

# **Reflection on quality culture as a substantial element of quality management in higher education.**

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper we present a conceptual framework as well as an instrument for reflection and research on quality culture. The building blocks are three pairs of opposite values. Each pair consists of a value associated with the TQM paradigm on the one hand and a value associated with the traditional academic world on the other hand. The advantage of this approach is that reflection and research on quality culture is not a priori and exclusively connected to the TQM paradigm. On the contrary the approach embraces a dialectical vision on quality culture. Beneath the possibilities for reflection and dialogue we discuss also possibilities for further research that should focus on the examination of the relationship between dimensions of quality culture and organizational and educational performance indicators.*

## **Introduction**

Peters and Waterman (1982) introduced the idea that an appropriate implementation of the *soft* side of management (*shared values, style, staff, skills*) is at least so important as the control over the *hard* aspects of management (*strategy, structure, systems*). Like general management, quality management embodies 'hard' and 'soft' elements. This distinction is made in handbooks of Total Quality Management (e.g. Oakland, 1993) and in well-elaborated content analyses of the TQM paradigm (e.g. Hackman & Wageman, 1995; Sitkin, Sutcliffe & Schroeder, 1994). Commitment and involvement of stakeholders, the development of quality oriented competences and the establishment of an appropriate organizational culture – often called 'quality culture' – are supposed to underpin the quality processes and systems and vice versa. Sitkin et al. (1994) deliver an interesting conceptual framework for analysing the reciprocal relationship between hard and soft elements of TQM, by distinguishing a Quality Control Approach (TQC) from a Quality Learning Approach (TQL). Vijoen and van Waveren (2009) argue that implementing quality management in higher education demands a paradigm shift from

traditional management (planning, organising, leading and controlling) to a focus on continuous improvement. Lots of scholars acknowledge quality culture and organizational culture change as a prerequisite for realising quality in products and services and for realizing excellence in educational settings (Helms, Williams & Nixon, 2001; Kekale, Fecikova & Kitaigorodskaja, 2004; Viljoen & van Waveren, 2009; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Houtveen, Voogt & van der Vegt, 1996). Also in the context of quality assurance and accreditation in the European Higher Education Area 'quality culture' is found high on the agenda (EUA, 2006). Less consensus exists about the content of the concept of 'quality culture' itself. In their considerations about the meaning of 'quality culture' Harvey and Stensaker (2008) accentuate the complexity and dialectical nature of the concept. Such theoretical reflections can help us to explore further the meaning of the concept in theory, research and practice. One conclusion of such reflections is that quality culture cannot be restricted to a standardized quality management tool that can be implemented invariably over time and situations. Rather the assumption is made that a contingency approach or even more a social constructionist approach could be required (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). This implies that not only research, but also reflection on and dialogue among stakeholders of an organisation are useful in order to understand and embrace the cultural elements of quality management. The EUA report formulate this idea as follows: "Quality culture signals the need to ensure a grass-roots acceptance, to develop a compact within the academic community through effective community building, as well as a change in values, attitude and behaviour within an institution" (EUA, 2006, p.6).

Before exploring opportunities for reflection and research on quality culture, it is useful to obtain more clarity about the meaning and content of the concept. We start with a rather 'empty' circumscription borrowed from a reflection made by the Flemish Bologna Expert Team. The following working definition emerged: **quality culture is an *organisational culture* which contributes to the development of effective and efficient care for *quality*.** In this working definition - contrary to other scholars (Oakland, 1986; Viljoen & van Waveren, 2008) - the concept of quality culture is not a priori or exclusively connected to the paradigm of Total Quality Management (TQM) that has become at the same time ubiquitous and controversial in academic settings (Helms et al., 2001;

Youssef et al., 1998). In the working definition the concept of quality culture is allied to the concept of *organizational culture*. In order to fill up these empty definition of quality culture we have to elaborate further the concepts of quality and organizational culture.

## **Quality**

Defining the concept quality is a rather tricky endeavour. Harvey and Stensaker (2008) distinguish five ways to define quality in the educational context:

'exceptional', 'perfection or consistency', 'fitness for purpose', 'value for money' and 'transformation'. Before Reeves and Bednar (1994) gave a thorough analysis of the concept of quality. An even older but at least as interesting analysis can be borrowed from Garvin (1984). His distinction of several meanings can easily be associated with different approaches of quality management in higher education (Berings, 2008). Five ways to define quality can be distinguished:

- 1 Product-oriented
- 2 Production or design-oriented
- 3 Customer-oriented
- 4 Value-oriented
- 5 Transcendence-oriented

*Product orientation* implies a selection of measurable characteristics that must be present in a certain degree before we can speak about quality. The weakness in this approach is that the characteristics are not given in advance. Therefore we need an institution or forum with enough authority to decide on these characteristics and criteria. In higher education accreditation agencies are charged with this endeavour. They experience a lot of difficulties to determine a comprehensive set of such criteria applicable to different educational settings with divergent missions, strategies and contextual features.

An alternative approach is the *design oriented* approach on quality. Here the criteria for quality are not determined by an external authority but by the designer of the product. From this perspective quality is the consistency between the characteristics specified before the production and the characteristics of the

product delivered to the customer. The crucial question is whether the product has the characteristics specified in the design of the product. A prerequisite for this approach on quality is that there is a thorough reflection before starting the production and supply of services. The designer of the product determines in advance the specifications of the product. This approach involves standardization of production and process control. This approach corresponds with the core principle of a quality system in line with the guidelines of the International Standardization Organization (ISO): "say what you do, and do what you say".

The *customer oriented* approach is the emanation of the main principle of TQM, namely the fulfilment of the customers' needs and expectations. The weakness of this approach is that the client can have an only limited insight in his own needs or can hold unrealistic expectations. Another limitation is that lots of clients only have a short term vision on their own needs. Such arguments are often mentioned when a customer orientation is introduced in educational settings, especially concerning freshmen in higher education. Following blindly the expectations and wishes of freshmen could have a negative effect on the quality level of education.

The fourth approach is *value oriented* and is based on the the value for money principle.

Finally, the fifth approach to quality is called the *transcendence approach*. Here the meaning of the quality concept comes near to 'excellence' and 'reputation'. Quality is a label attributed to a product, a service or an organization as a whole, as a result of an overwhelming consensus about the high level of quality, even when empirical evidence is lacking. In this approach quality has to do with image building and the establishment of a long term quality image often based on tradition. In the light of the enhanced accent on accountability in our society in general and especially in education, today reputation based on tradition is no longer sufficient to receive a quality label from society or a societal licence to operate.

The deconstruction of the quality concept can underpin the debate about the meaning – principles as well as tools - of quality management in higher

education. The most important challenge for universities and colleges, as well as for the accreditations agencies, is not in the first place to make a radical choice between the five quality approaches but rather to explore the possibilities to integrate elements of the five different approaches in a consistent and manageable way (Berings, 2008).

### **Organisational culture**

Peters and Waterman (1984) introduced the idea that an appropriate implementation of the soft side of management (shared values, style, staff, skills) is at least as important as the control over the hard aspects of management (strategy, structure, systems). The transfer of this generic assumption to the world of quality management is obvious. Quality management can only be successful if processes and systems are supported by a quality culture. Quality culture in higher education can be defined as an organizational culture that sustains the development of an effective and efficient quality management approach that allows the educational institution to realize its objectives and enhance the quality of its education and services. In that way the rather new concept of quality culture is connected to the more common concept of organizational culture. Cameron and Quinn (1999) have summarized the essence and functions of organizational culture as follows: "Organizational culture refers to the taken-for-granted values, underlying assumptions, expectations, collective memories, and definitions present in an organization. It reflects the prevailing ideology that people carry inside their heads. It conveys a sense of identity to employees, provides unwritten rules and, often, unspoken guidelines for how to get along in the organization, and enhances the stability of the social system that they experience." (p. 14). Edgar Schein (1992), one of the most respected theorists dealing with organizational culture attributed two basic functions to organizational culture, namely internal integration and external adaptation. Organizational culture determines how people work together within the organization and how they cope with influences from outside the organization. In other words, how internal integration and external adaptation is shaped by the organization as a social community is the emanation of its organizational culture. Organizations can be distinguished from each other by their cultural orientation: they can put the accent on management control or

rather on flexibility, they can focus on internal processes or rather on external challenges (Quinn, 1988), they can focus on individual needs versus collective goals (Wagner, 1995). The way organizations shape the two functions of organizational culture, internal integration and external adaptations, is often the starting point from which models for organizational culture are conceived (Quinn, 1988; Cameron & Quinn, 1999) especially in the context of education (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Berings, 2001, 2006; Houtveen et al. 1996).

Definitions and theories about organizational culture suggest that analysis of organizational culture can help members of an organization to understand better their own practices (Berings, 2008b; Stankosky, 2005; Wagner & Spencer, 1996). Hereby a kind of 'social sharedness' is presumed. In contrast with this assumption lots of scholars have pointed out that organization culture is rather fragmented instead of totally shared. Subcultures can exist and values are often less shared than thought (Hofstede, 1998). To understand well the role of organizational culture in connection with quality management in higher education it is important to pay attention to both shared and unshared values expressed in so called subcultures related to different disciplinary setting (Kekäle, 1999, 2000; Kekale et al., 2004) and personnel categories (Berings, Grieten, Lambrechts & De Witte, 2008; Johnson, 2000). Hargreaves (1994) called it 'balkanization': "the balkanization ... between the avant garde and the rearguard, between insiders and outsiders, or between the old and the young" (p. 18).

### **Quality culture: a confrontation of values**

Viljoen and van Waveren (2008) took TQM as a reference for elaborating the concept of quality culture. TQM has been introduced as a new management philosophy (Oakland, 1993 Hackman & Wageman, 1995) whereby the client's needs and expectations are set central. TQM further strives towards the 'continuous improvement' of the whole organization. Although initially applied in industry and profit business, TQM has become also popular in service and non-profit organisations such as educational institutions (Burkhalter, 1996; Coate, 1993; Helms, Williams & Nixon, 2001; Horine & Haily, 1995; Meisel & Seltzer, 1995; Williams, 1993). The core of Total Quality Management can be recognized in the concept itself. 'Total' refers to the shared responsibility of every person

and each unit in an organization to achieve quality. 'Quality' refers to the core of any business, namely understanding the needs of the customer and the delivery of products and services that satisfy these needs. Finally, the notion management embraces the belief that realizing quality is not possible without coordination, communication, planning and that senior management has to take the lead to achieve quality. See Table 1 for an overview of the most important TQM principles and tools (Hackman & Wageman, 1995; Hill, 1995; Oakland, 1993; Van den Berghe, 1997).

Table 1. TQM principles and tools.

TQM Principles	TQM Tools
Customer driven	Customer, employee and other stakeholder surveys
Engagement of top management	Quality policy declaration
Employee commitment and participation	Quality improvement teams, quality days
Shared objectives	Formulation of a shared vision and quality objectives
Process management and control	Documentation and auditing of processes
System approach	Cross-functional teams and coordination
Continuous improvement	Suggestion boxes, problem solving techniques, structural treatment of complaints
Quality and client-oriented culture	Training in quality and customer oriented behaviour
Management by facts and figures	Key performance indicators and benchmarks

As can be seen from this table, TQM focuses on the interest and values of the client, as much as the work orientation and values of its employees. A prerequisite for the implementation of TQM would be that the values of employees are shared and in line with the TQM principles and strategies.

In the principles and practices of TQM we recognize three core values or fundamental work orientations (Berings, 2001, 2008a):

- **Innovation**, as a foundation for continuous improvement
- **Collective orientation**, as a basis for working together to accomplish common goals
- **System control**, as a basis for planned, systematic and coordinated quality control.

Together with the enhancing popularity of this paradigm among administrators in higher education, criticism and scepticism emerged among academics (Berings, 2000; Helms et al., 2001; Youssef et al., 1998). One of the reasons can be found in the strong need for autonomy among academic professionals (Copur, 1990). In the report on the three rounds quality culture project of the European University Association it is formulated as follows: "It is often the case that when speaking of quality, it is easy to revert back to such managerial concepts as quality control, quality mechanisms, quality management, etc. These concepts, however, are not neutral. They convey a technocratic and top-down approach that will backfire in academic settings. The self-perception of academics as successful professionals who are committed to excellence means that they dislike being managed." (EUA, 2006, p. 6).

After exploring the scepticism of the academic world toward TQM we contrasted the three core TQM values mentioned above with three values strongly espoused in traditional academic settings. Such competing values can be held responsible for the problematic marriage between TQM and the academic world (Berings, 2000; Cowles & Gilbreath, 1993; Dickson, Pollack & Troy, 1995; Youssef et al., 1998):

- Innovation versus **tradition**
- collective orientation versus **individual specialization**
- system control versus **self-determination**

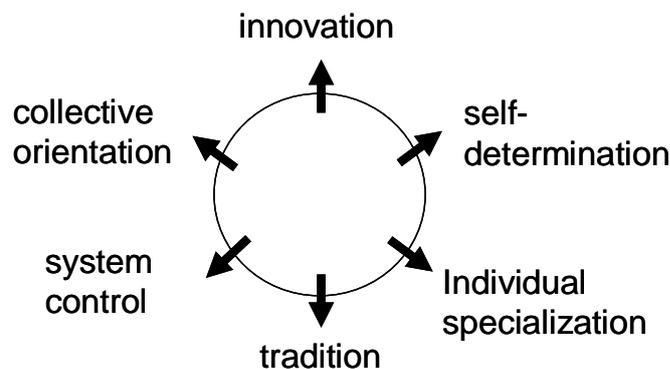
By contrasting the TQM values with their opposites a competing value model that can be useful for reflection on TQM in higher education can be elaborated. Such an approach embraces the idea that management is looking for creative answers to fundamental paradoxes (Quinn, 1988) and the idea that working on quality culture is in essence a dialectical endeavour (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

The paradoxical character of values and the art of managing such paradoxes in a creative way – management as a dialectical process - is a never fading theme in the literature on management and organizational effectiveness (e.g. Buelens, 1992; Cameron, 1986; Pascale, 1990; Morgan, 1997; Johnson, 1992). From such a point of view organizational effectiveness is defined as the capability of an organization to find creative solutions for paradoxes or competing value

dimensions like *control versus flexibility* or *internal versus external focus* (Quinn, 1988) or *individualism versus collectivism* (Wagner, 1995). Quinn (1988) defined 'Competing values' as opposite values that are expected to be important to some extent for all organizations but are difficult to be realised at the same time.

The building blocks of the model presented here (Figure 1) are three pairs of such competing values. Each pair consists of a value associated with the TQM paradigm on the one hand and a value associated with the traditional academic world on the other hand.

Figure 1. Competing value model for TQM in Higher Education (Berings, 2001)



The challenge for higher educational institutions and especially for their quality management systems is to find creative solutions for the three paradoxes in this model (Berings, 2006). They have to find an answer for the question how a systematic approach can be taken without killing individual autonomy and creativity. A second paradox has to do with the need to cope with changes in the environment with respect to tradition and existing practices. Finally a balance has to be established between the collective shared goals on the one hand and the individual needs and aspirations of highly specialised lecturers and researchers on the other side. This last paradox is related to the dimension 'collectivisme-individualisme' often found in studies of organizational culture and change (Ramamoorthy & Carroll, 1998; Hofstede, 1980; Wagner, 1995) and in models for values and work values (Berings, De Fruyt & Bouwen, 2004; Schwartz, 1992). Also scholars in the field of educational science emphasize the importance of team work and collective orientation in education as well as the

need to give enough room to individual competences and aspirations (Clement, 1995; Van den Bosch & Teelken, 2000; van Wessum, 1997). The development of a work environment in which collectivism is connected to individualism is also a challenge and critical success factor for research teams within higher educational institutes.

Recognizing the tension between competing values and looking for creative and practical solutions can be a part of a reflection on quality culture in institutions for higher education. Arguments for such a dialectical vision on quality culture are found in the reflection about quality culture by Harvey and Stensaker (2008, p. 438): "... quality culture is not mechanistic or codified, a system produced by specialists for adaptation by others but an iterative, indeed dialectical process ...". Such a reflection and analysis can help members of an organization to understand better and handle more consciously their own interaction within and between teams in order to achieve common goals (Stankosky, 2005).

### **Six 'mirrors' to reflect on quality culture**

To underpin a reflection and open dialogue about quality culture an instrument has been developed in line with the three dimensional model discussed above (Berings, 2001). Six holistic circumscriptions are used to assess both culture perception and culture expectation. Each of these six 'images of organization' (Morgan, 1997) corresponds with one of the poles of the three dimensions in the model:

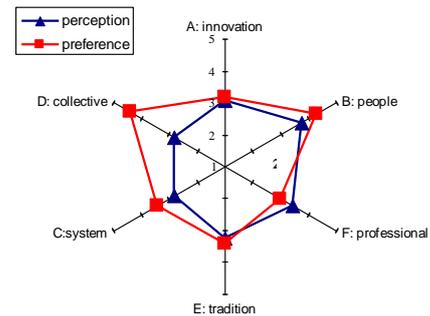
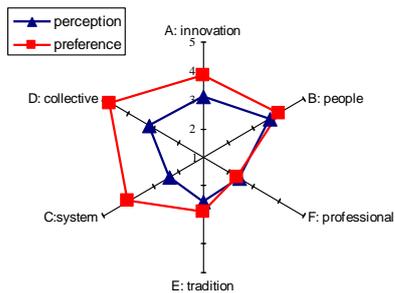
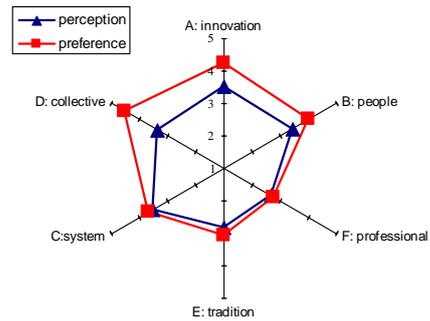
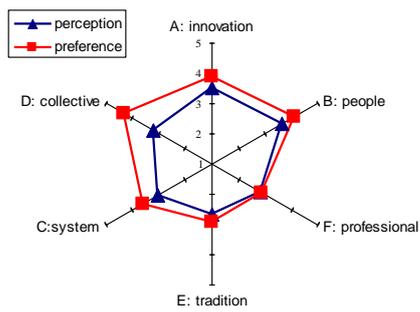
- the innovation-oriented organization;
- the tradition-oriented organization;
- the people-oriented organization;
- the system-oriented organization;
- the professionally oriented organization;
- the collectively oriented organisation.

The first image is the *innovation*-oriented organisation in which proactive external adaptation and an internal focus on continuous improvement are the essential elements. Opposite to this image we find the *tradition*-oriented organization. A conservative reflex and reservedness towards innovation and organizational change are its central features. A third image is the *people*-

oriented organization. Its core elements are confidence in people and room for self-determination and creativity. This image fits with the assumption of the theory Y of McGregor (1960), the concept of self-actualization of Maslow (Maslow & Holzman, 1970) and the theory about intrinsic motivation elaborated in the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Opposite to this image stands the *system-oriented* organization. Here the accent is on coordination, standardization and formalization. Actions are organized according to plans and schedules and within a hierarchical structure. This image corresponds to the bureaucracy defined by Max Weber (1966), the 'machine bureaucracy' according to Mintzberg (1983) and the 'internal process model' in Quinn's model (1988). The fifth and sixth image are the collectively oriented organization and the professionally oriented organization. In the *collectively* oriented organization sharing ideas and values, social problem solving and team work are taken for granted. This image comes near to the idea of the 'learning organization' (Senge, 1993). The opposite is the *professional* oriented organization that corresponds to Mintzberg's 'professional bureaucracy' (1983). The competences of highly qualified people are the standardizing principles. Such an organization is conceived around a number of professionals specialized in different disciplines. Management and administration are supposed to give support to these professionals but not to control or direct them directly. Professionals expect a lot of autonomy and are concerned mostly about their own objectives. The whole organization and its management are considered excellent as long as they don't disturb the professionals projects and aspirations.

For each of these six images two questions are asked: a) to which degree this organization seems to be attractive to work in for you? b) to which degree does your organization resemble this organization? So this instrument assesses the *culture preference* as well as the *culture perception*. The gap between preference and perception reflects the amount of organizational *change readiness*. The results of such a survey can be summarized in a organizational culture profile that shows the preference, the perception and the readiness for change (Berings, 2001).

Culture profiles: examples



## Organizational culture and performance

Berings (2001) applied this survey to 44 higher educational departments in Flanders. At the same time three TQM criteria were also measured: student satisfaction, employee satisfaction and the degree of TQM implementation. The purpose was to examine the correlation between perception of the six culture images on the one hand and these three TQM criteria on the other hand. The perception of the six culture images explained 44% of the variance in student satisfaction, 73% of the variance in employee satisfaction and 22% of the variance in degree of TQM implementation. The degree of TQM implementation was correlated significantly with the perception of the collectively oriented organisation. Student satisfaction was correlated significantly with the perception of the collectively oriented organization but also with three other culture images: people-oriented, innovation-oriented and system oriented. Employee satisfaction shows the highest correlations with the perception of the people and collective oriented organization.

Table 2. Culture images and TQM-criteria: Pearson-correlations.

	TQM implementation		Student satisfaction		Employee satisfaction	
Collective	.39	*	.60	***	.73	***
People	.23		.46	**	.69	**
Innovation	.22		.46	**	.51	**
System	.13		.49	**	.51	**
Tradition	-.15		.11		.17	
Professional	-.25		-.20		-.11	
R <sup>2</sup>	.22		.44		.73	

Note: \* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

These findings suggest that not only one but several culture images have predictive value towards the degree of TQM implementation and the degree to which TQM objectives (student and employee satisfaction) are realized. This conclusion is in line with the basic assumption of the competing value theory that postulates that organizational performance can be attained by a rather well-equilibrated and broad culture profile (Yeung, Brockbank & Ulrich, 1991). To explore this idea further Berings (2001; 2006) conducted a cluster analysis that revealed four clusters. The most positive results for the three TQM-criteria were found in the cluster labelled 'TQM' and the cluster labeled 'Team'. The TQM-cluster was characterized by high scores on innovation, system and collective, and low scores on tradition-orientation. The Team-cluster was characterized by high scores on collectively and people-orientation, and low scores on professional orientation. Less flattering results concerning the three TQM criteria (implementation degree, satisfaction of students and employees) were found in the two other clusters labelled 'Tradition' (high scores on tradition-, people- and professional orientation and low scores on innovation) and labelled 'indeterminate' (low recognition for all of the six culture images).

The fact that two clusters reveal positive results corresponds to the well-accepted management idea that there doesn't exist one single best way of management. This assumption is also adopted by scholars in the field of quality culture in education (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Kekäle, 1999, 2000). Besides this it is far from certain that the same culture-outcome relations should be found when other performance criteria such as scientific output or study and employment results, are chosen. Further research is needed to explore further the culture-performance relationship in a more comprehensive way based on a larger sample and a broader set of performance criteria.

## **Perspectives**

We can conclude that the six culture images can be useful for reflection on organizational culture in higher education as well as for further research on this issue. Therefore Flanders Bologna Expert Group has started recently a pilot study on quality culture using this theoretical framework and associate instrument discussed above. The twofold objective of this pilot was exploring the possibilities for reflection and research. Fourteen universities and colleges participated in this project. For each of them two sub-organizations were selected for which a quota sample of at least ten employees (lecturers, researchers, administrators and supportive staff members) was made. The participants were asked to fill out an extended version of the six culture image questionnaire. The extension of the questionnaire was prepared by the members of Flanders Bologna Expert Group who formulated for each of the six culture images six extra items. Some supplementary items were adopted from the questionnaires used to measure work values (Berings, De Fruyt & Bouwen, 2004; Berings, 2004b). Those items were selected for which preliminary analysis revealed a substantial correlation with the preference for one of the six culture images. The same logic and procedure was followed to adopt also some items from the employee satisfaction questionnaire used by Berings (2001; Berings, 2004a). Here some items were selected with a significant correlation with the perception of one of the six culture images. This exercise resulted in a questionnaire consisting of 60 items. This item pool has been evaluated by a mixed team of organizational psychology experts and quality management practitioners. The result was a more compact questionnaire consisting of the six holistically formulated culture images adopted from the original instrument (Berings, 2001, 2004b) completed with five new items for each culture image. Preliminary results of the pilot study were presented at the Conference on Quality Culture organized by Flanders Bologna Expert team on the fourth of June 2009. On this meeting the further possibilities for reflection and research were explored and discussed in workshops.

The participants experienced the instrument as a useful tool that can sustain a fruitful reflection and dialogue about the quality policy and approach in colleges and universities. They expressed also the need for a more elaborated method for

the follow up of the results of the survey. Concerning further research the suggestion was made to extend the research program on quality culture. A larger sample, the optimization of the psycho-metric qualities of the instrument and the assessment of a broad set of performance criteria were suggested. The reflection on quality culture would be more fruitful if more evidence can be found about the relationship between aspects of organizational culture en the degree of attainment of educational and other objectives of institutions of higher education. Finally such an endeavour can lead to a more evidence-based assessment of quality culture in the context of quality assurance and accreditation. The prolongment of the above Bologna Quality Culture Project was accepted within the work of the Flemish Bologna experts for the coming two years.

**Questions for discussion:**

- 1) Which educational or organizational outcomes could be considered as crucial criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of different organizational cultures in higher education?
- 2) Is it desirable to include 'quality culture' as a criterion in accreditation procedures?
- 3) How could we enhance the probability that the assessment of 'quality culture' results in a real and desirable organizational culture change?

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