11th European Quality Assurance Forum

17–19 November 2016

Quality in context – embedding improvement

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

Author(s)

Name: Esther Jonker

Position: Quality assurance officer at the department of Applied Social Sciences

Organisation: Leiden University of Applied Sciences (Hogeschool Leiden)

Country: The Netherlands

E-mail address: paul.e@hsleiden.nl

Short bio (150 words max):

Esther Jonker holds a PhD in medieval literature from Leiden University. After finishing her studies she was more interested in the way higher education institutions are organized than in pursuing a career as a medievalist. This led her to accept the position of quality assurance officer at the department of Applied Social Sciences at Leiden University of Applied Sciences (Hogeschool Leiden). In this capacity, she initiates quality assurance policy and coordinates its implementation. Although not initially trained in the field of quality assurance research, she likes to search for possibilities to combine her skills as a researcher with that of a policy advisor.

After the Forum, the full text of all papers presented at the Forum will be published on the Forum website. If you do not wish your paper to be published, please indicate so here. This has no consequences on the selection of the papers.

Proposal

Title: The 'soft' side of quality: positive effects of policy change in the Netherlands, a case study

Abstract (150 words max):
In recent years the tone of voice in higher education policy in the Netherlands has changed from advocating tight control and accountability to giving more room to the 'soft' side of quality. In trying to address this change, the management of a department at Leiden University of Applied Sciences decided to find out what academic staff and students think about quality in education and how this can contribute to a shared vision on teaching. A study conducted to that end revealed that (still existing) governmental frameworks for quality control do not fit the ideas that staff and students hold on what should be central to teaching and education. These frameworks sometimes even actively discourage staff and students to give attention to what they think is most valuable. Giving room to the 'soft' side of quality, by contrast, turns out to stimulate ownership of and involvement in quality in education by academic staff, students and management.

Text of paper (3000 words max):
The 'soft' side of quality
Positive effects of policy change in the Netherlands, a case study

Over the last few years quality of higher education has become a political 'hot issue' in the Netherlands. A very small number of incidents of fraud and similar issues at especially one university of applied sciences (hogeschool) resulted in headlines in almost every newspaper, ad hoc policy at a governmental level and a pile of reports on improving assessment standards. These reports in particular were clear in their opinion on what ought to be improved: more supervision from the government, higher standards and frameworks for assessments and more uniformity in final exams so as to allow for comparison. At the same time the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science adopted a more stringent approach in examining the higher education sector on quantitative results like graduate output, contact hours and student-teacher ratio. From 2010 onwards, all this created an atmosphere of tight control and accountability in the higher education sector.

Unmistakably, the new rules and standards had a positive influence on the organization of many institutions. But gradually counter-arguments emerged. Wasn't there too much attention for the 'hard' side of quality and didn't the 'soft' side of quality deserve attention as well? Last year (2015) these notions also began to appear in such government papers as letters from the Minister of Education to the Parliament, and the Strategic Agenda of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Although there are no new laws yet – such developments take time – the tone of voice has changed. Increasingly expressions like 'deserved trust', 'it comes to contents' and 'quality culture' are being used in new policy documents.

In this paper I'd like to show, by way of case study, the positive effects (also for quality assurance) of giving room to the 'soft' side of quality in higher education, when embedded in a specific context. This specific context is a department at Leiden University of Applied Sciences. The department has about 1800 students in three bachelor's programmes, 125 employees and a management team of four. In this department I work as a quality assurance officer, called 'quality coordinator', which means that I initiate policy on quality assurance and coordinate its implementation.

Quality culture
As for the new space created in government policy on quality in higher education, the management team of my department quickly discovered that it wasn't easy to fill this space. It had got used to dictates like "improve the programme aims", "improve your assessments", "improve your graduate output", etc. Without as of yet having guidelines for addressing the 'soft' side of quality, the managers had to answer questions like: "What, do we think, is important for quality in education?" and "How should we implement this?" Luckily enough they soon got some support in answering these questions. The much respected Education Council (Onderwijsraad), a highly influential advisory body for the Minister of Education, published a report that highlighted the importance of quality culture in higher education. Although quality culture has been a buzz word in the educational field for some time already, the Education Council was the first to put it on the agenda of higher education policy in the Netherlands. Based on a thorough literature review, the report of the Education Council identifies seven aspects that characterize a quality culture:

1. a clear, shared and lived vision on teaching, emerging from an ongoing dialogue among stakeholders
2. focus on improvement, based on both collective and individual learning capability

3. leadership at programme level
4. an organizational structure that stimulates teamwork and collaboration
5. a supportive HR policy
6. extensive student involvement
7. a sensitivity for external developments

The management team decided to use this list of seven aspects as guidance for addressing the 'soft' side of quality in education. A quick scan showed that the aspects 2, 3, 5 and 7 and to some extent aspect 6 as well, were more or less part of the organizational culture of the department already. Next year two bachelor's programmes will merge, which presents an excellent opportunity for also taking seriously into account aspect 4. But the list of aspects also helped identify a serious omission. The report calls a shared and lived vision on teaching, emerging from an ongoing dialogue among stakeholders the sine qua non for a strong quality culture. And such a lived and shared vision was missing. Of course academic staff and management had unspoken and outspoken ideas about teaching and what they saw as quality in education. And of course there could be found some documents that stated what principles were used in the bachelor's programme design. But this all couldn't be named "a clear, shared and lived vision on teaching, emerging from an ongoing dialogue among stakeholders". Apparently and due to the external pressure for accountability and reaching standards, nobody ever felt an urgency to discuss these ideas and create a shared and lived vision from it.

Exploratory research
To decide whether such a shared vision would be possible at all – and I had the intuition it could be – the management needed to know what academic staff and students considered as *the essence* of education and teaching. Therefore I carried out a small exploratory study on what ideas about quality in education could lead to a shared vision on teaching.[1] The study was structured by the following three questions:
- what (implicit) vision on quality in education and teaching can be derived from departmental policy documents?
- what ideas do academic staff have on quality in education?
- what ideas do students have on quality in education?

To be able to compare the results there had to be a theoretical framework that could bring some focus and unity in language. For this I chose the almost classical categorization of quality definitions by Lee Harvey and Diana Green (1993), that Harvey further elaborated in his paper 'Understanding Quality' in 2006. For the sake of intelligibility for staff as well as students I only used Harvey's five main categories:

1. quality as excellence
2. quality as consistency
3. quality as fitness for purpose
4. quality as value for money
5. quality as transformation

During my survey I noticed that staff and students, despite my attempts at definitional clarification, interpreted these categories somewhat differently than the authors might have envisioned. But still the framework proved helpful in comparing the results. After all I was not interested in a faultless application of Harvey's categories, but in finding a shared language and vision for quality in education that could lead to a shared vision on teaching.

---

[1] The linking of 'essence' and 'quality' is inspired by Harvey's (2006) definition of quality as "the embodiment of the essential nature of a person, object, action, process or organisation".

Following the three leading questions I already mentioned, the study was split up in three parts: an analysis of relevant policy documents, focus groups with academic staff and focus groups with students.

1. document analysis

First of all the documentation was analyzed. This allowed me to introduce the results in the focus groups and compare the outcomes. As could have been expected after the quick scan with the management team, there was no document that explicitly articulated a vision on quality in education. But it was possible to score the documents on Harvey's categories, in order to find implicit and underlying definitions of quality. This exercise revealed that definitions three (fitness for purpose), four (value for money) and two (consistency) dominated the policy documents. It is possible to trace these definitions back to external, governmental standards that the documents account to: the accreditation framework with its central quest for fitness, the performance agreements with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science that promote efficiency and value for money and the more general tendency to controllability and procedural perfection that match definition two. So actually nothing unexpected.

2. focus groups with academic staff

After the document analysis focus groups with academic staff were organized. Due to organizational restrictions it wasn't possible to invite all staff. I decided to invite staff of all three bachelor's programmes with an employment of more than 24 hours a week (> 0.6 FTE). The reason for this was that teaching would be their main job (as they mostly have some employment in social work as well), and that this would make them more involved in thinking about educational quality. It resulted in approximately 10 staff members per programme divided over four similar sessions.

The focus groups consisted of three elements in a fixed sequence. First staff was asked to choose an image from a given set that for them represented quality in education in some way. They were asked to describe the image and to explain their choice and their associations with quality. This task was inspired by Cheng (2014) who used collage-making workshops in his research. The aim of this task was to get insight into the free associations of staff with quality in education, without the influence of later discussions. Secondly there was a short introductory discussion on more general questions like: "How do you see quality in education?" and "How do you use this in your classes?". Lastly they could choose from Harvey's definitions and explain which one(s) appealed to them most.

In the introductory discussion staff answered they felt highly responsible for the quality of their own teaching. They described quality in terms of being well connected to the professional field, current events and the educational needs of students, as well as in terms of judging students' achievements fairly. All staff members considered definitions three (fitness for purpose) and/or five (transformation) the most appealing ones, although some preferred three over five, and vice versa. For professional education staff tends to ascribe much value to how the professional field judges the graduates' attainment levels. That makes definition three (purpose is professional competence) a natural standard for professional training. But staff actually experience their passion in guiding the learning process of a student, which they ranged under definition five. However, because of very strict curricular norms, prescribing what should be taught in class at which moment, it isn't always easy for them to engage fully with the learning process of students and fit their needs. What staff perceives as causing the largest impediment for working in this manner is definition two, which they interpret as: caring for faultless assessment and evaluation procedures, creating elaborate study guides and accounting accurately for choices made. These tasks take so much time, that academic staff sometimes even tend to neglect to prepare for class.

If these answers are compared to the results of the image association task the most striking insight yielded by this exercise is that staff in both tasks, with and without Harvey's framework, emphasized similar issues and priorities. The majority of them chose an image related to the learning process of a student and their own guiding role in that. Popular images are that of a tree, with strong roots to grow and flourish, people that dive into the deep, etc. Staff consider themselves as the ones that create

room for students and their learning process. Eventually, this produces students who have sufficient (intellectual) baggage, roots, fundament – and such images – to start as a professional. In this definition three and five get together again.

3. *focus groups with students*

For the focus groups with students I initially tried to arrange a random group of students by scheduling three moments in the week schedule of each bachelor's programme, accompanied by an invitation. But no one appeared, so then I decided to ask the (already more motivated) student evaluation groups of two bachelor's programmes.[2] This led to two focus groups with 15 students in total.

When asked freely what they called quality in education, students mentioned things like being taught by staff that know their future profession well and that attend to students' needs, as well as a good organization of the bachelor's programme. They were also asked which of Harvey's definitions they preferred. Here they chose without hesitation, just like the academic staff, definitions three (fitness for purpose) and five (transformation). Most students preferred a combination of the two. They interpreted the definitions, however, in line with their own educational needs and experiences, although some older students anticipated the aim of professional competence, defined in terms of the judgement by the professional field. The preference for definitions three and five is also found in research by Jungblut, Vukasovic and Stensaker (2015) in which they asked a large group of students from several European countries to choose from Harvey's definitions. The researchers explain this by saying that students prefer perspectives that put them in the centre of the process. (And maybe that can be said of staff as well.)

The image association task proved students to be also attracted by images that they saw as representing the learning process. They mostly applied the image to themselves and to their learning process. So there again were the trees, diving people and cars with baggage that represented their intellectual growth. Some students also were very explicit in stating that they needed staff that would be less concerned with the strict curricular norms provided by study guides and more concerned with the educational needs of their class.

Discussing the results

Let's now return to the aim of this little exploratory study: it had to teach the management of my department what academic staff and students think of quality in education, and what they think is *the essence* of education and teaching. What strikes us in looking at the results?

First of all it is remarkable, but not wholly unexpected, that the implicit definitions of quality in education that were found in the documentation don't really match the ideas of staff and students. The only congruence is found in definition three (fitness for purpose), which can be seen as a natural measure for professional training. As the choices in the documentation were explained as influenced by external frameworks and standards, the conclusion must be that these standards and frameworks do not really fit the expectations and the ideas of quality in education of staff and students.

Secondly there is the observation that a shared and lived vision on teaching, based on an open dialogue among the main stakeholders, should be very well possible for the department. This little study shows that staff and students have a lot of shared ideas on quality in education, on what matters most in teaching and should get priority. Both groups think that teaching is mostly about what happens in the classroom, about how students get prepared for their life as a professional and how their personal development adds to this.

Positive effect of policy change

This paper started with a sketch of recent developments in Dutch higher education policy in order to show by means of a case study the positive effects that this policy can yield in a specific context, also for quality assurance. Where do I see these positive effects in my department?

---

[2] It wasn't possible to attend the other group, because of time restrictions.

The overall positive effect is that the management of my department, in response to the outcomes of this study decided to give more room to ownership of and influence on quality in education in several spheres. I will give some examples, counting these among the positive effects as well:

- a process for articulating a shared vision on teaching has been set up, where the results of this study prove to be starting guidelines; future policy documents will lean on this new articulated vision and not only account to external governmental frameworks;
- academic staff and students will be stimulated to engage in ongoing discussion on quality in education, e.g. during classes and teacher meetings;
- inter-collegial feedback by attending each other's classes will be stimulated (a suggestion from staff themselves) as another means for stimulating the discussion on quality in education;
- staff members will be allowed more creative freedom in learning design so as to allow staff to fit students' needs, and
- staff will be able to bring in individual development and/or performance targets that match their definition of quality in education.

Although I very well realize that this case study has little evidential value, I think it is not unwarranted to draw a more general conclusion from it: giving more room for and attention to the 'soft' side of quality in educational policy can stimulate ownership of and involvement in quality in education. This case study offers four kinds of support for this conclusion:

- compared to strict frameworks and rules, attention to the 'soft' side of quality stimulates, and in our case initiated, consciously thinking of and discussion on quality in education by different stakeholders, more than strict frameworks and rules;
- it more directly addresses the professionalism of academic staff and stimulates their ownership of quality in education;
- it puts the focus in education on issues that students find important and it stimulates their involvement in a shared vision on teaching;
- it stimulates a lived *culture* of quality instead of promoting a quality assurance *system*.

Despite all this there remain some hard issues to tackle, especially with regard to quality assurance. I would like to share these with you as the start of our discussion:

1. What role does QA have at the 'soft' side of quality? Do we still need QA as an organized system in a quality culture, as the latter could be called a 'lived PDCA-cycle'?
2. How to bring in QA if the transformative definition of quality is what you aim at in education and teaching? (Harvey (2006) already gives some answers to this questions, but these are not very elaborated; the same is true for Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007))
3. How can governmental policy effectively stimulate ownership of quality in higher education, while assuring high educational performance as well?

I would be very interested in hearing to what extent other higher education institutions in Europe are struggling with these questions too, and what sort of answers they have found so far.

References:

Cheng, M. (2014). Quality as transformation: educational metamorphosis. *Quality in Higher Education, 20*(3), 272-289.

Harvey, L. (2006). Understanding quality. In Froment, Kohler, Purser, & Wilson (eds). *EUA Bologna Handbook, Making Bologna Work*. (pp. B4.1-1). Berlin: European University Association (EUA)/Raabe.

Harvey, L., & Green, D. (1993). Defining quality. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 18*(1), 9-34.

Jungblut, J., Vukasovic, M., & Stensaker, B. (2015). Student perspectives on quality in higher education. *European Journal of Higher Education, 5*(2), 157-180.

Onderwijsraad (2015). *Kwaliteit in het hoger onderwijs. Evenwicht in ruimte, regels en rekenschap*.

Discussion questions:
- What role does QA have at the 'soft' side of quality? Do we still need QA as an organized system in a quality culture, as the latter could be called a 'lived PDCA-cycle'?
- How to bring in QA if the transformative definition of quality is what you aim at in education and teaching? (Harvey (2006) already gives some answers to this question, but these are not very elaborated; the same is true for Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) [will be showed on powerpoint].)
- How can governmental policy effectively stimulate ownership of quality in education, while assuring high educational performance as well?
- To what extent do you recognize the problems and questions I have addressed and what sort of answers did you find for that so far?

Srikanthan, G., Dalrymple, J.F. (2007). A conceptual overview of a holistic model for quality in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Management, 21*(3), 173 - 193

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 25 July 2016 to QAForum@eua.be. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not *send a hard copy or a PDF file.*