

# Reaching for the Stars

## Reflections on institutional quality strategies and practices in a top-down bottom-up perspective

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### Abstract

Universities today have to implement and maintain a quality culture. However, this is in many ways both a truism and a contradiction in terms. Universities are dedicated to delivering excellence and therefore quality is an integral part of universities, but at the same time universities are characterized by so big differences across disciplines and units that talking about one quality culture instead of several, perhaps indeed almost individual, quality cultures is at least a challenge. However, modern universities do need shared values and goals to be successful in handling scarce resources, external accountability, raising external funding etc. On the other hand commitment to a quality culture will never be a reality, if not an appropriate mix of top-down and bottom-up activities be created. This paper discusses with examples from European universities what such a mix might look like, in the end stressing the importance of human resource development in order to be successful.

### Introduction

Quality work in the educational field is often associated with accountability, control and external directives (Land 2004), and university culture has always reacted negatively on such external demands invented elsewhere and implemented in universities without elegance (Duke 2002). To transform quality work to an integrated part of university culture which is necessary to run successful universities in the future focus must therefore shift from an exclusively externally defined setup to activities deduced from and embedded in the strategies and everyday practices in universities (Quality Culture 2006). Then quality teaching and learning will not just be something we must have because some external bodies tell us to account for having it, but transcend into something we decide to have ourselves as universities related to our values, strategies, and objectives, to prove accountability but just as much to develop our teaching and learning 'product' continuously. This makes quality work even harder, however, but also more fun since actual effects can be experienced directly in our daily work as researchers and teachers and not just be put into words in distant quality assurance accounting reports. Like in all institutional activities management and leadership then also become crucial elements of quality work. Quality is being created locally, however, but not without as mentioned an institutional management and leadership, initiating, guiding, responding, integrating, acknowledging etc. Consequently, the quality culture challenge in

universities must call for a good mix of top-down and bottom-up activities , engaging all at different stages and in different ways.

### Universities as organizations

The first step in changing the status of quality work in universities is to understand what kind of organizations we are dealing with, because change also in universities will not be successful without at least a broad understanding of the context of the change effort (Brennan & Shah 2000).

Studies of university culture indicate HE institutions as characterized by ‘distribution of power and authority, the ambiguity and complexity of goals and purposes, and outcomes that are difficult to measure’ (Quality Culture 2006, p.13).

Management style in HE is different from that in the commercial sector, although today tendencies are seen towards a growing importance of professional managers also in HE. Nevertheless management in most public organizations is still often weaker than in business and industry, leaving a good deal of decision making and initiative to staff, and to a much higher degree than in business and industry a process of shared decision-making is going on. The leading positions in HE are also often - in contrast to what you see in business and industry - inhabited by subject field people (mathematicians, language people etc.) and not by persons whose identity is being a leader by profession. Davies et al. (2007) describe the contrast as one between collegialism and managerialism, and in elaborating on the contrast, based on a literature study, they conclude that ‘it appears that any approach perceived by academic staff to be managerial in nature is likely to be greeted with skepticism and resistance’ (p.385). There appears to be support for ‘a collegial approach combined with leadership’, however.

Compared to many other organizations university culture is also very much characterized by individualism. Academic staff in universities very often works alone and their individual achievements are much more important for their professional life and career than their contributions to teamwork (Bolton 1995). This forms a culture where autonomy is much more obvious than common goals and interdependence, and when a high degree of autonomy is paired with the ideal of academic freedom and the critical nature of staff as such in universities you have a culture where everybody feels free to reject whatever processes that don’t fit in with the agenda of the individual.

A third important characteristic for educational institutions as such is the freedom of each teacher to choose by himself appropriate methods of teaching and learning and to implement these methods behind closed doors, the classroom often being one of the most private scenes in the world (Nugent & Bell 2006). Institutional pedagogical strategies or common quality schemes, both dependant on shared values and procedures, therefore experience hard times in universities.

Finally it is important to note that academic culture in universities, although linked with activities both in research, teaching and dissemination, is predominately influenced by research. It means the hell of a difference, when you try to introduce measures to support

quality teaching, that faculty are very little rewarded for efforts in the area of teaching. The key to their personal recognition and advancement is research not teaching.

The general academic culture may therefore be characterized as a barrier rather than as an aid to institutional efforts to promote high quality in teaching and learning. Of course all agree on the idea that quality in teaching and learning should be high. When the idea is being transformed into concrete actions you often experience, however, just as many opinions as persons present as to what, how etc., and the collegial leader without professional leading skills will have big trouble implementing general quality activities, being met by skepticism and resistance.

Nevertheless, quality can neither be assured nor developed without at least some common general activities. Examples of such will be discussed in the following.

### **A mix of top-down and bottom-up initiatives as a successful method to improve teaching and learning in universities**

The European Association of Universities (EAU) in 2002-2006 carried through a very big quality culture project involving 134 higher education institutions located in 36 European countries. The philosophy of the project was from the beginning 'that grass-root initiatives in higher education often are more effective than top-down directives' since thereby 'ownership and engagement' are developed, crucial factors to success in higher education. The project was therefore based on discussions in grass-root networks on quality as a concept and on the implementation of quality in HE institutions. However, as discussions progressed it became more and more obvious that despite 'the self-perception of academics as successful professionals who are committed to excellence' university culture in HE institutions needs substantial involvement of and actions from the rectoral team and all other leaders of the universities in questions. For the academic community to deliver quality provision the networks in the EAU project thus identified four features of successful quality culture processes: strategy, leadership, engagement and feedback. This also leads the authors of the project report to conclude:

'For now, it is important to stress that the introduction of quality culture requires an appropriate balance of top-down and bottom-up aspects.' (p.11)

Leaders thereby have an important role in implementing a quality culture in universities, balancing between setting up appropriate conditions for quality work and leaving space for the academic community to take hold of the agreed on quality concept and the processes leading to continuous improvement of teaching and learning quality as the two main dimension in any quality concept in universities. A crucial question is hereafter what 'appropriate conditions' means. As pointed out in the EAU project 'a crucial factor and indeed the starting point of the development of a quality culture is the mission of the institution', since 'a mission reflecting clear institutional priorities helps the institution to develop a strategy for quality culture and to embed it' (p.11). Therefore coherence between institutional mission, institutional profile and strategy and the ways chosen and implemented to achieve quality must be established. Secondly processes chosen to achieve quality must pay

serious attention to how commitment to institutional quality goals and objectives be created or – seen in a bottom-up perspective – develop and grow.

As any culture quality culture in HE institutions needs nurturing to develop, mature and become successful, which means effective on one hand and embedded in and taken on by the academic community on the other hand. Therefore leadership – much more than management - is called for to inspire and motivate both academic and administrative staff in universities to engage in quality improvement processes. In the following sections examples from the home university of the author will be discussed where a mix of leadership and bottom-up ideas as how to improve quality in teaching and learning has been an important part of improvement measures.

### **Rector and expert faculty working together to improve PBL through standards and visions**

Aalborg University, Denmark is a dedicated PBL university and has been from its inauguration in 1974. PBL organized in group projects each supervised by a faculty member and each producing a project report at the end which is then assessed in an oral exam has been the standard model from the start for teaching and learning activities covering at least half of the students' study hours. The university has integrated POPBL (project organized problem based learning) in its mission and so given notice to the quality of this method as an important part of its profile. After 35 years with POPBL the institution must conclude, however, that the quality of the method and the importance associated with its continuous improvement is very different in departments and faculties. Therefore, an institutional challenge has been voiced: How do we defend our position as a leading PBL university worldwide, practicing high quality POPBL? The history of the actions taken from the challenge shows very clearly the inherent battle between managerialism and collegialism in universities introduced above, but it also confirms that success lies in between.

Acknowledging the challenge rector and university board reacted through setting up a PBL standards initiative, the intention being to raise awareness of quality issues and quality itself by setting up external quality control based on a set of standards to be formulated by external expertise supported by internal expert faculty in the field of PBL, quality, evaluation etc. This process has now been running for some time and has led to draft standards for PBL according to the Aalborg model ( by Scott Barge from Harvard University), to be finalized after an international conference next summer, bringing in experts from all over the world with PBL experience. No doubt the initiative has put light on the mission of the university to deliver high quality PBL, and has as such been successful in its own right, but as internal expert faculty claimed in the process, being an excellent PBL university is not just ensuring that processes and product comply with standards, it's also about having visions and continuously trying to turn visions into reality. To complement the standard approach therefore a bottom-up vision process has now been started. Through a combination of top-down and bottom-up ideas quality assurance and quality development thereby meet as two sides of the same coin.

### **Applying and evaluating new methods of teaching and learning to improve quality**

In universities no one has an overview over what pedagogical and didactical methods are actually applied to which degree in classes and in everyday life in departments and faculties.

This also means that changing these for the better at an institutional level is difficult, since no one knows for sure where the most important micro level quality challenges are. Therefore in raising the pedagogical and didactical quality of teaching – and thereby raising the quality of learning – we have to start bottom-up. Different phases may then be defined related to the transformation of concrete change initiatives into higher quality at an institutional level. First challenge is to actually have somebody carry through pedagogical and didactical change for the better based on what they in their context experience need a raise in quality. Subsequently someone is needed to lift these new ways of teaching or learning to an institutional level – by way of information, networks for sharing best practice, workshops with cases, integration of the new methods and practice into staff training activities etc. These tasks presuppose an institutional quality system with a unit and resources to fulfill these tasks, which again depend on leaders having decided to establish such a system with appropriate resources. In this way the loop between bottom-up and top-down initiatives is established as a precondition for effective quality work in universities on a micro level.

Two examples from Aalborg University, Denmark in this field could be the introduction of portfolio and of coaching sessions for students in master programs. Use of portfolio has been introduced in several study programs as a new method of evaluation and a new method to raise employability and strengthen students' development of appropriate skills, such as reflections skills, communications skills and other soft transferable skills needed in working life today. Initiative to introduce portfolio came from dynamic teachers who could see that less resources would mean a declining quality in teaching and learning if students were not involved and engaged more, themselves, in continuously evaluating how their study processes proceed, what they learn, how their knowledge, skills and competences progress etc. Portfolio as a method is however not easily introduced, since it is new, different and demanding. Therefore, despite first good results with pioneers (Lorentsen & Lund 2008), a broader diffusion of the method presupposes someone introducing the method to other teachers, using the first results from the pioneers to demonstrate and illustrate how the method gives good results applied in the right way. At Aalborg University this happens today through an integration of the portfolio method in the pedagogical training that new and young teachers must go through when they start teaching at Aalborg University. By having course participants create and work with their own portfolio through the whole one and a half year long training course teachers both learn about and learn to use the method in practice.

Another new method which has been introduced is individual coaching sessions with students in master programs, focusing on their subject related competence development and their employment plans discussing themes like personal development, learning and study strategies, progression etc. from the point of each student. The background for introducing this method is that study program leaders and teachers have noticed that the young postmodern learner needs more caring, individual attention and more possibilities to be in focus in order to experience teaching and learning as being of high quality. Such dialogues also raise employability of students, but this was not the main idea for introducing them, however a nice side effect. The coaching sessions have been evaluated by staff from especially one master program in Learning and Change Processes, an evaluation which showed remarkable student satisfaction with the sessions (Lorentsen 2008). It has been a

challenge, however, to find teachers enough to conduct the sessions, since coaching demands the presence of specific dialogue and empathy skills which have not been developed by many teachers through their traditional teacher training or academic merits. Therefore coaching is introduced now at Aalborg University as part of the institutional staff training program. The conclusion again here is that not until teachers themselves have experienced new methods they cannot be expected to use such new methods as a quality raise in teaching and learning except from the pioneers. Therefore pioneer bottom-up initiatives introducing such new methods need to be followed by offers to teachers in general to get to know these new methods – a responsibility management must live up to and allocate resources to.

### **Developing human resources as a crucial part of quality culture in universities**

In many articles on quality culture the necessity of the construction of a unit with quality assurance professionals is mentioned to support and help maintain the quality commitment of the organization (Duke 2002 ). However, creating such organizational structures is not enough to keep momentum, since – as acknowledged by institutional leaders and documented by research in the field – human resources is really the crucial challenge in creating any kind of change in organizations and therefore also in universities related to quality assurance and quality development. Consequently more focus should be on the objectives, methods and practices of the existing staff development units in order to make these able to develop human resources appropriately within the framework of an institutional quality culture. For the academic community quality culture must relate to everyday teaching and learning and thus there is a strong need for a unit to be able to transform abstract ideas about quality into concrete ideas and support as to how you can enrich, change, develop your actual teaching on an individual level, acknowledging the diversity you find across departments and faculties. Which methods are the best differ from university to university according to traditions, culture etc., but workshops, websites with resources, sharing of best practice, network activities, coaching, mentoring etc. have proven to be successful in many universities.

### **Stars keep shining**

Creating, embedding and maintaining a quality culture in universities is a continuous endeavor. Quality culture is also fragile and needs everybody's attention and dedication – from vice-chancellor to security staff. In such cases common ideals and values have to be very clear, shining ahead as a leading star for all.

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