



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

Quality Conversations

Proceedings of the

25th HERDSA Annual Conference

7-10 July 2002

Perth, Western Australia

Avdjieva, M. & Wilson, M. (2002) Higher Education Institutions quality initiatives in New Zealand and Australia: Conversations across academic cultures, in *Quality Conversations, Proceedings of the 25th HERDSA Annual Conference, Perth, Western Australia, 7-10 July 2002: pp 28.*

Published 2002 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 0155-6223

ISBN: 0 90 8557 51 5

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Higher Education Institutions quality initiatives in New Zealand and Australia: Conversations across academic cultures



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***Abstract:** The introduction of quality policies and processes in response to the increased pressure to assure accountability and quality has become both commonplace and contested in higher education. Such initiatives have also resulted in a range of reactions from staff, particularly academics. This study explores the perception of quality in the New Zealand and Australian academy from an evolutionary and cultural perspective. It also assesses the contributions, both positive and negative, of academic cultural dissonance in institutional quality efforts. The method used in this small-scale study is exploratory; rich text data is collected in the form of verbal and electronic surveys of academic staff and managers from six New Zealand and six Australian Universities. In the data gathered, there is little evidence that institutions in either country have progressed past the second of the three stages of quality evolution. The strongest emergent theme in the assessment of quality initiatives reflects the clash between a collegial and managerial culture, consistent with the literature. Difficulties in attaining higher education quality are attributed to cultural factors by respondents at all levels of the organisation.*

***Key words:** quality culture, organisational learning, managerialism*

Introduction

The value system and management of Higher Education (HE) have evolved under very different conditions from those that apply today. Mass HE and knowledge growth in western universities are changing traditional management patterns of universities from collegiums or professional bureaucracies to corporation and enterprise models (Ramsden, 1998).

The drive to a more corporate model has meant that government and public demands for accountability and efficient management of public money have increased. Internationally, hesitation by universities in embracing change tends to produce the reaction that even more checks or controls are needed (Dill, 2000; Harman and Meek, 2000). New Zealand is moving increasingly toward de-regulation and self-accreditation by the Universities. This move introduced more market characteristics to New Zealand HE and threatened the oligopoly of its universities. In contrast, Universities in Australia are subject to regular quality assurance

audits by an Australian Universities Quality Agency from 2001, thus breaking with a tradition of self-accreditation (Maslen, 2000). Some New Zealand institutions are instituting organisational excellence models based on the Baldrige Criteria for Excellence in Higher Education, while others are moving towards building a “learning organisation”. All such models were originally introduced in the industrial and corporate sectors and have been subject to extensive debates over the last decade (Foley, 2000)

In discussing the application of learning organisation principles to education, Senge asserts that institutions of learning are not automatically learning organisations (O’Neil, 1995). Simply focusing energies on quality assurance programmes that are predominantly concerned with process improvement confines the efforts of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the domain of adaptive learning. Staff development programs do not necessarily enhance the organisation’s collective capacity to create and pursue a vision. Moreover, educational institutions are not typically organised to support collective learning. Educators are likely to feel disempowered and unable to make change in such a complex system (Senge, 2000).

The evolutionary pathway of quality and learning organisations can be understood as a series of waves, or stages (Senge, 1992b). Organisations may exist, with minimal – or even accidental - attention to quality as defined by their stakeholders. The earliest stage of quality and learning intentionality has a primary focus on the role of frontline workers in process improvement, while managers act as champions removing impediments. This achieves measurable improvements in cost, quality, and customer satisfaction (Senge, 1999a), while the relatively passive role of management and the limited impact on the larger systems are seen as limitations. In the next evolutionary stage, the focus shifts from improving work process to improving how an organisation works. Here management's role is to foster ways of thinking and interacting conducive to continual learning focused on system-wide performance. The first two waves of learning, most commonly known as quality movement initiatives, represent a change platform for learning to become institutionalised for managers and workers alike (Senge, 1999a).

The work of leaders is emphasised in the final stage, as leaders are supposed to “improve our ability to improve” (Senge, 1999c). It is this ability to improve in an holistic fashion that recognises “how critical it is to CONNECT change proficiency WITH philosophic and conceptual understanding of the substance of the intended change” (Fear, Adamek & Imig, 2002). In higher education the progression of quality and learning has been characterised by Elton (McKay & Kember, 1999) as from quality assurance to quality enhancement, but this downplays the role of learning. Both the concepts of quality and the learning organisation, however, are firmly rooted in a traditional notion of organisation and management, a cultural genealogy, which is often anathema in the academic context. “What is not always apparent (or sometimes considered important) is that any “new way” is not a monolithic phenomenon— understood philosophically and conceptually in one way only. Virtually any change platform can be informed by multiple and diverse philosophic and scholarly traditions. It is unclear... if this conclusion is understood and accepted by change agents in HE.”(Fear, Adamek et al., 2002). The meaning of quality to senior management and government, for instance, has taken centre stage in some countries. According to Fitzsimons (1999) ‘managerialism’ - a significant shift away from administration and policy to an emphasis on management - ‘has been very influential in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand where changes in university management to a ‘more corporate style’ are seen as a threat to academic freedom. Gilbert (1998) argues, that the very word ‘management’ evokes powerful negative reactions in an academic community. Accordingly, its offspring, ‘managerialism’, is even more odious, particularly in the Australian context where it is represented as “just evil”

(Sharrock 2000). This is reflected in the academics' view that university management seems to link quality to status and marketing, advertising their "quality" programmes and boasting of their "quality assurance" mechanisms (Taylor, Gough, Bundrock and Winter, 1998). In turn, government-quality as a way of assessing value for money, is also questioned by academics as to them the emphasis is on the consumer response (student) rather than the producer contribution (academics) so it is not an option for academics at universities to be instrumental in determining the quality of their own work. More critical evaluations of the "quality" initiatives (Becher, 1994) have highlighted the focus on inappropriate and inherently inequitable measurement rather than quality or organisational learning.

Throughout its evolution, quality has been one of the most contentious concepts in the academy (Taylor, Gough et al., 1998). To a great extent the sensitivity about the meaning of quality is reflected in the four different academic cultures suggested by Bergquist (1992)—collegial, managerial, developmental, and negotiating. The collegial culture finds meaning primarily in the disciplines represented by the academic staff. This culture is considered to be a classic example of fragmented learning (Kim, 1993) embodied in highly autonomous units and independent-minded individuals for whom quality is reflected in research and teaching in a relatively isolated and independent fashion. The managerial culture focuses on the organisation, implementation, and evaluation of work that is directed toward specified goals. Being focussed on compliance rather than genuine commitment, this culture implies the notion of conformity, imposition of standard, across-the-board measures of departmental performance (Becher, 1994), an unpopular concept in HE. In contrast, the developmental culture finds meaning mainly in the creation of programs and activities furthering the personal and professional growth of all members of the collegiate community. It views quality as an institutional assessment and information systems that provide constant, useful feedback on institutional performance, including measuring institutional learning. Lastly, the negotiating culture values the establishment of equitable and egalitarian policies and procedures for the distribution of resources and benefits. All four cultures exist simultaneously and interdependently, but one is usually predominant. In the context of quality, Bergquist's academic cultures are a useful framework for assessing the quality initiatives in HEIs.

Predictably, in an environment where such distinct cultures as the collegiate and managerial ones strive for dominance, the power play between them may result in serious dysfunction with negative impact on the organisation, as indicated in a survey of Australian universities (Taylor, Gough et al., 1998). Both New Zealand and Australian experiences suggest a firm rejection of Bergquist's (1992) managerial academic culture in favour of the alternatives. While this does not eliminate quality or learning initiatives, it renders difficult the essential climate of trust and open communication assumed in all such initiatives.

The cultural framework enables a focus on the diversity of "conversations" that arise in the organisation (Kim, 1994). The importance of communicating across cultures has been repeatedly emphasised in tertiary teaching (Zoreda, 1997) but generally under-developed in management and administrative processes. Given that "language and culture are intermeshed as social practice" (Zoreda, 1997, p.923), we can track cultural dissonance through language patterns. A field study of academic conversations on quality and organisational learning allows us to both chronicle developmental stages in the quality process as well as cultural dissonance revealed in language patterns.

Method

An exploratory study in Australia and New Zealand was undertaken, using multiple methods, including initial scoping interviews with subject experts, an electronic survey, and follow-up depth interviews. The potential for multiple institutional perspectives occasioned a “diagonal slice” approach, collecting perspectives of both academic and non-academic staff, managers and line staff. The two primary data collection methods were used to triangulate findings and to support findings with illustrative quotes, underscoring developmental and cultural issues.

Sampling was based on relevant archival data on each institution obtained in written and electronic searches. Eight matched HEIs with comparable offerings at both undergraduate and graduate levels, and similar numbers of academic staff and students were invited. All were complex, large-scale institutions with well-publicised quality initiatives under-way. Six institutions responded from each country. Within each organisation, 8 people ranging from executives to non-managerial staff (all quality experts identified by their HEIs) were surveyed, either electronically or in-person. The overall response rate was 17% for Australia and 48% for New Zealand. The higher rate reflects the more positive response to in-person options in New Zealand. The views of 6 executives, 24 managerial and 7 non-managerial respondents were captured.

The comprehensive survey instrument represented a framework of institutional quality and learning where cultural narratives were captured unprompted in predominantly clustered open questions. A series of twenty-two focus questions, linked to established quality parameters and organisational learning disciplines, were each followed by open questions as to why focal responses were positive or negative. For example, the response to the 7-point Likert scale focus question on *Organisational Learning* “To what extent is **your institution** committed to enhancing its **organisational** learning?” was followed-up by “If your response is *positive*, how is this achieved and evaluated?” or “*Alternatively*, please comment as appropriate”.

Culture is interwoven and revealed by language (Findlay, 1998). The raw data was coded into conceptual categories and then sorted for themes using three analytical levels - open, axial, and selective (Neuman, 2000). At the open coding level, basic themes were surfaced by assigning labels for the themes without making connections amongst them. In the next pass, organising ideas and themes were used to identify the key analytical patterns, particularly between quality stages and cultural conflicts. At the selective level, data were organised to display patterns of both staged development and cultural dissonance. Demographic characteristics such as years with current institution, position and work experience were considered both as contextualising respondents’ views and as potential moderating variables.

Findings

Culture is interwoven and revealed by language (Findlay, 1998). The first part of the results and discussion are divided into three columns. The centre column presents data summaries (in standard text) and direct quotes (in bold italics). Commentary and interpretation appear to the right (culture) and left (evolutionary stage regarding quality and learning). Text divisions reflect divisions in the survey and interview on types of quality practices and learning organisation disciplines.

On quality and organisational learning

Regarding learning infrastructure, a negative political environment, poor or no systems and structures, and poor communication were major areas of respondent concern, with managers as barriers rather than leaders. (Stage 1 or 2)

No institutionalised systems, and poor quality data were seen as a source of frustration, particularly by the Australian respondents. (Stage 1)

Staff appear to aspire to a supportive environment (Stage 2) but find little management support for related development and involvement. The lack of a link between individual development and organisational needs, for instance, emerged as a key issue for the Australian sample.

Limited ability to ask questions, to act outside narrow boundaries, even to see the strategic plan, are cited by Australian respondents (Stage 1) with both Australian and New Zealand institutions viewing quality managers as "add-ons" (Stage 2).

Difficulties in practising systems thinking as a rigorous foundation for any organisational development effort in creating enduring change were also attributed to negative political and cultural environment and poor learning infrastructure. (Stage 1)

The emphasis on poor culture as a barrier to practising double-loop learning was shared by Australian respondents throughout the hierarchy.

Senior management were described as suffering from what Senge calls "relational blindness" – the inability to see oneself in relation to others. This is particularly true in the development of shared mental models which would be required to move beyond Stage 2 quality initiatives.

Positive and alternative explanations

Australian respondents were more likely to report *mindset of senior managers* as barriers to learning initiatives, while one New Zealand institution was extremely negative about its learning infrastructure overall and the lack of systems to support organisational learning in particular. The belief of an Australian non-managerial respondent that *the managers of the organisation do not know how to create the required atmosphere of co-operation* was echoed by two New Zealand managerial respondents. Non-managerial respondents saw *no evidence of what 'organisational excellence' might be, and how each of us can share in creating it*. Managerial respondents focused on political and cultural barriers such as *University governance is conditioned more by political issues, than by learning ones and a lot of data is collected but it is not systematically analysed and used as knowledge to drive or influence decision-making*.

The above barriers also appeared to have a crucial impact on institutions' learning dynamics as *traditional methods of short courses, study leave [...] are not directed towards organisational goals except where new software or other change is being implemented. Ingrained cultural issues such as individualism and lack of commitment* were cited as major contributing factors to *no visible commitment to organisational learning [being] claimed or practised*. While some New Zealand senior managers emphasised leadership and mentoring skills development, the impact of poor learning infrastructure was highlighted by a managerial respondent - *the university has a school, faculty system, which in theory lets ideas move between the top to bottom, and bottom to top. However, in practice the university appears to be very bureaucratically run, and does not seem to encourage 'collaboration' to any great extent*.

Barriers cited by Australian respondents encompassed *lack of understanding*, a *'silo' mentality* and *reactive approach* and were underpinned by the opinion of one of the New Zealand managerial respondents - *this kind of sophistication [systems thinking] does not exist*. These views were further exemplified by an Australian non-managerial respondents who shared that there is *no good understanding about the impact of new initiatives (e.g. funding allocation decisions) on student and staff requirements*. One Australian managerial respondent even suggested that *their [management's] motto is 'never look back' – therefore how can they learn by their experience*.

These major barriers to focusing energies on creating quality for the stakeholders of universities were highlighted by a managerial respondent as *generally there is a disconnection between university policies, and operational effort in creating quality for customers*. Paradoxically, *I think there is generally continual pressure to improve quality of our teaching and research. However, the only time this is really put to test is when you apply for promotion!!*

The cultural "conversations"

These two comments are consistent with the perception from a developmental cultural perspective.

Shared creation is a focus of the negotiating cultural framework.

The need for good information is shared by both managerial and developmental cultures.

This is a rather pointed conflict commentary on the managerial (goal direction) and the collegial (individualistic) dialectic.

A similar dialectic, again from a management respondent on managerial versus a developmental approach. This tension is repeatedly reflected in contrasting managerial and non-managerial statements in both countries.

The "silo-mentality" is consistent with the construction of disciplinary divides in the collegial cultural mode.

The allocative concern reflects the focus of the negotiating culture.

Historicity is usually valued much more by the collegial and developmental cultures than the managerial culture and becomes another point for dissonance.

From a collegial perspective, you can exist quite happily without compliance, until you must interact with the central managerial collective.

On quality and organisational learning	Positive and alternative explanations	The cultural “conversations”
<p>The presence of learning disabilities limits the efforts to learn as organisations, and to move beyond primary quality initiatives. The focus remains on rudimentary tools such as benchmarking and reputational listings (Stage 1 and 2).</p>	<p>Overall, the organisational climate in both countries was characterised by learning disabilities such as <i>resistance to change, content status, conservative and/or dominant culture, stagnant environment, reactive approach</i>, etc. One of the Australian executives cited a clear need for change as <i>too many staff have been in one institution too long</i>.</p>	<p>Without naming a dominant cultural domain, holders of each perspective want holders (and enforcers) of other cultural modes to change or go!</p>
<p>Increasingly bureaucratised systems (Stage 1) and a separate quality component with executive responsibility but without systems thinking or full integration of quality and learning as central issues (Stage 2) appear to characterise the institutions studied.</p>	<p>A university executive, managerial and non-managerial Australian respondents from three different institutions highlighted their present and future concerns as <i>it's usually best not to try to buck the system; the dominant paradigm prevails; I think this [conducive culture] is decreasing as we adopt a more hierarchical (deeper) management structure</i>.</p>	<p>Again, differences in domains of appropriate contribution surface, with a “dominance” metaphor for the “hierarchical” – that is managerial – culture.</p>
<p>All of the Australian respondents, and about half of the New Zealand ones, suggested opportunities for improvement of both the learning systems and the quality aspects of their institutions. These suggestions were dominated by the need for culture change and called for increased commitment from senior management. As noted in the culture column, however, support was far from universal.</p>	<p>Two managerial respondents, one from each country, felt particularly strong about managerialism. They wanted to see <i>less emphasis on rhetoric and techniques of learning, quality assurance, continuous improvement, performance indicators, etc</i> and <i>move to a collegial mode</i> respectively. Regarding suggestion of alternatives, the former participant responded that they were <i>impossible to detail</i>, while the other asserted that <i>managerialism is a political nonsense and should be removed by involv[ing] academic and other staff in decision-making</i> to facilitate building a <i>learning organisation</i>.</p>	<p>Again, opposition to what is viewed as managerialist imposition, as reflected in the language in use. The collegial culture clearly sees Universities as distinctly different sorts of organisations.</p>
		<p>The last comment goes further in opposing managerialism and reflects a distinctly collegial and negotiating perspective.</p>

Conclusion

In the data gathered, there is little evidence that either New Zealand or Australian HEIs have progressed past the second stage of quality evolution. That is, organisational learning is far from a reality in the surveyed institutions. This is paralleled, and causally linked – by participants – to a cultural clash between public expectations, senior management initiatives and academic prerogatives.

The strongest emergent theme in the assessment of HEI quality initiatives, however, reflects the clash between a collegial and managerial culture, consistent with the literature (Taylor, Gough et al., 1998). The findings suggest that members of these institutions are facing serious political and cultural barriers to personal quality initiatives, and that these reflect widespread difficulties in HEI quality efforts. Australian respondents were particularly vocal in this regard. Although the New Zealand sample appeared to be taking steps towards embracing the notion of quality culture, in many aspects the quality practices were not consistent with espoused commitment to change and learning.

Acknowledging the cultural uniqueness of academia is still a key issue in addressing quality and organisational learning in HE. Shifting from models in opposition to a developmental culture is particularly valid to most of the sampled institutions where both non-managerial and managerial academic respondents have demonstrated strong resistance to what they view as “managerialism”, and “corporate models”.

Understanding these cultures and their interplay is critical to the success of any significant change. This study has revealed that it is all too easy for senior management to attempt to introduce new ideas without considering the assumptions held by the various constituencies

and without making sure to present the ideas in such a way that they will not be rejected out of hand. The call for leadership, well established in the literature, appears a largely unheeded imperative. Leadership is needed to combine the collegiality ethos of universities with the responsive, business-like approach demanded by customers (Davies, Hides & Casey, 2001), as well as a cross-cultural awareness that has been lacking in Australian managers generally (Fish & Wood, 1997).

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