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Quality needs culture: The Quality Culture Concept and its applicability in the context of (vocational) schools

Abstract

Quality management systems for vocational schools have been being developed for some years now in the German-speaking regions. The implementation of structures, instruments and reporting systems has progressed well; in Austria, for example, there has been an over-arching quality initiative for vocational education (QIBB) for all vocational schools in Austria since 2004.

In the higher education sector there have long been discussions about the question of how users of quality management systems actually work with these structures or systems, using the term "quality culture". The concern of this paper is to question the quality culture in the field of (vocational) schools, and thereby to relate the formal structures with individual and collective convictions and commitment to work regarding quality.

HARVEY/ STENSAKER (2008) developed the concept of quality culture further with reference to cultural theory, and differentiated between four ideal types of organizational quality culture: defensive, reactive, reproductive and renewal of quality cultures. The authors examine these ideal types for the school sector, and encourage a debate about the concept using a series of questions on self-reflection of school-based quality culture. The effect should be a process of awareness about a possible balance between formal structure and positions and convictions

1   Introduction

Quality management systems have, by now, become a 'tradition' in the context of schools and teaching. In Austria, initial approaches towards implementing school-based QM (Quality Management) systems emerged in the mid-1990s, and since 2004 there has been, in the form of the Quality Initiative for Vocational Education (QIBB), an over-arching quality management system for vocational education in Austria (QIBB) (see GRAMLINGER/ NIMAC/ JONACH 2010). There are comparable developments in Germany and Switzerland, and other European countries have reorganised their governance structures with the help of quality management systems, with system-specific, nationally differing emphases[1]. The implementation of these QM approaches and the associated structures at the level of vocational education systems were frequently associated with considerable effort and not inconsiderable costs: the systems were often developed and piloted with academic and research support (EULER 2005; ZÖLLER 2009).

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[1]   There is an overview of the QM systems in vocational education in different European countries on the home page of the European Network for Quality in Vocational Education (EQAVET), available at: www.eqavet.eu.

In the meantime, several national systems have already been through the initial cycles, relevant experience has been gained and the QM systems have been further improved. From the perspective of the current authors, the focus was, above all, on the setting up and the implementation of the quality management systems (including external evaluation) and especially on structures, instruments or tools, as well as reporting systems[2].

Functioning systems, as well as the associated processes and regulations have, therefore, been implemented many times, data are generated through reporting and monitoring systems, and there have at least been discussions about the effectiveness of the measures used. The existence of formal structures alone, however, as argued by HARVEY and STENSAKER (2008) for the higher education sector, does not represent a guarantee that educational organisations actually live the concept of quality and implement it or continuously attempt to improve: "*Available evidence rather suggests that while systems, procedures and rules are being laid down, creating much data, many reports and much attention, there is still a lack of staff and student attachment and active involvement in these processes*" (HARVEY/ STENSAKER 2008, 428).

There are further interesting questions beyond the pure implementation of the systems, which, from the perspective of the current authors, have not been discussed to any great extent for the school sector: in concrete terms we refer here to the disposition of the users - that is to say, the school leadership, teachers and pupils - described by HARVEY and STENSAKER as *"attachment and active involvement"* – and the ways in which they work with the quality management systems. This also includes questions regarding the responsibilities, the practicability and the acceptance of these systems and the ways in which a QM system is "lived" and implemented at a school. We aim to discuss all these "soft factors", following a concept from the higher education sector which is termed "Quality Culture", and demonstrate relevant possibilities for application in the context of schools.

2 The Quality Culture Concept of the EUA (European University Association) and its further development

In the higher education sector, the topic of Quality Management has played a suitably large role at European level at least since the Bologna Process, initiated in 1999 with the creation of a unified European Higher Education Area (see EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2011). Higher education institutions have been working with the topic of Quality Culture since 2002(see EUA 2006), above all in the context of projects of the European University Association (see www.eua.be).

The starting point for this was the situation that the purely "technical" implementation of quality management systems in the context of the Bologna Process was progressing comparatively quickly, whilst the establishing of a quality culture in the sense of "shared values" and a collective (quality) responsibility of as many members as possible of a higher

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[2] There is a good overview of the existing systems in the federal states of Germany at: www.deqa-vet.de/de/478.php, and in Austria at www.qibb.at or www.peer-review-in-qibb.at.

education organisation was, in contrast, progressing considerably more slowly. In particular, the management aspect regarding the topic of quality was rejected by numerous members of the scientific community and, indeed, especially if top-down implementation approaches were dominant (see VETTORI 2012). The aim of the quality culture project was, therefore, to promote raising awareness regarding the necessity of developing an internal quality culture in higher education institutions (see EUA 2006, 6 f.).

Following extensive discussions and analyses, there was agreement on the following approximation of a definition of Quality Culture:

"(...) quality culture refers to an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a cultural/ psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts." (EUA 2006, 10)

The following graphic shows the connections of the Quality Culture concept:

QUALITY CULTURE

Formal quality assurance processes
(technocratic element)

Tools and processes to define, measure, evaluate, assure, and enhance quality

Communication
Participation
Trust

Quality commitment
cultural element

Individual level:
personal commitment to strive for quality
Collective level:
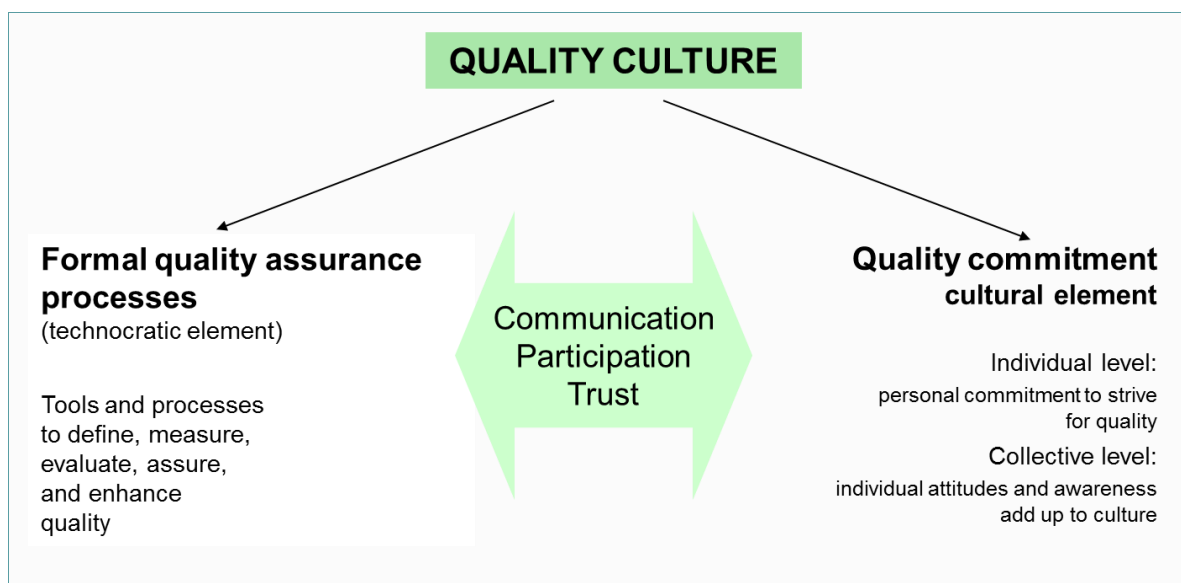individual attitudes and awareness add up to culture

Fig. 1: The Quality Culture concept of the European University Association
(Graphic following LOUKKOLA/ ZHANG 2010, 17)

According to this concept, Quality Culture comprises the formal elements of a quality assurance or quality management system (instruments, tools, processes, indicators etc) and the commitment (approach, attitude, commitment) of the individual members of an organisation to the topic of quality. This commitment represents an essential component of the quality culture of an organisation. Only if as many members of an (educational) organisation as possible feel personally committed to the quality concept can quality management be meaningfully and effectively implemented. Both areas – the formal structures or processes and the approach of the organisation's members to the topic of quality – are necessary and

they are inextricably linked (see LOUKKOLA/ ZHANG 2010, 16 f.). Key concepts for a successful interplay between these two sides are communication, participation and the building of trust (in this order), whereby the leadership naturally takes on a key function here (see GORDON 2002).

HARVEY/ STENSAKER (2008) further developed the concept of the EUA, by undertaking an attempt of a new theoretical underpinning of the quality culture concept. On the basis of Cultural Theory (DOUGLAS 1982; THOMPSON et al. 1990) they differentiated between two dimensions which are important for explaining the social behaviour of an individual: the significance or the influence of group control, and the presence or absence of external rules and regulations.
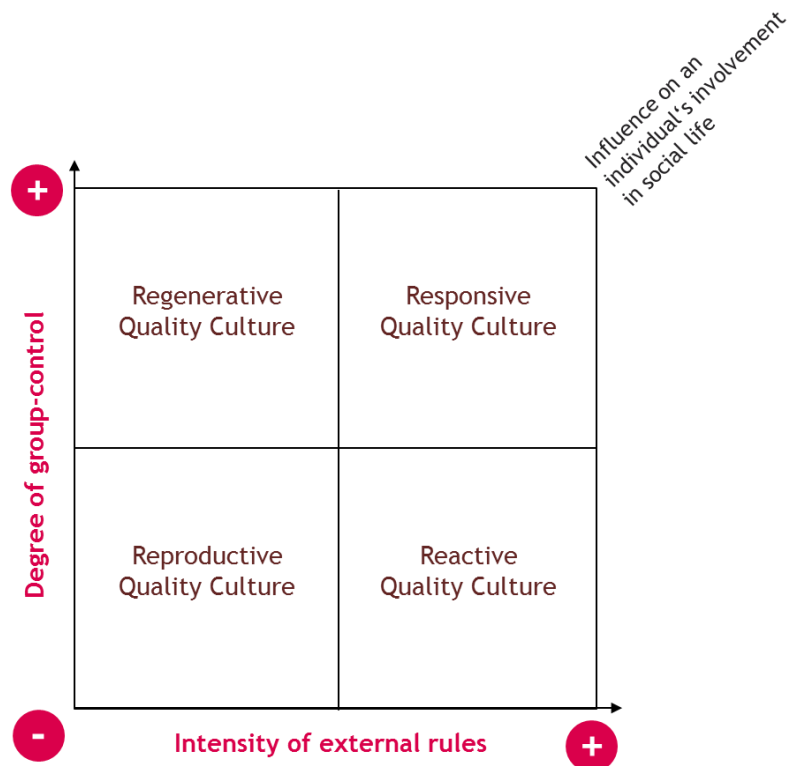

Fig. 2: Ideal typical quality cultures according to HARVEY & STENSAKER
(following HARVEY 2009, 2)

The combination of these two dimensions results in four ideal types of quality culture, whereby the authors emphasise that each organisation has its own, specific quality culture, and that the ideal types that are described in what follows are to be understood as a theoretical concept. In other words, in reality these characteristic forms do not exist as a pure culture.

- **Reactive quality culture**: Members of these organisations are highly reticent and harbour doubts regarding the topic of quality. They act according to the rules. The work on quality is delegated to a representative for quality, and this person is responsible for quality, in the self-conception of the organisation, and there is not a wider participation of additional members of the organisation. Activities relating to the topic of quality management are

lined up next to each other relatively incoherently, and there is no discernible integrated, meaningful overall system.

- **Responsive quality culture**: In these organisations governance mostly occurs through external demands. Management and the members of the organisation endeavour to meet the external requirements, and act according to the requirements of accountability and regulations. Quality management is viewed as a parallel structure to which one dedicates oneself from time to time; the connection to daily work is absent.

- **Reproductive quality culture**: Organisations of this type attempt, above all, to reproduce the status quo and to limit the influence of external factors as much as possible. The quality culture is seen as part of daily work; however, the procedures are not very transparent, and the processes and practices that are implemented are not called into question. Attempts to force more self-critical approaches are, more or less, repelled. No self-critical questions about quality management are asked which could endanger the status quo.

- **Regenerative quality culture**: Organisations of this ideal type have clear aims in mind; however, they are continuously reinventing themselves; external demands on the organisation are perceived clearly, but they are not always taken into consideration sufficiently. Quality management is part of daily work and is not experienced as an additional burden; these organisations define themselves as learning organisations (see HARVEY/ STENSAKER 2008, 436 f.).

HARVEY (2009, 2) emphasises that this two-dimensional model was selected in order to support reflection about one's own organisation with a representation which is as simple as possible. Further, and explicitly, no evaluation is associated with it, rather the opposite – *the* correct quality culture does not exist, according to this: *"The four resulting types represent different modes of operating. None are 'correct' or desirable in general, albeit some approaches may be preferable in a specific context."* (ibid.)

3   What does the quality culture concept mean for (vocational) schools?

Even if there are significant differences between higher education institutions and vocational schools (for example, differing degrees of autonomy, differences in the specified tasks, in the target groups of teachers and learners, etc) we consider that the quality culture concept is, in principle, applicable to, and transferable to, the school sector, and we consider the discussion of this to be meaningful and important. The concept demonstrates that the purely instrumental implementation of formal quality assurance processes in each educational organisation is an important factor; in addition, however, there is the second essential prerequisite for "quality commitment" – that the organisation and its members commit themselves to, and are convinced of, taking quality work seriously and implement it sustainably in their own organisation. Therefore, it is important to connect the formal/technocratic aspect with the cultural aspect.

In order to examine whether the quality culture concept could be implemented in the school sector as well, we must firstly establish whether the four ideal-types, according to HARVEY and STENSAKER (not in their 'pure form', which, of course, does not exist) are conceivable in vocational schools. The outline below, which shows the ideal types, results from our five-year long experience, by now, in working with vocational schools in Austria and Germany. We worked with them as advisers or evaluators (for example, as external evaluators). The following observations were made in relation to the four ideal types, and they have been summarised as examples, whereby it must be emphasised that this, of course, does not involve a description of the individual organisation, but rather a conglomeration of individual observations, which were carried out at many different schools, and have been brought together in terms of their content.

Reactive quality culture in the school context:

In these organisations, the school leadership often does not support quality management, and the benefit of the QM system is called into question and doubted in a more or less open way. The people responsible for quality (who are often very motivated, regardless) suffer, above all, because of this, because they have a remit, which is not sufficiently supported by the leadership. Many of the projects they have moved forward grind to a halt or fall on stony ground, because neither teachers nor the administrative staff feel obliged to show commitment to the area of QM. In schools there is no shared understanding of what quality means at or for the school, or how it can be established that quality has been created. When asked how individual teachers implement quality in their lessons, for example, the enquiry is referred to the people responsible for quality, who are 'responsible' for this. The QM system appears, overall, to have been implemented in a very fragmentary way: individual quality projects are lined up in a relatively incoherent way, and there is no binding strategy which is communicated by the leadership and which provides a sense of purpose. Evaluations are carried out, for the most part, as and when appropriate, and because there is external pressure, for example, because a quality report has to be written or because an external evaluation is due. No further work is carried out with the evaluation results, and there are no consequences. Different groups (pupils, teachers, parents, employers) who take part in the evaluations, therefore do not feel taken seriously, and experience the evaluation as a bureaucratic exercise. Schools with a reactive quality culture do not develop a culture of feedback, and serious quality deficits are not recognised as such, for the most part.

Responsive quality culture in the school context:

It is characteristic of this type to do as much justice as possible to the external demands that arise (for example, through school inspection). The planning of the school programmes complies with these external demands. The leadership does not ask questions about the relevance of specific quality topics or quality projects for their own organisation; at the core of the strategic planning is the question of whether the topics will be judged to be relevant by the external stakeholders. The school leadership endeavours to communicate the external demands as well as possible to the internal organisation. External accountability plays a major role, the writing of quality reports or performance at external evaluations are taken extremely

seriously, when it is a question of presenting oneself as well as possible. It is difficult for the organisations to tackle the QM system development topics or areas, where they are not yet performing well. Evaluations are carried out, but not exactly on those topics which are really important to the school. QM is set up as a kind of parallel structure, to which one repeatedly turns; it does not, however, for the most part became an integrative component of the organisation, with which the organisation's own aims can be pursued. Important topics are dealt with elsewhere. The teachers apply QM instruments, but do not conceive of quality work as part of their daily work, which still needs to be done. Overall, quality management is not used for the further development of their own organisation, but rather to satisfy external demands.

Reproductive quality culture in the school context:

It is characteristic of this type of school-based quality culture that quality management is used to maintain the status quo thus far. Should it prove necessary, there may even be thoroughly manipulative actions to this end: data, for example, are interpreted in a particular manner, so that it is 'obvious' why particular measures need to be implemented, and why other measures are not being considered External influence (such as declining student numbers, new labour market developments) are suppressed or ignored as far as possible, so that no changes need to be introduced into the organisation. This leads, for example, to existing educational provision not being critically questioned or adapted where necessary. Overall, the quality management lacks transparency and remains opaque; the organisation does not use it in order to question itself self-critically. The existing conditions cannot be called into question. Teachers who do this run the risk of being discredited. Evaluations are carried out, but without referring to the actual questions and problems that the school needs to resolve. Evaluation results are investigated further, but there is little openness regarding the interpretive possibilities, and the planned measures are already actually fixed, independently of the results.

Regenerative quality culture in the school context:

Schools of this type have school leadership teams at their disposal who are convinced of the purpose and value of quality management and who carry out their tasks purposefully in this regard. There are people responsible for quality (often even quality teams) but, in principle, almost everybody at the school feels committed to the concept of quality. Work on quality is integrated into the daily routine and is not perceived to be an additional burden. The school possesses shared values and attitudes to the topic of quality, the mission statement is created in a participatory process, and everyone attempts to implement it. The students are at the centre of all the endeavours surrounding quality, and it is clear to the school leadership, the teachers and the administrative staff that all their efforts must be in this direction. The students feel taken seriously when they give feedback, because they perceive that their feedback has consequences. Evaluations are carried out regularly, and they concern topics which are of concern to the school. The evaluation results are analysed carefully, and measures based upon them are planned and implemented. External demands are perceived, but they are not always implemented sufficiently.

The ideal types described by HARVEY/ STENSAKER (2008) for various different forms of quality culture can also be found, we believe, in the vocational school sector – if not in their pure form. We found the structures, processes and behaviours which are allocated relatively clearly to the different types in many of the schools we advised.

4 The applicability of the quality culture concept as an analytical instrument: from self-reflection to quality development

Factors which are conducive to helping the formal *and* the cultural aspects, which both together constitute the quality culture of an organisation, to combine meaningfully are, according to the work of the European University Association (see. EUA 2006, 20; see also, Fig. 1, above):

- **Communication**: there are suitable and sufficient communication structures and opportunities on the topic of quality and quality management

- **Participation**: as many actors as possible at the school are involved in QM projects and processes

- **Trust**: a spirit of constructive criticism and a culture of trust in dealing with feedback and evaluation results have been built up

There is no 'ideal solution' or 'right' quality culture, since each organisation functions in a different way, or faces different challenges. However, the quality culture concept is able to offer a shared starting point: the analysis of the pre-existing quality culture in an organisation. VETTORI (2012, 4 f.) emphasises that the quality culture concept can be used as an analytical instrument, in order to reflect current strategies, practices and principles, respectively, in organisations and thereby lay the foundations for the next developments.

It is pointed out repeatedly that it is more important to ask questions than to have answers or to find implementation possibilities: "*... our main conclusion is that 'quality culture' (...) can be a tool for asking questions about how things work, how institutions function, who they relate to, and how they see themselves*" (HARVEY/ STENSAKER 2008, 438).

In conclusion, therefore, initial reflections will be presented here (following VETTORI 2012) regarding which questions can be meaningful and useful in the school context and in the context of the quality culture concept; the list below can in no way be a conclusion, but rather, in contrast, it can be extended indefinitely. The aim of the questions is that they serve to call the status quo analytically into question, that is to say the currently lived quality culture and that, building upon this, future strategic decisions can be made. "From self-reflection to enhancement" is not by chance the sub-title of the EUA publication "Examining Quality Culture Part III" (VETTORI 2012).

Questions for the self-reflection of school-based quality culture:

- Which values and attitudes distinguish our school?

- Is there a connection between the values and attitudes (mission statement) and the strategic goals or the associated instruments at our school?

- Are these values and attitudes lived at our school?

- Who is involved in which projects/activities?

  Who is not involved at all?

- Do all our QM activates have a clear intent and purpose?
  Is there a clear connection to the strategy, which is communicated to everyone?

- How are the existing QM instruments used, and by whom?
  How well are the instruments accepted?
  Which groups regard which instruments as useful?

- What are the most important activities and instruments within the QM system?
  Are there any activities which could be foregone?

- What contribution do the existing structures make to the quality of our school?

- How do we deal with mistakes or quality deficits?

- How do we deal with the results of evaluations?

- What effect does our QM system have on teaching?

- What do we want to achieve for our students?

- How do we deal with external demands?

- How do we deal with changes in environmental conditions (such as demographic developments)?

There are no "right" answers to these questions. In our opinion it is rather the discussion of such or similar questions in an organisation that is more important than answers to them (see VETTORI 2012).
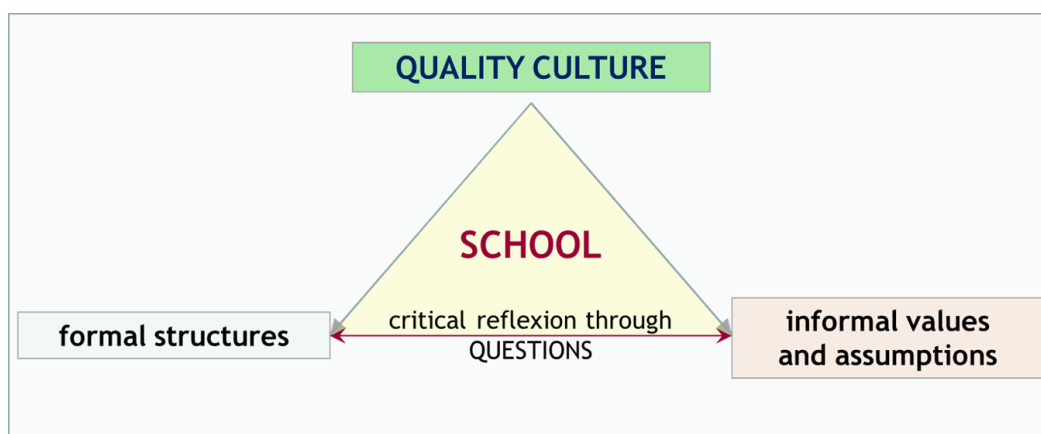

Fig. 3: Components of quality culture and the significance of questions

As presented above, the quality culture of an (educational) organisation according to the concept being discussed here consists of the following components: *formal structures*, on the one hand, and *attitudes* and *convictions* on the other – both components are necessary and important and related to each other in an interplay. In Fig. 3 this connection and the function of questions is presented: questions relating to self-reflection can and should help to promote both elements of quality culture and to foster synergetically the interplay or the balance of both parts; or, put in another way: to compensate for a suspected frequent imbalance in favour of the formal structures.

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