of changes is determined by the general principles of the development of the European higher education space, international agreements and directives. Lithuania has an active quality evaluation system for institutions of higher education; this system encompasses the institutional evaluation of institutions of higher education and evaluation of study programmes. According to the concept of quality culture development, external evaluation stimulates internal self-evaluation of the quality of activities in an institution of higher education. Excluding the external environmental change that presupposes the actualisation of the idea of quality, institutions of higher education undergo related changes in the internal environment which are determined by the changing student profile, changes in didactics, development of academic values and traditions. The formation of the concept of quality within the context of internal and external conditions and changes is a complex process for every institution of higher education. The concept of quality in an institution of higher education is not a self-driven or predetermined phenomenon; in order to form it and develop quality culture, the strategic approach is needed.

The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize quality culture as a strategic dimension in higher education institution. This paper integrates material from recent quality culture and quality management studies and provides a conceptual framework for the understanding of quality culture.

A literature review is based on the quality management literature as a guiding framework. The theoretical areas of quality concept and strategic dimensions of quality are proposed.

Key words: *quality, quality culture, higher education.*

1. Actualisation of the idea of quality within the higher education space

The concept of quality attracts attention of practitioners and scientists by designating both the aspects of daily life and the development of theoretical conceptions. The concept of quality is designated as *the keywords of public debates* (Clement, 2003) by determining its extensive involvement into not only academic, but also political discussions; *fashionable concept* and *meta-idea* (Stensaker, 2007) by showing its popularity in discussions that carry out different interests and by generalising its extensive development in terms of different meaningful fields and aspects.

The conception of quality within the field of higher education is a relevant object of scientific discussions. Scientists observe that quality is one of the concepts in social sciences that is especially difficult to define and that it has become one of the most attractive ones in the entire management theory (Valiuškevičiūtė, Žiogevičiūtė, 2006). An evident attempt to explain the complexity of the conception of quality and access to it by means of metaphors (quality is 'moving target', Westerheijden, 2005; 'chameleon', Vidovich, 2001; 'window', Saarinen, 2008) and epithets (quality is relative, Harvey and Green, 1993; elusive, Elassy, 2015). All of the

aforementioned epithets and metaphors of quality (concept of quality) include evident senses 'many' and 'change'. As it has been mentioned, the scientific discourse shows the complexity and ambiguity of the conception of quality in higher education, i.e. there are extensive discussions on the topic of defining the conception of quality within the framework of the activities of institutions of higher education. Different ways of conceptualising the concept of quality are presupposed by different methodologies, different attitudes towards the goals and essential management aspects of institutions of higher education. The definition of quality is based on various approaches (Van Kemenade, 2008; Newton, 2002; Harvey and Green, 1993).

Analysing various approaches towards quality in higher education, the classification of conceptions suggested by Harvey and Green is the most frequent basis: *Quality as exception, Quality as perfection or consistency, Quality as fitness for purpose, Quality as value for money, Quality as transformation* (Harvey, Green, 1993; Harvey, Stensaker, 2008). The quality conceptualisation structure by Harvey and Green which distinguished 5 conceptions of quality does not reveal a specific definition of quality, and does not suggest a recommendation for the contextualisation of the conception of quality in a specific institution of higher education. This is mostly an abstracted classification of the concepts of quality according to the actualised projection of the idea of quality based on analogies (Vettori, 2012) without emphasising definite scientific direction or access. One comparative component cannot be distinguished, i.e. certain concepts are grouped according to the expression of the idea of quality within the management structure of an institution of higher education, while other concepts are grouped according to the goals of quality processes or the interests of interested parties. Since there are no defined theoretical dimensions of these 5 quality perceptions, further theoretical and empirical quality studies exploit certain units, i.e. separate quality visions / concepts. The quality conceptualisation structure proposed by Harvey and Green has been widely used and interpreted in theoretical and empirical studies on the topic of quality during the last two decades; the structure has become a conclusive position in the studies of any paradigm and methodological access. Finding the place of the concept of quality under analysis in the *Quality as exception / perfection or consistency / fitness for purpose / value for money / transformation* structure (Tam, 2001; Lomas, 2004; Saarinen, 2008; Vettori, 2012; etc.) corresponds to the implication of philosophical *agreement on the definition of conceptions / object*. The quality conceptualisation structure proposed by Harvey and Green reveals the space of discussions and research for the cognition of the quality *phenomenon*.

The *subjectivity* of the conception of quality presupposes its expression in different contexts based on different interests (practical, scientific). According to Tam (2001), interested parties of the higher education institution have different outlooks towards quality; each of the outlooks towards quality is determined by interests that direct towards higher education. The interested parties of the higher education institution are very diverse; the field of higher education interests includes students, employers, personnel of the higher education institution (teachers and non-academic staff), the government and its funds, auditors, accreditors and assessors (including professional structures) of the higher education institution. Other authors, e.g. Tucci and Cellesi (2007), distinguish possible interested groups of the higher education institution, i.e. students, families, industry and economic subjects, society, professionals, graduates, researchers, professorship. The ellipsis at the end of this list is significant, i.e. Tucci and Cellesi provide the list of interested groups as indefinite by supposing implications of potential groups and interests for the higher education institution.

The review of the scientific literature reveals that the development of the conception of quality in an institution of higher education is a complex process that requires *active participation of interested groups and implementation of the consensus principle*. The general management theory reveals the necessity to actualise organisational strategic and tactical goals, and provides clearly defined vision and mission. The conception of quality *within the context of strategic organisational management* reveals itself through fundamental aspects of content, i.e. knowing the organisational goals and having a concept of quality are especially important in the context of quality management.

Summing up the theoretical analysis of the conception of quality, the following two main paradigms can be distinguished: that of *outcomes* and that of *goals*. The content of the conception of quality which is epistemologically dynamic, subjective and multidimensional depends on the following aspects:

- The needs (encompassing expectations) of a subject – interested group, interested person – that creates perception of quality and defines the content of quality;
- Circumstances/contexts in which the content of the conception of quality is defined (study quality, teaching quality, scientific research quality, administration activity quality);
- International and national levels that reveal the expression of institutionalised conception of quality in the context of wider quality ensuring processes.

The paradigm of outcomes introduces the meanings of knowledge creation and transference, preparation of specialists, satisfaction of labour market needs, i.e. outcome measurement, into the institutional conception of quality. The paradigm of outcomes encompasses the topics of identification of needs (interests and expectations), nurturing of academic freedom, organisational values and academic tradition through the philosophical (ideological) prism. The paradigms of goals and outcomes reveal the strategic dimension of the concept of quality, i.e. quality in the higher education institution through the perception and involvement of interested party needs into the quality ensuring processes enables formulating strategic goals and anticipating respective measures in order to implement them and evaluate the outcomes.

2. Theoretical Framework of Quality Culture in Higher Education Institutions

The conception of quality is disclosed in the paradigm of quality culture orienting the perception of quality into the corporate level of higher education in the scientific and practical discourse. Neither scientific discourse, nor projects and discussions dedicated to practical issues provide a unified definition of quality culture: as in the case of the conception of quality there are discussions on various definitions of quality culture which reveal various conceptions of quality culture in the area of higher education. European project Quality Culture in European Universities (2006) does not provide a specific and unified concept of quality culture, does not define its structure; however, the discussions and analysis led to the unanimous conclusion that the concept of quality culture depends on the organisational culture and that it is individual for every institution of higher education. Quality culture is associated more with the internal aims of higher education institution.

Different conceptions of organisational culture are actualised in the scientific discourse. In the research on culture two directions may be distinguished: some of the research, based on the qualitative approach, reveal anthropological origin of culture, and the others are based on the assumption that culture is a measurable organisational characteristic (Naor *et al*, 2008). Some of the scientists claim that quality is the result of one's experience, while others state that its conception is shaped and changes when the institution is striving to achieve its goals and while developing quality culture (Vettori, 2007).

Why is it difficult to define quality culture? Because it is revealed through the processes that are more affected by the opinions and beliefs, while knowledge, analysis and empirical research have less impact of elements which are important for better perception of culture. Harvey and Stensaker (2008) through the excursion of cultural history reveal three concepts of culture: culture as the implication of civilisation; culture as art (including the notion of *popular culture*); and culture as a way of life (including subcultures). The latter conception is justified by a cultural relativism perspective: since diverse cultures have diverse standards, an absolute standard possibility of human cognition is eliminated. This provision is important in the analysis of social, political, ethic and any other cultural phenomena, having in mind the standards of the culture to which they relate. Cultural perspective within the perception of social and organisational behaviour is divided into two provisions: the culture is what the organisation possesses, i.e. potentially recognised and manageable factor; and the culture is what the organisation is, i.e. culture as an integral product of social interaction and organisational life and which is impossible to separate from other factors (Harvey ir Stensaker, 2008).

Scientists and practitioners have recognised the importance of the organisational culture for the quality management practice - the role of culture is analysed in the quality management. Considering quality culture as a part of organisational culture, much focus in the research is dedicated to the specificity and expression of the organisational culture in the processes of quality management. The research of Naor *et all* (2008) on the role of culture in quality management is based on the competing values framework which describes four types of culture: group, developmental, rational, and hierarchical - this framework is considered to be a tool for evaluating organisational culture. A two-category framework which is divided into 7 quality activities is applied for investigation of quality management: infrastructure (management support, workforce management, supplier involvement, client involvement) and key performance (quality information, process management, product design). Investigation of competing values framework and quality practices leads to the conclusion that support for organisational culture is necessary for introduction of quality management: it might be stated that unawareness of the role of organisational culture is one of the failures in introducing quality management.

Different objectives and theoretical approaches determine different conceptions of quality culture. Quality culture research trends basically reflect the aforementioned approaches of quality conception: technocratic (pointing to the processes, criteria and indicators) and cultural (pointing to paradigm of quality development, agreement on quality). The technocratic approach

towards quality culture justifies the aim at identifying quality culture dimensions and criteria (Adomavičienė, Pukelytė, 2010). Since in practice these approaches often blend together, the everyday usage of quality culture conception eliminates the differences of these two approaches. If quality culture is something that includes the quality assurance procedures, it should be called the quality assurance culture. Harvey and Stensaker (2008) observe that in order to describe a well-functioning quality management system, the conception of quality culture is invoked. The authors believe that it severely confines the understanding of quality culture, because the processes related to opinions, trust, and ideology are not estimated.

3. Quality assurance as an expression of quality culture on the strategic level of an institution

Literature review shows that there is no general agreement on the conception of quality and quality culture. Theoretically eliminated possibility of the definition of quality and quality culture presupposes the complexity of quality culture assessment and development modelling in an institution of higher education. The definition of quality culture and the exclusion of quality culture dimensions become the object of the discussions due to internal aspiration of quality culture development in an institution of higher education and the external need to assess and compare quality culture in different institutions of higher education.

When analysing the deployment of quality culture principles in an institution of higher education, it is often stressed that quality as change fluctuation presupposes the quality culture integration into strategic management – for the internal (institutional) quality assurance level the prerequisite is setting internal requirement, self-evaluation and development (Milišiūnaitė *et al*, 2010). For the paradigm of strategic management the reflexive evaluation - attitude and self-evaluation - is crucial. Levels of international and national quality assurance levels in the higher education culture development actualises the element of outside environment, which has to be contextualised by means of individual perspective on higher education institution in the process of strategic planning.

Quality culture dimensions: 1) human resource management; 2) leadership; 3) quality implementation; 4) attitude towards the change in the organisation; 5) institutional quality assessment; 6) customer orientation; 7) decision making; 8) strategic planning (Pukelytė, Adomavičienė, 2010) include the constituents of strategic management: leadership (including engagement and commitment of the personnel), goals of the organization, the needs of the interested parties (including the results and their monitoring), culture and values.

Kettunen and Kantola (2007), when analysing the strategic planning and quality management attitudes in the Bologna Process and its influence on the development of higher education institution, state that there is integration between strategic planning and quality management which orientates to high quality education results. Researchers explore how strategic planning and quality assurance complement each other on the international, national, and institutional levels – the Bologna Process implementation is interpreted through the perspective of strategic planning and quality assurance. Quality management, quality control, and quality assurance are treated as synonyms in the process of strategic planning – 'quality management is a more philosophical approach towards organisation management rather than a technical quality standard itself', 'holistic approach that gives structure to organisational development' (Kettunen and Kantola, 2007, p. 67). This analysis shows that higher education strategic planning, associated with Bologna Process, consists of seven levels, with a responsible person, documents, and development processes on each level. The planning route starts at European and national higher education policy, goes through to higher education strategic planning and reaches the levels of student and lecturer. Scientists claim that all the levels are required in the planning process and all of them should be accounted for. When describing quality assurance on different levels of planning, scientists conclude that higher education quality assurance encompasses the same seven levels (from European to student level) – the higher education institution primarily responsible for quality assurance, and the quality assurance is most effective when it approaches the study programmes, and when the staff and students feel responsible and are involved in the process of quality assurance.

Conclusions

1. The concept of quality in an institution of higher education is not a self-driven or predetermined phenomenon; in order to form it and develop quality culture, the strategic approach is needed. Strategic dimension of quality conception is actualized by orientation towards identification of expectations and needs (paradigm of goals) and measurement of results (paradigm of results: quality in a higher school through understanding of the needs of interested parties and involvement into the quality insurance processes allows formulating strategic goals and anticipating respective tools for achieving them and evaluating the results.

2. Strategic perspective is actualized by the understanding of quality culture: the way the understanding of quality is contextualized in higher education institution, and the way quality culture reveals the perspective of external and internal integrity and enables evaluating the direction of higher education institution.

3. The extent of the research field of quality culture development in an institution of higher education reveals the fundamental divide: in theoretical and empirical studies the analysis of issues in quality culture is based on a dichotomous approach: the perception of technocratic (formal, "hard" quality technique) quality vs the perception of value (subjective, "soft" quality practice) quality. A significant point which arises in the tension of this contraposition – *creation of quality understanding as a general meaning (mutual agreement) in a higher education institution* – enables revealing the strategic perspective of quality culture.

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