

# **Quality culture: understandings, boundaries and linkages**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As part of the process of enhancing quality, quality culture has become a taken-for-granted concept intended to support development and improvement processes in higher education. By taking a theoretical approach to examining quality culture, starting with a scholarly examination of the concept of culture, and exploring how it is related to quality, quality improvement and quality assurance, the aim of this paper is to create a better understanding of how one can make sense of quality culture, its boundaries but also its links to the fundamental processes of teaching and learning.

Keywords: quality, culture, quality culture, learning and teaching, academic engagement

## **1. Introduction**

Quality assurance is no longer a novelty to higher education. National and institutional systems for evaluation, assessment, accreditation and audit are now a routine in the majority of European countries (Schwarz & Westerheijden 2004). However, this does not mean that quality work and quality improvement is an integrated part of the sector. Available evidence rather suggests that 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 staff and student attachment and active involvement in these processes (Newton 2000; Vidal, 2003).

When trying to describe the ideal involvement of student and staff in such processes, the concept of quality culture has in the latter years often been highlighted as a description of the social processes intended to characterise well-functioning quality systems and quality work processes (Bařstová *et al.*, 2004; Rozsnyai, 2003). While quality culture has a taken-for-granted meaning attached to it, it is not really helpful for those wanting to improve the link between quality work and the fundamental processes of teaching and learning.

The problem related to a poor understanding of the concept of quality culture is that it opens up for processes more dominated by belief, faith and ideology than processes more characterised by knowledge, analyses and empirical studies of the elements important for a better description and understanding of such a culture.

Hence, the aim of this paper is to create a better understanding of how one can make sense of the concept of quality culture, its boundaries and limitations, but also its possible links to the fundamental processes of teaching and learning. To be able to do this, the paper will start with providing a short overview of the recent and more general history of theory of culture since developments in higher education are increasingly influenced and interrelated to broader development trends in society.

## 2. Culture: a short historical account

It is an understatement to say that much has been written about culture. However, much of the writing has taken a rather uncritical approach and used the concept in an *ad hoc* manner in the higher education policy discourse (Kogan 1999).

Culture, as Williams (1983, p. 87) pointed out, 'is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language'. The complications arise because the concept has evolved differently in different European languages and in different disciplines. The word derives from the Latin *colere*, which had various meanings including cultivate, protect, inhabit and honour with worship. Williams noted that some of these meanings dropped away although remain linked through derived nouns such as cult, for honour with worship and colony for inhabit. The Latin noun *cultura* evolved and its main meaning was cultivation in the sense of husbandry. Much later, after it passed into English early in 15<sup>th</sup> century, it came also to include cultivation of the mind. Thus:

Bacon: 'the culture and manurance of minds' (1605);

Hobbes: 'a culture of their minds' (1651);

Johnson: 'she neglected the culture of her understanding' (1759).

Williams argued that the noun culture began, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, to develop as an abstract concept, away from the specific cultivation of something, and this is where the complications were compounded. In French, culture started to become linked with civilisation and, in German, *Kultur* (which evolved from, *Cultur* in the C19) was a synonym for civilisation.

The tendency, then, was to align culture with a notion of civility and refinement and this is evident, for example, in the works of Arnold (1869). His neo-platonic view of culture, equating it with such characteristics as beauty and intelligence, saw culture as the crucial component of a healthy democratic state. For him, culture is a study of perfection: it is about 'contact with the best which has been thought and said in the world'. Subsequently, this view was replicated by conservative commentators such as Eliot (1948) who argued that Western European Christian culture is the highest form of culture and Ortega y Gasset (1930) who argued that the apparent move from elitist to democratic views of culture is undesirable as not enough effort is put into conserving the best.

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However, in Germany, the concept was being fractured: Herder (1784–91) attacked the assumption of a linear progress through history of civilisation and (high) culture to the dominant C18th European view. Herder attacked cultural imperialism (although he did not call it that): ‘The very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature.’ Herder argued there are different cultures relating to different nations and periods as well as specific and variable cultures of different social and economic groups within a nation. For the understanding of quality culture it is important to retain awareness of this critique of homogeneous, evolving elitist concept of culture.

Herder’s approach was reflected in some branches of anthropology, initially the focus was on ‘primitive cultures’ but subsequently developed into an appreciation of cultural diversity: that culture is descriptive, inclusive, and relativistic (Bodley, 1994). Since Tylor (1872) first proposed a list of aspects that described culture, there have been many variants and Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) identified 156 different anthropological definitions of culture, which Bodley has reconstructed into eight broad groups:

- 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.<sup>1</sup>

In essence, Bodley (1994) argues that culture is shared, learned and symbolic. Being shared means that culture is a social phenomenon that is learned and involves arbitrarily assigned, symbolic meanings (for example, that a rose, in some societies, implies romance); culture is not biologically inherited nor is idiosyncratic behaviour cultural. Further, he argues that culture is transmitted cross-generations, is adaptive, and integrated. This means, for some, that culture is not dependent on the individual but precedes and survives any individual: a super-organic view of culture. This sometimes manifests itself as seeing culture as an abstract rather than, as Bodley prefers, an ‘objective reality’. Bodley (1994) insists that culture includes its human carriers and argues that many ‘humanistic anthropologists would agree that culture is an observable phenomenon, and a people’s unique possession’.

So culture moved away from the notion of husbandry, although never abandoning it: the culture in which laboratory specimens are grown and, of course, attempts to create or grow a culture [of quality]. Culture, in the sense of a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts, developed along three lines. First, culture is used as an abstract noun implying civilized. Second, culture implies artistic culture, which was

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initially 'high' culture but has also developed to mean any form of artistic endeavour, including the subset of 'popular culture'. This artistic construction, at its broadest, refers to all aspects of human achievement that are recorded in some kind of documentary form, including, painting, sculpture, literature, film, photographs and video. Third, is the notion of diverse cultures (including subcultures), which linked culture firmly with a way of life. This democratic view includes everything that is part of a society or indicative of a class or other group. Thus culture, in this version, is closely associated with the idea of society.

##### *Cultural relativism*

This third, democratic, view is, furthermore, conducive to a cultural relativist perspective. The core thesis of cultural relativism is that there are no absolute standards of human cognition. Different cultures have different standards. The implication of this is that social, political, ethical or indeed any cultural phenomena should be considered against the prevailing standards of the particular culture in which they occur. Similarly, no judgements can be made that the institutions of one culture are superior or inferior to that of another culture. Cultural relativism denies the legitimacy of cross-cultural evaluations. Indeed, knowledge, notions of truth and moral imperatives are relative to cultures and subcultures (as will be shown later, this is relevant, although ignored, in construction of quality culture).

##### *Culturologism and the sociology of knowledge*

Cultural relativism, although an anthropological construct, was not the focus of early development of cultural analysis in sociology. Instead, in the early culturologist approach culture was linked to the production of knowledge. The argument was that knowledge, and invention in particular, is not a function of genius but of culture. Given a specific cultural setting, someone would come up with the invention. The empirical grounding of this view, held, *inter alia* by Ogburn, White and Dorothy Thomas at the University of Chicago in the 1920s, was the identification of simultaneous discoveries (Duncan, 1964). Although much of the empirical evidence has subsequently been discounted (Branningan 1981), this cultural element to discovery has been developed in Merton's (1957) early work on the sociology of knowledge in the United States. This sociological analysis of culture, then, placed considerable emphasis on the relationship between culture and knowledge. Alongside this were developments in Europe, not least the development of cultural theory by Adorno and the Frankfurt School. Critical Theory's approach to culture was, despite their Marxist intent, an élitist one. Adorno saw culture as an industry that potentially eliminated critical thought through the production of cultural commodities distributed through the mass media, which manipulated the population. Put simply, populist mass media output served to provide simple pleasure and make the population docile irrespective of their economic circumstances. He saw this mass-produced culture as a danger to the more difficult high arts. Culture industries cultivate false needs through the manipulation of appearance: things with superficial differences are made to appear significantly different, which Adorno conceptualised as *pseudo-individualisation*. The false needs created are satisfied by capitalism. True needs, in contrast, are freedom, creativity, and genuine happiness (Adorno, 1973–1986).

What these approaches to culture all argued, in various ways, is that knowledge, explanation, interpretation and understanding are all culturally embedded.

### *Cultural studies*

These developments were taken a step further with the advent of cultural studies, for example in the UK, in the wake of Williams's pioneering work, with its insistence on a democratic notion of culture. For Williams (1958, p. 5):

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings... We use the word culture in ... two senses: to mean a whole way of life—the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning—the special processes of discovery and creative effort.

Cultural studies in the UK was developed at the University of Birmingham in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), headed initially by Hoggart and then Hall. Taking a cue from Williams, CCCS was concerned to examine the symbolic nature of culture. CCCS argued against the Frankfurt School distinction between cultural producers and consumers, taking instead the view of Eco, which emphasised the role of the reader in cultural production. Furthermore, and significantly, Hall and CCCS shifted attention towards the relationship between culture and ideology: reinterpreting culture in relation to dominant political structures and social hierarchies. Among other things, CCCS gave 'popular culture' much more importance by re-conceptualising it as a 'site of resistance' for 'marginalized and disempowered groups' rather than as the embodiment of a non-critical, simplistic art form.

This was part of a radical Marxist critique from the 1960 and 1970s, and drew, *inter alia*, on Gramsci's (1926–34) work, which questioned the deterministic Marxist notion that the social superstructure was determined by the economic base.

### **3. From culture to quality**

Interest in and analysis of cultural theory continued with studies in the 1980s further exploring the critical reaction to the dominant position of rational theories of the 1970s (Van Maanen 1988; Gagliardi 1990). In essence, those advocating a cultural perspective for understanding social and organisational behaviour reacted against the functionalist neglect of how rationalist meaning is constructed in modern societies (Pedersen & Dobbin 2006, p. 899).

During the 1980s those advocating the cultural approach to organisations could be divided up into two basic camps (Alvesson & Berg 1992). On one side those seeing culture as something an organisation *has*, that is, culture as a potentially identifiable and manipulative factor, and those seeing culture as something an organisation *is*, that is, culture as an integrated product of social interaction and organisational life impossible to differentiate from other factors. In the latter version, culture was an integrated dimension of (most often) sociological and anthropological research into social behaviour. In the former version, culture was emphasised as the new organisational instrument by

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reformers, consultants and management gurus—sometimes because they simply had ‘run out of specifics’ (Kogan 1999, p. 64). Culture became the umbrella term for all possible intangible factors in organisational life.

During the 1980s it was this perspective that dominated business and industry and received considerable attention in private companies. The international bestseller by Peter & Waterman (1982) *In Search of Excellence* paved the way for a number of studies aiming at identifying general ‘intangible’ factors that could boost organisational performance and profit.

The emerging interest in quality during the 1980s can be related to this perspective. The success of Japanese business after World-War II has been related, by a number of authors, to cultural factors, and how these positively affect organisation and organisational behaviour (Mickletwait & Wooldridge 1996). One of the central ideas of the quality movement—continuous improvement or *kaizen*—was very much intertwined with what management gurus wrote about culture at that time (Mickletwait & Wooldridge 1996, p. 274). Hence, rather than understanding culture and quality as independent entities, it is important to understand that quality actually stems from a broader cultural perspective.

Partly as a result of the also emergent emphasis on new public management where structures, responsibility, decentralisation and de-regulation became core factors of interest (Hood 1998), and partly as a result of much more complexity in the field of cultural studies, in the 1990s there was less interest in culture as a dominant independent factor for understanding organisational behaviour. Due to this increasing complexity, the dichotomy between perspectives of organisations as either *having* or *being* culture became less relevant for understanding the scholarly development of the field. As such, one could argue that it was the interpretative perspective of culture that dominated the 1990s. Hence, studies in organisational symbolism (Alvesson & Berg 1992) and organisational identities (Czarniawska Joerges & Sevón 1996) received considerable attention and led to the establishment of new arenas for more interdisciplinary approaches into organisational culture where the distinction between the two categories (*having* or *being*) became increasingly blurred (see e.g., Schultz *et al.* 2000).

However, it is important to notice that the interest in culture as an instrument for improving organisational performance is still a dominant theme in much of the available management literature. ‘Value-based management’ and similar concepts are currently highly recommended readings in the business sphere providing advice for how managers can change their organisation from one that is locked in tradition to one that is flexible enough to respond positively to constant change. In essence, the emergent message is that an emphasis on values, norms in an organisation is easily combined with the aim of securing the interest of shareholders in making a profit (Martin *et al.* 2000; Stratten 2006). Whether these and similar concepts are as novel as claimed is another question. As Røvik (1996) has pointed out, there are a number of similarities between older and newer management concepts, although the labels under which they are presented may have

changed. Hence, the interest in culture as something manipulative, ‘designed’ and something that can be imposed on an organisation is still a very dominant perspective.

#### 4. Quality culture and higher education

As indicated above, the emergence of quality in business and industry can be linked to a broader cultural perspective. In higher education, the influence of new public management paved the way for an understanding of quality more influenced by new public management ideas, which led to the establishment of various national (and partly institutional) structures for evaluating or enhancing quality (Schwarz & Westerheijden 2004). Hence, the cultural influence was less evident within higher education in the 1990s<sup>2</sup>. If we use the schemata outlined in the *Bologna Handbook* by Harvey (2006) refining an early well-cited version (Harvey and Green, 1993) of various ways to define quality (see Table I), one could argue that most attention in this decade were given to a fitness-for-purpose and a value-for-money approach (Henkel 2000, Newton 2000, Stensaker 2003).

**Table 1: Five ways of defining quality in higher education**

Exceptional	a traditional concept of quality linked to the idea of ‘excellence’, usually operationalised as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. Quality is achieved if the standards are surpassed
Perfection or consistency	focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet. Quality in this sense is summed up by the interrelated ideas of zero defects and getting things right first time. Often thought not to apply to a learning situation where no one wants students to be all the same, it does, however, have relevance in areas such as consistency of academic judgement and reliability of management information
Fitness for purpose	judges quality by the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose. The purpose may be customer-defined to meet requirements or (in education) is usually institution-defined to reflect institutional mission (or course objectives), or indeed defined by external professional bodies. Fitness for purpose is often allied with another so-called definition of quality ‘fitness of purpose’, which evaluates whether the quality-related intentions of an organisation are adequate. It provides a check on fitness for purpose. <i>As such, fitness of purpose is not a definition of quality per se</i>
Value for money	assesses quality via return on investment or expenditure. At the heart of the value-for-money approach in education is the notion of accountability. Public services, including education, are expected to be accountable to the funders. Increasingly, students are also considering the value for money of their own investment in higher education
Transformation	this view sees quality as a process of change, which in higher education adds value to students through their learning experience. Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant. This leads to two notions of transformative quality in education: enhancing the consumer and empowering the consumer

However, in the aftermath of the Bologna-process and as a result of an increasing interest in the outcome of the established structures of higher education, one can observe a shift in which definitions that dominates international and national policy agendas. For example, the European Commission currently seems to be *in search of excellence* when arguing for how European higher education should be reformed in the coming years (Olsen & Maassen 2007, p. 16). Thus, it is tempting to link the introduction of the whole concept of quality culture in European higher education to this search for excellence: privileging an excellence notion of quality culture. This can also be found, to some extent, in the ‘Quality Culture’ project of the European Universities Association (EUA)

that ran between 2002–2006. The quality culture project can be regarded as a spin-off from the Bologna-process with its emphasis on quality assurance, and was instigated by the EUA with economic support from The European Commission (EUA 2006). The formal description of the project is that it had a bottom-up approach in which the higher education institutions and those working within these institutions should have a voice and be invited to engage in discussions on how to ‘establish a quality culture’ (EUA 2006, p. 4). The project aimed to increase awareness of the need to develop an internal quality culture in universities and wide dissemination of existing best practices in the field. It further, wanted to promote the introduction of *internal* quality management to improve quality levels and help universities to approach external procedures of quality assurance in a constructive way. Finally, it aimed to contribute to the Bologna process by strengthening the attractiveness of European universities.

This implies a search for excellence through the dissemination of best practices but is principally about the introduction, implicitly, of a culture of quality improvement, so does not militate against any of the schematic definitions. What it does do, though, is presume that an internal quality culture is worth striving for because of its improvement potential and that practice in developing a quality culture is transferable. It also presumes that external quality assurance is useful and that, somehow, a quality culture will make European universities attractive.

Although the belief related to the ‘establishment’ of a culture might hint at a more manipulative approach for understanding culture, the project still emphasised that quality should not be defined from above, that it was up to the individual institution to define quality as it would not be feasible, or even desirable, to apply a shared definition of quality to institutions with different missions and purposes (EUA 2006, p. 9). Still, when reporting from the project, EUA did argue that any quality culture was based on two distinct elements. First, a set of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality (a psychological aspect, which refers to understanding, flexibility, participation, hopes and emotions). Second, a structural or managerial element with well-defined processes that enhance quality and coordinate efforts (which refers to tasks, standards and responsibilities of individuals, units and services) (EUA 2006, p. 10).

The Report (EUA 2006, p. 11) noted that most of the consultation groups took the notion of ‘quality culture’ for granted: a situation reflected in other publications that want to build (Mehta, undated) create (Enemark, 2000) or embed (Korbel and Lis, undated) a quality culture. In the EUA study, only the Student Support Services Network agreed on a formal definition of quality culture. It defined it as ‘an organisational climate in which groups of staff work together to realise their specific tasks’.

Hence, if we relate the concept of quality culture as outlined by the EUA to more established perspectives on how to understand culture, it seems evident that the definitions and understandings brought forward are characterised by a relatively high degree of ambiguity. Quality culture is, on the one hand, impossible to define since every higher education institution is unique (culture as something an organisation is), while it on the other could be brought forward by structural or managerial efforts stimulating shared values and beliefs.

To further complicate the picture, one could also argue that the quality culture concept is heavily related to political ambitions, nationally and internationally, of changing the way higher education institutions work and how they function in a more fundamental way. The strong pressure for reform stemming from the European Commission has already been mentioned. The pressure for reform may be equally strong coming from national governments in certain countries. In such a political perspective, quality culture is a tool for preparing the institutions for the consequences of this autonomy, both with respect to how they handle external demands (for example, the ability to respond to external quality assurance schemes), and internal developments in governance (for example, promoting stronger internal management structures). As such, it seems that quality culture, in practice, is everything for everyone.

However, this account of the history of the notion of culture, combined with a brief overview of more recent development concerning quality in higher education is not just an esoteric analysis of a concept but raises important issues and relationships for the idea of a quality culture. First, in developing the notion of a quality culture one needs to be aware of the critique of culture as a homogeneous, evolving elitist concept. Second, culture still retains a sense that it is about creative endeavours of a particular artistic form. Third, counter to a view of separate cultural produces are consumers is the dialectical synthesis of the 'producer' and the 'reader', which is important in thinking about the way quality cultures are developed. Fourth, culture, in its democratic form is about a learned way of life, a context for knowledge production. Fifth, culture is symbolic as much as it is material. Sixth, culture and ideology are related, which tends to be overlooked in analyses of 'quality culture'. Seventh, there is, arguably, a dialectical relationship between culture and economy, not a deterministic one. Eighth, culture may be construed as transcending the human actors or as possessed uniquely by people. Ninth, subcultures can be sites of resistance; a documented effect of the quality movement in higher education (Newton, 2000). Hence, if we are to take the whole concept of quality culture seriously, we need to acknowledge this complexity. Given five different definitions of quality and an array of notions of culture, the intersections between the two concepts are potentially vast.

## **5. Quality culture and the links to teaching and learning**

The question then is whether we should just accept this seemingly never-ending complexity. It seems indeed difficult not to. Still, it is important to notice that much of this complexity is related to an implicit understanding of quality culture as manipulative, as seeing it as an end product, and by relating it to various functions raised by external and internal stakeholders in higher education. If we, as a point of departure, accept that culture is a way of life, then quality culture becomes a tool that can be quite useful for analysis, questioning and dialogue in higher education. This implies a change of perspective concerning the purpose associated with quality culture. Hence, instead of starting by asking 'who do we want to be?', perhaps a better question is 'who are we?' It also implies that we should look for tools that could be helpful in answering more

fundamental questions about individual, group and organisational functioning. The purpose of this paper is not to argue for a special approach in this respect. If culture is democratic and a way of life, then one can also imagine various ways to answer the question of who we are.

However, as a demonstration of one possible approach forward, *Cultural Theory*, inspired by Douglas (1982) and outlined by Thompson *et al.* (1990), suggests that there are only two dimensions that are of importance in understanding an individual's involvement in social life:

- group: i.e., whether individual behaviour is group-controlled
- grid: i.e., whether individual behaviour is pre-scribed by external rules and regulations

The advantages of this theory are that it reduces complexity by linking values, beliefs, structure and actions into an integrated framework (Maassen 1996, p. 77) suggesting that there are actually a very limited number of possible 'ways of life'<sup>3</sup>. Another advantage is that it includes the political or normative dimension so often found related to quality and quality assurance (see Hood 1998, Henkel 2000, Newton 2000), while it at the same time pay attention to the potential dynamic character of quality and how it might be interpreted (Harvey & Knight 1996, Stensaker 1998).

The point here is not to outline the details of the cultural theory approach, or to claim the superiority of this approach compared to others but to hint to the advantages to linking analysis in higher education to more established theories and concepts within the social sciences in general (see Maassen 1996 on the application of cultural theory within higher education).

Combing the group/grid dimensions as suggested by Douglas (1982) results in four possible Weberian ideal-types of 'quality culture' (see Table II).

**Table II: 'Quality Culture' in a 'Cultural Theory' framework**

Degree of group-control	Strong	Weak
Intensity of external rules		
Strong	<i>Responsive</i>	<i>Reactive</i>
Weak	<i>Regenerative</i>	<i>Reproductive</i>

(Inspired by Thompson *et al.* 1990 and Hood 1998).

*Responsive quality culture*

as an ideal-type, is primarily led by external demands, be they governmental imperatives, such as widening access, or agency expectations of compliance, such as delivering a self-assessment document. The responsive mode is positive in taking the opportunities offered (or forced on) the institution and using them to review practices, create forward looking agendas, explore how to maximise benefit from engagement with policies or requirements and to engineer improvement. The responsive mode, will thus have an

improvement agenda for quality assurance, although it will be acutely aware of accountability issues and compliance requirements. It is likely that the responsive mode will attempt to learn from culturally similar good practice, adopt it and (hopefully) modify it but essentially see the culture as something created to deal with the evaluation problem, a solution to an issue created by others. This is likely to be exacerbated internally by a lack of buy-in to a quality culture as a way of life and lack of feeling of ownership or of any real control. Rather quality culture will appear as existing beyond their control as something, perhaps, that the institution encourages its staff to embrace but which is unconnected with everyday experience, a parallel reality that staff journey to periodically.

### *Reactive quality culture*

as an ideal-type, reacts to, rather than engages with external demands. The reactive mode may take advantage when action is linked to reward, such as research evaluations linked to funding, but is likely to be reluctant to embrace most forms of quality evaluation having reservations about the potential outcomes. The reactive mode, will have doubts about any improvement potential resulting from evaluation, will tend to be driven by compliance and, reluctantly, accountability; although mourning the lost of trust (and autonomy). The reactive mode will tend to deal with one thing at a time, with a rather disjointed or dislocated cultural ethos that may well reinvent wheels. The quality culture is likely to be construed as externally constructed, managed and imposed, with little or no sense of ownership. It is more likely to be something delegated to a specific space (a quality office). The reactive mode may, for example, harbour counter cultures among academics that perceives any kind of quality culture as a beast to be fed (Newton, 2000).

### *Regenerative quality culture*

as an ideal-type, is focused on internal developments, albeit fully aware of the external context and expectations. The regenerative mode, although taking the opportunities afforded via review exercises and making the most of government initiatives, is one that has a co-ordinated plan for its own internal regeneration which has primacy and external opportunities are included where they add value, otherwise they are accommodated at the margins or even actively subverted. A regenerative quality culture tends to be widespread, with clear overall goals, in a state of flux as activities and events evolve. Its dynamism is manifest not just in an improvement agenda but in an ongoing reconceptualisation of what it knows, where it is going and even the language in which it frames its future direction. The improvement process will be a taken-for-granted norm and the regenerative mode will assume that its continual improvement programme is itself a form of accountability. The regenerative mode will likely encompass a learning-organisation approach, seeking out learning opportunities, benchmarking possibilities and generating space for reflective review. The quality culture will be indistinguishable from everyday work practice and while it leads to regeneration it will be unquestioned. Ideologically, the quality culture will be attuned with the aspirations of the team. However, if regeneration stalls or is interfered with externally, be it by a higher layer of management or by an external force, the quality culture will have an intrinsic subversive potential.

*Reproductive quality culture*

as an ideal-type, is focused on reproducing the *status quo*, manipulating the situation to minimise the impact of external factors as far as possible. The reproductive mode is focused on what the institution or its sub units do best and for what it is rewarded and its plans go little beyond reproducing them. A widespread, internalised quality but with clear boundaries, it has established norms and is unlikely to reconceptualise core concepts or future goals. The quality culture, although indistinguishable from everyday work practice, is not transparent and is encoded in various taken-for-granted or esoteric practices. Nonetheless a sense of a job well done is maintained and perpetuated through the culture. Ideologically, the quality culture reflects the expertise and individual aspirations of members. Any attempt to develop a more open, self-critical approach is likely to result in an implacable resistance culture.

The four quality cultures outlines are, of course, ideal-types. However, central characteristics of all of them are most likely to be found in various higher education settings, and may serve as a starting point for investigating how structure and culture can be matched with respect to quality assurance. This is an important point as studies have shown how structures of quality assurance often are designed without taking into account existing social structures and tacit institutional ways of handling quality assurance issues (Henkel 2000, Newton 2000). Hence, it should be quite obvious that a quality assurance system (and 'quality cultures') will be inclined to look very different located within a reactive or regenerative cultural setting, or within a responsive or reproductive cultural setting.

Our simple argument is that 'localised' knowledge and practice should play a more important part in developing institutional quality assurance schemes, and that it is only when including such localised knowledge that the structure and culture will merge into a specific 'quality culture'. In this paper we have used cultural theory to illustrate one way forward in this respect. As mentioned, there may be a number of other ways to capture 'localised' knowledge. Given the different academic profiles of higher education institutions, another way forward would be to link quality culture to a more disciplinary approach, identifying both common grounds and different territories (Becher & Trowler 2001). Yet another approach could be to emphasise more the symbolic dimensions of academic organisation, investigating the conditions (and limitations) for social integration in the modern university (Dill 1982).

Regardless of the approach chosen they all depend on empirical investment into the culture, the identity and organisational climate of the given institution. As such, the concept of 'quality culture' brings an important dimension into the quality assurance setting; that structures are not enough to enhance quality.

## **6. Conclusion**

What we have done in the paper is to offer a more solid theoretical basis for understanding the concept of quality culture. We have identified some of the different

understandings of (quality) culture, shown the linkages between culture and quality, and also suggested a more simple and empirical way forward for those wanting to make use of the concept in their own institutional settings.

In this conclusion, we still want to underline that applying ‘quality culture’ in a higher education setting should be used with caution. Thus, our main conclusion is that ‘quality culture’ first and foremost can be a tool for asking questions about how things work, how institutions function, who they relate to, and how they see themselves. The dominant problem with quality culture as it is used today is that the concept is thought of as the *answer* to challenges, while in reality, it is a concept for *identifying* potential challenges.

However, in the process of identifying potential challenges, the following nine caveats should still be kept in mind. First, there is often an implicit cultural imperialism associated with quality culture. This ranges from the presumption that quality culture is necessary through to an assumption that best practice is transferable from one context to another: usually, in higher education, from north-west European or North American practices. Second, one should be careful in seeing quality culture as pre-defined, rather viewing it as a way of life. Third, if the latter, quality culture is not mechanistic or codified, a system produced by specialists for adoption by others but an iterative, indeed dialectical, process of evolution that does not just focus on internal processes but relates them to a wider appreciation of social and political forces and locates them historically. Quality culture is not a panacea, something that can be disengaged from a wider lived reality. Fourth, the dialectical evolution is compatible with a democratic notion of quality culture as a lived, learned experience that itself generates knowledge, rather than simply processes it. Fifth, a quality culture is not just about checking outputs at each stage but is also a frame of mind, as much of the management literature implies. However, sixth, this is not just a matter of raising consciousness but a fundamental question of ideology. A quality culture is an ideological construct, a fact that cannot be glossed by a set of prescriptions or recipes for implementation. Seventh, a quality culture is not likely to be constructed irrespective of the context in which it is located, which again limit the possibilities for knowledge transfer. Eighth, a quality culture is nothing if isn’t owned by the people who live it, which raises the issue, ninth, of resistance to and engagement with quality cultures, that will be endemic in higher education if academics see quality culture as a managerialist fad, as a means to reduce their academic freedom or as in any other way disempowering.

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<sup>1</sup> Williams (1983, p. 91), noted that:

in archaeology and in *cultural anthropology* the reference to **culture** or **a culture** is primarily to *material* production, while in history and *cultural studies* the reference is primarily to *signifying* or *symbolic* systems.... The anthropological use is common in the German, Scandinavian and Slavonic language groups, but ...subordinate to the senses of art and learning, or of a general process of human development, in Italian and French.

<sup>2</sup> However, this does not imply that culture was absent in higher education research all together. Studies by Vålímáa (1995) and Maassen (1996) are just a couple of examples of research in higher education with an applied cultural framework. Our point is that within the area of quality assurance, such links have been more absent.

<sup>3</sup> Thompson *et al.* (1990, p.7) suggests that there are only five way of life; Hierarchy, Fatalism, Egalitarianism, Individualism and Autonomy. However, the latter is referring to individuals who totally withdraw from social involvement. The latter way of life is not included as a category in our paper.