

**Institutional creativity – a challenge for a quality assurance system and its evaluation.
A dialogue between an institution and an agency.**

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An introduction. Creativity is an integral part of the basic mission of universities, and it is the institutional leadership's role to create preconditions for flourishing organisational creativity. For this purpose, rectors and other representatives of administration and planning need relevant information. A good quality assurance (QA) system is of significant help in this. However, some important factors of institutional creativity can be intrinsically and perhaps only partly explicitly present. For instance, it is eventually the academic and administrative staff as well as the students of a higher education institute (HEI) that need to be willing and able to take advantage of the opportunities offered to them to exercise creativity, as stated in the recent European University Association (EUA) publication on quality and creativity (EUA 2009). Can we measure willingness and ability of this kind? Institutional creativity as a whole may be difficult to approach in terms of a QA system that tries to rely on openness, concreteness, accountability and transparency. In this paper, we discuss some challenges encountered when creating a QA system that might be sensitive to factors connected to institutional creativity. Also, the question of the evaluation of a QA system in this respect is referred to.

The above question arises from practical needs that are of immediate relevance both in the HEIs and in a QA agency. This paper is based on a dialogue between a HEI and a QA agency. The QA agency is represented by a Senior Adviser in the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) and the HEI by a Vice Rector/Professor at the Sibelius Academy (Helsinki, Finland).

2. Some criteria in the evaluation work of QA systems steered by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council. A good QA system relates to the university's basic mission. Therefore, it is advisable that a consensus on the basic mission, focal areas, and allocation of resources in the HEI has been reached by mutual negotiation. Equally important is to build the QA system in a manner that affords the staff and students an opportunity to participate in its construction – as also recommended by the new EUA Report (2009), when it underlines the importance of

inclusivity in QA. This helps to integrate relevant attitudes and skills into the QA system. It also ensures that the QA system does not start to create separate and culturally alien social realities and that it supports innovative actions in the best possible way.

A QA system can sometimes adopt an excessively burdensome form. Over-bureaucratisation should be avoided when building a QA system. It should be elastic and flexible. Nowadays, many HEIs in Finland aim at streamlining their QA systems. A QA system is intended not to be an inconvenient burden that adds to the problems, but rather a supportive, developing and integral part of normal work.

What can we say about institutional creativity in this context? Creative potential is a sensitive matter. Of course, one should ask how developmental ideas are introduced into planning processes; and how institutional leaders recognise creative actions within their organisation and whether they take them seriously. And we must not forget that creativity is in many ways a social phenomenon and constructed through social interaction (Burr 1995). It is not possible to obtain creative results in a vacuum. The institution's preparedness to interact with its environment is therefore essential. In a good creativity-supporting assessment model, the relationship with external stakeholders is respected.

External auditing of an institutional QA system in a HEI can be seen as an opportunity to test institutional ideas together with other experts¹. It is a demanding task for the audit group to identify and reveal the strengths of the QA system in a HEI, and, on the other hand, to identify targets for its further development. It is essential that the members of the audit group familiarise themselves with the institution – much as an anthropologist would do. This has also been recently emphasised in the EUA Report (2009) when it recommends context sensitivity in QA processes. This means that the criteria for the evaluation of a QA system need to be constructed so that they take into account various organisational cultures and their historical positions. Thus, a major challenge of an audit group in a HEI is to understand the basic principles of the HEI at all levels of structures, processes, and personnel.

¹ The audit group of a QA system in Finland consists of three representatives from HEIs, one student, and an expert from working life outside HEIs.

A good QA system and a relevant audit culture help to build supportive structures that also provide opportunities for institutional innovativeness. They aim to create a working quality culture where individuals are collectively committed to producing high-quality output.

3. *Some characteristics of institutional creativity.* In business, the value of institutional or organisational creativity is regarded as a success factor. This has led to lists of features that are supposed to be present in companies where a creative culture exists. A literature review by Constantin Andriopoulos (2001) summarises five key factors that affect organisational creativity: (1) *organisational climate*, (2) *leadership style*, (3) *organisational culture*, (4) *resources and skills*, and (5) the *structure and systems* of the organisation. Andriopoulos also offers several subcategories for each category. Wayne Morris (2005), on the other hand, has visited New Zealand organisations and also detected several factors that were regarded as facilitating or enhancing organisational creativity. His findings to some extent overlap with Andriopoulos's subcategories. When combined, these two surveys give us the following list:

(1) Organisational climate	(2) Leadership style	3) Organisational culture	(4) Resources and skills	(5) Structure & Systems
Participation	Participative and creative leadership	Open flow of communication and full information	Time, space and resources to pursue ideas	Long-termism, clear organisational goals
Freedom of expression	Leader's vision	Risk taking	Effective system of communication	Flat structure
Performance standards	Develop effective groups	Self-initiated activity, personal authority to initiate change	Challenging work	Fair, supportive evaluation of employees
Interaction with small barriers	Staff motivation	Participative safety	Staff competence, individual empowerment	Rewarding creative performance
Large number of stimuli		Trust and respect for the individual		Supportive organisational structure
Experimental freedom				
Building on earlier ideas				

Creativity and innovation have been identified as key factors not only in business but also more generally in knowledge creation and social and economic development, as pointed out by EUA President Jean-Marc Rapp in the new EUA Report (2009). The EUA Creativity Project Report (2007) gives seven recommendations concerning institutional creativity in HEIs.

Briefly stated, according to the report, the following findings are important for a creative organisation:

1. *Creative mix of individual talents and experiences* among students and staff; structured exchanges between the arts and other disciplines.
2. *Outreach activities and cooperation with external partners.*
3. *Active fostering of the public mission of the institution* in terms of teaching and learning, research or service to society.
4. *Proactivity*: going beyond established knowledge and identifying issues of future relevance. *Internal quality processes that are geared towards the future and avoid over-bureaucratisation.*
5. Exploring *the concept of a learning organisation* for its management and governance structures, complemented with *ethical and cultural concerns.*
6. Institutional structures and cultures *balancing stability with flexibility.* *Safeguards* necessary to encourage risk taking. Students and staff prepared to address *uncertainty.*
7. The institutional *leadership delegating* specific decisions to staff and students in order to ensure a *wide ownership of change processes* within the university community.

Without going further, these categorisations already provide ample possibilities for favourite lists of institutional creativity factors in HEIs. It is also possible to detect some meta-issues in the above discussion. For instance, one can pick up *free internal and external flow of information* that stimulates *organisational learning* at all levels. Feelings of *safety, support, fair feedback and mutual trust* in the organisation are also important. They foster freedom and initiative, increase motivation and the flow of information and encourage experimentation. As the third issue we could mention *the ability to see clear and challenging organisational goals in the future* so that the attainment of these objectives optimally serves the *basic public mission.* The fourth meta-issue seems to be *relevant resources* (such as time, money, and competent staff). Of course, high performance standards could be mentioned, as well. However, our feeling is that too much concern over this aspect can in some cases be more an obstacle to than supportive of institutional (and individual) creativity.

4. *How to evaluate creativity factors?* The next question should be: is it possible to have reliable assessment tools for the selected factors? Can we measure, interpret qualitatively, or otherwise retrieve reliable information about the state of those factors in a university? And is it possible to mediate the results in a concise manner without distorting the reality? If we take

a scientific stand – that is, if we try to create information that is extensive and as correct and true as possible – it seems that we should have a variety of methods to investigate and describe the creativity factors. And in the end, it may be impossible to find realisable and reasonable methods for all the factors. In any case, it is of immense importance that the institutional leadership does not lose sight of those factors that really are essential and vital to institutional creativity and that it does not concentrate only on measurable features.

If the evaluation of the four meta-issues in a HEI is taken into account, it is possible to give some short and concrete answers. First, the internal and external flow of information. It may be possible to carry out an evaluation of the existence of unnecessary borders or of the existence of easily permeable borders between different substance areas (such as different departments, disciplines, and fields). Also, the presence and absence of connections with external reference groups can be demonstrated at least to some degree. The second meta-issue, i.e. organisational mentality, is a more challenging matter, but a variety of methods are present. For instance, focused work contentment surveys can be arranged. Also, open discussions between directors and employees can give information. The third meta-issue concerning clear and challenging organisational goals is under scrutiny, for instance, when the institution's mission, vision, and strategy are under re-evaluation and reconstruction. The fourth meta-issue can be regarded in the light of numbers and in relation to the third meta-issue.

When an audit group evaluates the QA system of a HEI, not only written material and numbers but also extensive interviews of the staff and students are needed. In this case, open communication, rewards for creative performance, and supportive evaluation of employees, among others, can be considered. In this way it is possible to obtain information about the strengths and weaknesses of the QA system as a supporter of the innovative organisational culture. In other words, one central issue in the auditing of a QA system concerns how the HEI succeeds in its self-evaluation of measures taken to support institutional creativity.

5. Potential creativity as a relational phenomenon. As already mentioned, creativity is connected to a social environment. Thus, the question of whether something is or is not to be regarded as creative is relative to the context. For instance, the creativeness of a researcher's single act is to be estimated as a part of a more general action plan – say on the level of the

research project – which again is connected to still more general social activities and pursuits – such as the academic discipline in question, or the basic mission of the university, or even the most general social and environmental aims (see Hasse 2001). The leaders' creative potential and flexibility may have a crucial impact here. It is essential that the director allocating material and mental resources is capable of seeing relevant contexts in order to be able to understand the creative potential in the university's academic configurations, plans and actions. And, additionally, an excellent and creative director can suggest new and relevant contexts for existing mental potential and by these means stimulate creativity which otherwise would remain dormant.

In other words, there may be some potential in an organisational unit that is about to be transformed to incorporate organisational learning and creative processes and results – but not without help. What is needed is a directorate and peers who can provide relevant impulses and support in a manner that helps the unit to benefit from its inherent potential (“zones of proximal development”; Vygotsky and Cole 1978). However, first we must be aware of the existence of the potential. Again, there is the question concerning a QA system. How could the attitudes and skills needed for this be assessed as a part of a QA system? Could a QA system evaluate the directorate's ability to detect organisational potentials and its readiness to help units to develop? Or could a QA system even go so far as to point out relevant but hidden potentials?

In this context, we think that a QA system that gives information about the state of the above-mentioned four meta-issues is important. After all, information of this kind tells the institutional leaders how they have succeeded in creating a facilitating environment for academic work. Also, it is certainly beneficial if the leaders are to some extent acquainted with the substance of the work that they are supposed to support. Consequently, the audit group may pay attention to how the institutional leadership evaluates its own work as an initiator and supporter of institutional creativity by SWOTs or otherwise.

6. On potential drawbacks of an audit culture. Finally, we must consider the possibility that a QA system can even be detrimental for institutional creativity. Iain MacRury (2007) says that at a time when “creativity” is “policy” the measures put in place to foster creativity and its correlates – thinking, imagination, developmental learning and criticality – seem to produce

an environment where such aspiration is not realised. He has described institutional creativity as a silently active containing space (Ogden 1986). We can imagine intra-psychic as well as social spaces where creative processes occur in a dialogical movement between activity and passivity, effort and no-effort, giving and asking. MacRury worries that the contemporary audit culture risks extracting the time and space of this oscillation. He also refers to Power (1997) and argues that there is a danger in an audit culture to fetishise the process *indicators* at the expense of proper apprehension of the *process itself*. A collapse of symbol and symbolised occurs if academic practices are reduced to, say, ' - - student support *figures*, satisfaction *data*, research assessment strategy *documents and meetings* - - ', and so on.

We think that those responsible for the enhancement of institutional creativity in a university must take seriously this rather gloomy criticism. There is a dynamic opposition inherent in this situation. There is an honest inclination to improve the conditions of the university in order to support its creative potential. For this purpose, it is necessary to obtain information about the current situation in order to be able to take the measures needed. For this we need good QA systems. But if we are not careful, they can also be detrimental, for instance, to the essential intra-psychic and social dialogical rhythms. Therefore institutional creativity is a special challenge for QA systems and those auditing them.

To sum up, we have asked, how should the QA system be designed in order to be relevant in promoting conditions for institutional creativity? This leads to the following questions, among others:

- 1) Can we identify the true sources of creativity in a HEI?
- 2) How could we be proactively conscious of the individual, organisational, and social configurations that are the true potential of institutional creativity?
- 3) Is it possible to create a QA system that takes full cognisance of and does not cause harm to the individual, organisational and social dynamics that are essential in creative work?
- 4) What is an appropriate QA methodology for assessing the relevant creativity factors in a HEI?
- 5) Taking all the above into account, we must still ask: how does one design a QA system without producing over-bureaucratisation and cumbersome procedures?

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An abstract

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Institutional creativity – a challenge for a quality assurance system.

A dialogue between an institution and an agency.

In this discussion group we ask how should the QA system in a higher education institution be designed in order to be relevant in promoting conditions for a creative organisation. This leads to further questions. Can we identify the true sources of creativity in a HEI? For instance, how could we be proactively conscious of the individual, organisational, and social configurations that are the true potential of institutional creativity? Can we list the relevant creativity factors? If so, what is an appropriate QA methodology for assessing such factors in a HEI? Is there a danger of a QA system disturbing creative processes? Taking all the above into account, we must still ask: how can we design a QA system without producing over-bureaucratisation and cumbersome procedures?

These questions arise from practical needs. A dialogue between an agency and an institution is realised by a Senior Adviser in the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) and a Professor/Vice-Rector at the Sibelius Academy (Helsinki, Finland).

Both authors will participate in the presentation.

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