Culture for quality in higher education

A Nordic research project on quality culture

Responsible university: University of Agder, Norway

Cooperating universities: University of Skövde, Sweden,

University of Turku, Finland,

Åbo Akademi University, Finland

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1. The starting point of the project

In recent decades, Europe has been working for a common way of reasoning about quality in higher education. Among the results of the work, standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area (ESG), has been developed. According to these guidelines, it would be great if the universities not only develop their quality assurance systems, but that they develop the universities' quality culture. This has proved to be a challenge. Maybe because the quality culture is more of a phenomenon than a concept that can be defined.

In the research project *Culture for quality in higher education*, the researchers focus on Nordic universities and how they reason about and define the quality culture. The starting point for the research is an interest in the Nordic educational systems, especially the universities, and a curiosity about whether Nordic educational co-operation can be discerned in how the universities describe their quality culture. An assumption is that the Nordic countries to a large extent have a shared value in quality work. This is an assumption because the Nordic countries share the same values, have a common educational history, similar educational systems and that all Nordic countries are members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and have thus also chosen to guarantee the quality of higher education in relation to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) In the research, this is presumed to give the Nordic universities a special touch that may be visible in the quality culture. Thus, a survey is conducted among Nordic universities, by analysing texts that describe the universities´ quality culture. The overall research questions of the research project are: *How can the phenomenon of quality culture at university be explained from a Nordic perspective?* and *What common features and contents appear in the Nordic documents about the universities' quality culture?* The research results of the project are expected to be

of use in the cooperation between the universities and in development of quality issues at universities.

2. The researchers

Christina Nygren-Landgärds
Professor of Education at University of Agder, Norway
Former Vice-Chancellor at Åbo Akademi University, Finland
E-mail: christinmn@uia.no

Lena Mårtensson
Pro Vice-Chancellor at University of Skövde, Sweden
Professor of Nursing at University of Skövde, Sweden
E-mail: lena.martensson@his.se

Riitta Pyykkö,
Professor emerita of Russian Language and Culture at University of Turku, Finland
Former Vice-Chancellor at University of Turku, Finland
E-mail: riitta.pyykko@utu.fi

John Olav Bjørnestad
Director at Centre for Teaching and Learning and at University of Agder, Norway
Associate Professor of Psychosocial Health at University of Agder, Norway
E-mail: john.o.bjornestad@uia.no

Roald von Schoultz,
Head of Internal Audit at Åbo Akademi University, Finland
MSc in Economics from Åbo Akademi University, Finland
E-mail: roald.vonschoultz@abo.fi

3. Theoretical perspectives of the research project

The common educational history of the Nordic universities

The educational systems of the Nordic countries are similar in many ways, partly due to a common history, but partly also due to equivalents in education policy and continued cooperation between the countries.

Compulsory and state-controlled education systems in the Nordic countries had their beginnings in the mid-19th century. Before that, education was mainly organized by families and controlled by priests. (Buchardt, Markkola & Valtonen, 2013) The Nordic educational systems were strongly developed in the mid-20th century. The school reforms that became the basis for equal education in the Nordic countries were greatly influenced by international educational and philosophical discussions on education. For example, John Dewey and Paulo Freire's ideas made great impression on the educational idea in the Nordic countries. (Antikainen, 2006.)

Both lower and higher vocational and college levels were also developed early, while universities have a slightly different history. The first university in Denmark and of the Swedish kingdom were founded as early as in the 15th century, but otherwise the development was slow. It is only in the 20th century that there have been founded universities in all Nordic regions. But when you study the Nordic universities, you can quickly discover common features, for instance that most of the universities are free for EU and EES citizens and the universities are openly accomplished. The Nordic Recognition Network (NORRIC) works actively with practical arrangements, quality and accessibility promoting the Nordic universities. (Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research, 2016.) This brings forward common values and norms. According to Andersen (1999) the Nordic countries have a fundamental common view of teaching and education and the importance of education for the individual and society. Central concepts and expressions within the Nordic educational system are "equal access to lifelong education", "education for democracy", "independence" and "critical thinking" beside academic freedom and autonomy in academic issues.

The concept of quality culture

The concept of quality culture is in general apprehended to be a controversial concept difficult to define. As Elken and Stensaker (2018, 189) point out, studies on quality tend to focus on internal quality management systems. Quality culture emphasises aspects of quality enhancement that are not focusing on rules, procedures and managerial approaches. Loukkola and Zhang (2010) establish that "quality culture is closely related to organisational culture and firmly based on shared values, beliefs, expectations and a commitment towards quality, dimensions which make it a difficult concept to manage" (p. 12). Due to the complicated nature of the concept, it even happens that universities leave the quality culture undisputed in their quality work. The reason for this is not that they think it is insignificant. On the contrary, to develop the quality culture, the universities development processes of internal quality assurance. These processes have in the long run been focused so firmly that they have been apprehended to be synonymous with the quality culture. But, according to Loukkola and Zhang (2010), quality culture and quality assurance processes are different

phenomena, although they are coherent. While the quality assurance processes are tangible and manageable by institutional decisions, the quality culture is far more difficult to grasp. There is not one correct quality culture to be defined that could apply to all universities. This is because the quality culture is in interaction with the surrounding context, which may consist of several sub quality cultures. Thus, the description of a university's quality culture does not only depend on national context or size of a university, but also on organizational structures and subcultures. According to Elken and Stensaker (2018, p. 192), management routines and cultural norms and values are not fixed entities but dynamic constructs that are shaped and transformed during the actions taken by individuals in the organisation.

The concept of quality culture consists of two words: quality and culture. Quality in relation to educational institutions may be seen out of two perspectives: an intern and an extern perspective. The extern perspective is in the research understood as evaluation of the quality of an institution and its activities carried out by extern organisations, groups or persons. The evaluation is made out from nationally or even internationally agreed guidelines and values for what is good quality and how evaluation is to be done. The intern perspective infers the evaluative activities that takes place within the organization itself and which is not necessarily tied to extern values. Instead, the values can be strongly tied to the university's history, specific assignments and individual development needs. The intern perspective can also be perceived as a more self-directed perspective, while the external perspective is more of an order from the outside. Ehlers (2009) establish that the extern perspective may be apprehended to belong to history while the intern perspective is a modern perspective. The former, or traditional, understanding of organisational management represents the belief that strategies can be pre-determined and precisely planned, while the new generation of approaches affirms that change in organisations is emergent and resulting from employees' competences and organisational culture.

Quality culture is according to EUA (2006) an organizational culture that contributes to effective development and cares about quality. Berings, et al. (2010) refer to the Flemish Bologna Expert Team that has formulated a definition of quality culture where they use the expression "take care of quality" instead of "quality control" or "quality assurance". In this way, the definition provides sufficient freedom for different ways of analysing quality in higher education. The definition can therefore stimulate the debate about the dialectical nature of quality culture, i.e., the relationship between quality systems and culture.

According to Bendermacher, et al (2017, p. 51) quality culture is in interaction with the organizational context (e.g. structure, management, communication), with working mechanisms (e.g. knowledge, shared ownership, commitment), results of the quality culture (e.g. student and staff satisfaction , continuous improvement of the teaching and learning process) and quality management interventions (e.g. enrolment of diverse staff in educational improvement teams, provision of quality training and support, focus on stakeholder feedback and involvement and recognition and reward of educational quality). The conclusion is that quality culture is of its best when the strategy of quality management is tailored for the individual organization. This means, for instance, that universities should consider the subcultures when describing the quality culture.

The quality work at the universities in the Nordic countries is very much based on common standards, that is, the European standards and guidelines for quality assurance of higher

education (ESG, 2015). The standards are common principles and guidelines that allow different national solutions. The purpose of the European standards is to create a common frame of reference for the quality work in higher education institutions in Europe, but the educational institutions are responsible for developing their own quality assurance system.

In the quality assurance documents of the universities in the Nordic region, the concept "quality culture" is used in varying degrees and ways. However, the guidelines in the Nordic countries strives to both encourage individual solutions and common guidelines for developing the quality culture (FINEEC, 2019; UKÄ, 2019; NOKUT, 2018; Danmarks akkrediteringsinstitution, 2019; Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education, 2017). In the future, higher education might further diversify (e.g., digital offer of education, micro-credentials, joint degrees) which will require shared responsibility for and trust on each other's quality and quality culture. Therefore, the research made in this project may be important.

4. Aims and methodology.

The research project focuses on the concept of quality culture in relation to universities. The marvelling about the phenomenon of quality culture is not new. Many researchers have discussed and analysed the concept from different perspectives (for instance Elken & Stensaker 2018; Bendermacher, Oude Egbrink, Wolfhagen & Dolmans, 2017; Bergh, 2010; Berings, 2009, Loukkola & Zhang, 2010; Sursock 2011; Vettori 2012). But in this research, the phenomenon is focused from a Nordic perspective. This is of interest because the Nordic countries have a common educational history, and the cooperation that has continued over the years is very strong. The research project finds it interesting to explore how the universities in the Nordic countries describe the phenomenon of quality culture and if there are perspectives on the phenomenon that the universities have in common. Clarifying the concept from a Nordic perspective is important because a common understanding may further develop high quality collaboration between the universities. The aim of the study is therefore to explore how universities in the Nordic countries apprehend and deal with the concept of quality culture and how they describe the phenomenon of quality culture. The questions to be answered are ow do the Nordic universities:

1. describe the phenomenon of quality culture?
2. deal with the phenomenon of quality culture?
3. consider that quality culture is created?
4. consider that quality culture can be led and safeguarded?
5. reflect on quality culture and evaluation?
6. reflect on quality culture and internal control?

The study in this project has a qualitative approach. The survey is divided into two stages. In the first stage *qualitative content analysis* (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) is used to identify patterns of common features and content in universities description of their quality culture. The analysis focuses on words and expressions that describe the quality culture and interprets what the universities may mean by quality culture. In the second stage the *ideal type method* (Eneroth, 2005) is used to create an idea of common features in the universities' descriptions of the

quality culture. For the research Nordic Universities are asked to send their documents describing their quality culture. There is counted to be over 80 universities or units for higher education within the Nordic region. The study strives to reach approximately 20 % of the universities. An invitation letter will be sent to some "old" universities, some "broad" universities, some "new" universities and some "narrow" universities. By inviting different kinds of universities to take part as informants in the study, the research strives to get a broad picture of the phenomenon quality culture. The universities chosen shall provide education at both bachelor, master and doctoral levels. This is because it is seemed to have a qualitative significance for the study that the participating universities have similar assignments and activities as possible. Anyway, it needs to be pointed out that the aim is not to evaluate the universities quality culture, nor to compare universities, but to seek for common features and contours of a common understanding of the phenomenon of quality culture.

The research is expected to result in articles based on the results. The first article will be "Quality Culture at Nordic Universities" and the second article "The internal quality processes and quality culture" and more articles will be planned as the results are at hand.

5. The working process

Autumn 2020   Start-up and planning
- Zoom-meetings.

Contacting universities for materials

Spring 2021   Receiving materials from universities
Planning the analysis
- Zoom-meetings.

Analysis
- Zoom-meetings.
- Follow-up and research seminar in Kristiansand

Autumn 2021   Processing and compilation the results of the questionnaire
- Zoom-meetings.
- Research-week in an external location including a seminar. All participating universities are welcome.

Spring 2022   Processing and completion of article 1 and planning article 2,3 etc.
- Zoom-meetings.
- Follow-up and research-days

Autumn 2022   Processing articles.
- Zoom-meetings.
- Follow-up and research-days.

Spring 2023   Completion of the project
- Zoom-meetings.
- Final seminar (a research festival) for summing up the research project and planning future projects.

6. Literature

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