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Shifting perceptions and channelling commitment in higher education communities: How to grow a Quality Culture outside the lab

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Abstract: Drawing on the data collected via a European funded project with eleven higher education partners, the article proposes a five-stage working model which can be adopted in and adapted to different institutional contexts so as to shift perceptions, strengthen engagement and channel commitment with a view to developing the desired quality culture.

The project explored ways in which quality in higher education was viewed and practised by three main stakeholder groups: students, academics and quality managers, referred to as three ‘quality circles’. It adopted a reflective approach to issues of quality based on grassroots discussion and cooperation between key, but in

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some cases disengaged, stakeholders in the quality process. The project designed, tried and tested a series of activities which demonstrated lasting impact. The analysis of the project data revealed a patterning, which, if organised sequentially, carries the potential to crystallise into an action model which may be replicated by individual higher education institutions in support of advancing towards the quality culture they might be striving for. This article highlights the building blocks of the model and explains practices which can underpin their successful implementation.

Keywords: quality assurance and enhancement; higher education quality culture; approaches to quality in higher education; empowerment and ownership in higher education; practical insights towards achieving quality cultures; quality actions and actors.

I. Introduction

There have been continued calls for higher education institutions to create and nurture a *Quality Culture* since they were first voiced in the mid-90s (Harvey and Knight 1996, Yorke 2000, Vettori et al. 2007, EUA 2009, Ehlers 2010, Harvey and Williams 2010, Bendermacher et al. 2017, Gover and Loukkola 2018, Verschueren et al. 2023). The discourse has moved a long way since then, when quality assurance was perceived as systemised, standardised, formalised structures and processes which served a purpose of compliance foremost (i.e. quality as accountability). Currently, the quality discourse focuses more on promoting an inclusive institutional environment (Njiro 2016, 79; Tutko 2018, 191; Greere 2023, 166), where autonomy, creativity, innovation and initiative are celebrated in the pursuit of excellence (i.e. quality as enhancement). For this to happen, all stakeholders need to feel a sense of identity which can be manifested individually and collectively, a sense of appreciation and recognition of their ideas, values, skills, expertise etc., and a sense of belonging to a dynamic community of practice, in the broadest sense.

In spite of this apparent consensus as to the need for a quality culture and broad agreement on what the essential contributing components are (e.g. Harvey and Stensaker 2008, EUA 2009, Ehlers 2009, Loukkola and Zhang 2010, 9-11), Bendermacher et al. (2017, 53) found that they could only address “theory development on quality culture” rather than “what intervention practices work for whom in what circumstances”, therefore explicitly calling for “research into daily experiences of staff and students in quality management as well as exploring practical suggestions to nurture a quality culture”. As a follow-up, the same Bendermacher et al. (2019) provide empirical evidence of the interplay of the various “value orientations” and identify which are fundamental in advancing a quality culture, but still

without providing any “practical suggestions” as such. Alternative studies propose models and frameworks for measuring quality (Tam 2001; Verschueren et al. 2023) or which focus on the more interpersonal dimensions of a quality culture (Njiro 2016, Sattler and Sonntag 2018, Verschueren et al. 2023), while others, still, “investigate [...] ways of understanding quality culture” and “how [...] [u]niversities frame quality culture” (Nygren-Landgärds et al. 2024), but without focusing on concrete examples or practical guidance from and for institutions intent on promoting and further developing a Quality Culture appropriate to their context.

The current study aims to offer a contribution towards responding to this gap in the scholarship; first by analysing ways in which participants in higher education perceive the components of a quality culture in their various contexts, and then by outlining various types of actions that may be taken to reinforce or, where necessary, to change these perceptions, and thus foster a quality culture. While we accept that “[c]ultural change in an organization is undoubtedly a difficult process and requires specific and long term efforts” (Ehlers 2009, 359), our study shows how even in a relatively short time span, raising awareness, engaging and subsequently empowering all stakeholders will engender ownership of the very quality culture they become committed to. This step-by-step approach will overall intensify the sense of community and advance the quality culture agenda at institutional level.

II. Context: Appeals for quality culture

The first Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) recommended that “institutions should commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality and quality assurance in their work” (ENQA 2009, 7, re-emphasised in ESG 2015). In their summary paper “Fifteen Years of Quality in Higher Education” Harvey and Williams (2010, 4) found that quality was yet “...to become a fundamental part of what is done in the sector” and that “[a] genuine culture of quality is necessary”, with evident “tension [still existing] between quality as ritual and quality as it is owned by its stakeholders”.

Loukkola and Zhang (2010, 9-11) considered it of crucial importance “to distinguish quality culture from quality assurance processes”. They noted that quality assurance systems were largely in place in most higher education institutions around Europe, with institutional leadership understanding their crucial role in demonstrating commitment to quality. However, they found that “participation of all stakeholders in the implementation of quality

assurance processes and striving for a stronger quality culture appears to be essential, but still demands attention”. Similarly, Vettori (2012, 1) acknowledged the “increasing popularity of the term ‘quality culture’ over discourse focusing on ‘quality assurance’”, which he found had still not been embraced by everyone, with “[a]cademics in particular [being] reluctant to engage with management schemes and procedures which they [perceived] overly bureaucratic and demotivating”, (also confirmed by other studies: Greere and Riley 2014, Seyfried and Reith 2019, more recently in Nygren-Landgärds et al. 2024). Indeed, much of the discourse in the literature of the ‘first 10-12 years’ of quality assurance in what was to become the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) spurred the E4¹ to revise the ESG, not only to make them more streamlined but also to instigate a shift in the approach to quality, with the potential to correct the ‘misalignment of quality assurance, institutional quality frameworks and quality culture’ outlined by Harvey in a paper of the same name (Harvey 2010 cited in Nygren-Landgärds et al. 2024, 17). Indeed, the ESG 2015 identify the development of a Quality Culture as one of the four principles or pillars upon which the Standards and Guidelines are based (ESG 2015, 6) and reference “...[a] quality culture in which all internal stakeholders assume responsibility for quality and engage in quality assurance at all levels of the institution” (ESG 2015, 11) and to which both quality assurance and quality enhancement have the potential to bring an intertwined contribution.

Undoubtedly, as per Loukkola and Zhang (2010), the quality assurance agenda intended as accountability did bear fruit, with higher education institutions across Europe able to report progress in so far as formal systems and processes were, more or less, successfully introduced. Nonetheless, quality is still widely felt to be management driven and it is yet to be perceived as having more inclusive, community value.

It continues to be widely acknowledged that “the quality culture concept does not provide a common goal for every institution” (Vettori 2012, 3), hence it “is not universal but rather unique to each higher education institution and determined by institutional drivers, national directions and international commitments” (Greere 2023, 188). Each institutional community may perceive or relate differently to the concept of a quality culture and what it entails.

What is more, if we take quality in its broadest meaning, to include all stakeholders involved in both formal processes and on the ground actions,

¹ The E4 Group is formed of: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), European Students Union (ESU), European University Association (EUA) and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE).

different actors may focus on diverse aspects or facets of quality in their day-to-day practices in this evolving quality culture. How quality is perceived at the formal institutional level and by the individual actors is also affected by the national and local cultural context and the value system already existing in the institution (Greere 2023, Nygren-Landgärds et al. 2024).

The EUA (2006) Quality Culture project proposes a definition which highlights the relative and context-sensitive nature of this complex concept. Quality culture is seen to be characterised “by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality, and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts” which “are not to be considered separately” (EUA 2006, 10). Although predicated on the idea that “grassroots initiatives in higher education are often more effective than top-down directives” and that “[t]he sense of ownership and engagement that develops through grassroots involvement is critical to success in higher education” (EUA 2006, 4), the report utilises a discourse which highlights the structural/managerial element over the cultural/psychological. It follows that a quality culture can be “introduced” or “implemented” like any other project, process or initiative (see also discussion in Greere 2023, 174), that it is synonymous with the existence of internal quality management processes, and the reader is presented with concrete recommendations and case studies which are effectively linked to the development of the structural/formal element. However, the report lacks case studies and explicit guidance on how the cultural and psychological (we would add social, cfr Eggins 2014) elements can be addressed and supported with specific actions.

Loukkola and Zhang (2010, 11-12), adopting the EUA’s definition, recognise that it is precisely because the quality culture is rooted in shared values, beliefs and expectations, along with a shared commitment towards achieving common goals, which makes it a difficult concept to deal with. Fostering a quality culture requires appropriate investment in time and effort and acknowledgement of the fact that a priority and prerequisite for success is “to combine the top-down leadership and managerial approach with the bottom-up approach, while creating favourable learning environments for academic staff and students to be actively involved [...] via their own initiatives and responsibilities” (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010, 23, see also Verschueren et al. 2023, 11-12).

In the on-going debate about how to promote, nurture, develop and drive a quality culture in higher education, various factors, other than financial restraints and time constraints, have been put forward in the literature as being

of utmost importance. However, some seem to stand out more prominently than others. Surssock (2011, 56) refers to the need for the institutional culture to stress democracy and debate and to value the voice of students and staff equally. Loukkola and Zhang (2010, 23) highlight the need for participants and stakeholders in higher education to see the value in the commonly shared goals in order to avoid a “potential reluctance from the institution’s community itself”. Respondents in the Examining Quality Culture project indicated “the only way to achieve a functional quality culture is by convincing the members of the higher education institution that they have something to gain by analysing the qualitative processes of their day-to-day work” and they reiterate that the biggest challenge for quality culture is, indeed, to combine a top-down approach with a bottom-up approach (also highlighted more recently by Nygren-Landgärds et al. (2024, 52). Bendermacher et al. (2017, 45) emphasise that for all the elements of a quality culture to develop both leadership and communication are fundamental. Indeed, “[quality culture] is created through information and dissemination; [...] maintaining open communication and an atmosphere of dialogue are [...] central tools for achieving this” (Nygren-Landgärds et al. 2024, 52).

The 2006 EUA definition (as above) is, in our view, effective in so far as it pinpoints the two fundamental components of a quality culture. In fact, the quality culture debate has encompassed this dual framework in the theoretical principles proposed, much of the literature emphasising the need for interaction between these two components. However, the way institutions go about addressing both components, simultaneously in a proportionate/balanced approach, has not been thoroughly investigated, and few studies or projects have proposed case studies, recommendations or models.

A high proportion of the literature to date tends to be dominated by the more manageable, quantitative (and possibly measurable) formal processes which set in the foreground policies and procedures. There are few qualitative studies demonstrating practices, initiatives, approaches and methods which effectively nurture a quality culture in higher education. Even where tools and models are offered, these attempt to identify, frame or measure quality culture rather than provide concrete suggestions on how to take initiative, embed outcomes and expand action, with impact for the wider community.

Hildesheim and Sonntag’s Quality Culture Inventory (2019), which sprang from Sattler and Sonntag’s model (2018, 317), depicts the elements and actors which contribute to a quality culture, and indicates the way they interconnect, but offers no indication how to foster development. This Quality Culture Inventory “represents a sound, economic tool with which to describe the current state of quality culture within institutions of higher

education [so as to] lay the foundation for discussions about strengths, weaknesses, and potential measures for improving quality” (Sattler and Sonntag 2018, 324). Bendermacher et al.’s path analysis model (2017, 646) provides an in-depth investigation of the interplay between four “organisational value orientations” and outlines core components of quality culture which may result in quality enhancement practices, with evidence of the ‘human relation’ value orientation as an important contributor (also considered in Cheng 2017). Verschueren et al. (2023, 1) present a ‘concept model’ which “incorporates both the structural/managerial elements of the educational context as well as individual and interpersonal dynamics”, its purpose being to “provide an interactive instrument to map, discuss and advance the existing quality cultures.” Currently, the ongoing project is concerned only with “monitoring the quality culture” through qualitative pre-structured interviews, which aim to identify individual quality profiles. The “advancement” they mention comes from the fact that the interview “enhances awareness and ownership in working towards educational quality, marking a key moment for enhancing quality literacy throughout the university” (Verschueren et al. 2023, 22). Nygren-Landgårds et al. (2024), through qualitative content analysis of institutional documents, investigate how quality culture is perceived, formally defined and embedded in eleven Nordic institutions and how this affects the “views on the responsibilities and leadership required for [quality culture] and differing views on the systems, structures and control of [quality culture]”. Yet again the model provides more of a snapshot of the situation, rather than a tool to promote quality culture. Van Hung (2021) develops a model based on an “integrated approach” encompassing four different approaches he identifies in the literature. However, all the actions suggested are top-down with the final proposal being “to develop a framework and criteria for assessment of [Quality Culture] that can fully reflect all elements that form the [Quality Culture]” (Van Hung 2021, 9).

III. Scope and methodology

The current study proposes for consideration a five-stage model which can be adopted in and adapted to different institutional contexts to strengthen engagement and nurture commitment towards the desired quality culture, with its context-appropriate characteristics.

The study draws on data collected under the SPEAQ project, analysed qualitatively and followed longitudinally to observe how well-targeted action can determine lasting quality outcomes.

The European funded project SPEAQ “Sharing Practice in Enhancing and Assuring Quality”² proposed a partnership of nine European universities, together with the European Students Union (ESU) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the United Kingdom (QAA), committed to developing tools effective for sharing and enhancing quality practices in higher education. To this aim, the project explored the ways in which quality in higher education is viewed and practised by three main stakeholder groups: students, academics and quality managers, referred to as three ‘quality circles’. The project adopted a reflective approach to issues of quality based on grassroots discussion and cooperation between key, but in some cases disengaged, stakeholders in the quality process and was found, by the project evaluator, to have designed, tried and tested concrete activities which support the overall aim of the European Higher Education Area and individual institutions of achieving a quality culture in higher education (SPEAQ website).

The methodology was aligned with ethical requirements for research conducted under European-funded projects and did not require individual approvals at national or institutional levels, other than for the participation in the project. Data was attributed by country and stakeholder group, as relevant, never individualised and fully anonymised. The qualitative analysis focused on evaluating the impact of actions proposed to improve the ways in which quality processes are implemented and experienced within higher education institutions and to facilitate connections and dialogue between the three quality circles.

At the time of the project, multiple stages of data collection were applied across all three stakeholder groups: (1) via a workshop which promoted shared understanding of quality aspects and initiated the dialogues across all three stakeholder groups, (2) via semi-structured interviews and focus groups which moved the discourse towards individual reflection about the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders, thus gauging more interest from a wider participant pool for subsequent stages of the project, and (3) via micro-project implementation and feedback which allowed the opportunity for design and development of actions which could contribute positively to the stakeholder experience, either by resolving an existing problematic situation or improving an area of sound practice or scaling a feature of good practice towards other institutional contexts. Feedback surveys accompanied all stages to ensure close monitoring and inter-partner adjustments, as necessary.

² <https://speaqproject.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/speaq-flyer.pdf> and <https://speaqproject.wordpress.com/resources/>

In acknowledgement of the fact that the discourse of quality and quality assurance is frequently perceived as impenetrable and overburdening, it was the scope of SPEAQ to facilitate communication by making use of language which could be easily recognisable and would successfully stimulate understanding and dialogue. Consequently, the tools designed all used straight-forward, non-technical questions, which were directly geared on individual experiences, encouraging inward-facing reflection, or would easily relate to experiences close to the individual; hence, answers became readily available.

The workshop took a progressive approach to highlighting quality assurance realities, initially presenting participants with a task to associate quality statements to every-day products or services, which were subsequently transformed into higher education comparisons. The aim was to keep participants within their comfort zones so as to instil confidence in their capacity to offer a personal contribution and encourage their desire/curiosity to become involved in future stages, even when they had not previously felt a pull towards quality assurance process or, worst, expressed overt reluctance towards these.

During the focus groups and interviews, the following open questions were used: “What do you think is good about your course/programme/institution?”, “What was the most rewarding experience for you in the past year?”, “Is the experience worth sharing/replicating?”, “What would you like to improve and how would you do it?”. Such questions promoted the opportunity for reflection on an individual level, about individual experiences, with direct self-implications, highlighting quality as a very personal matter, with tangible singular consequences, before it is perceived as systemic. It allowed not only for opinions to be voiced but, more importantly, initiatives to be proposed, i.e. such initiatives which participants felt sufficiently strongly about to want to engage with or even lead on.

SPEAQ identified ten main areas where intervention was desirable, with various degrees of priority in the specific institutional settings (see SPEAQ website, for details, and Greere and Riley 2014, 40, for a discussion). These areas were then translated into specific micro-projects, which allowed the stakeholders who had highlighted a development need to design and implement the micro-project in ways which they believed could render beneficial outcomes. Giving participants free reign meant the onus was on them to shape and deliver quality, to make judgement calls about what could constitute positive experiences into the future, to experiment with quality processes in the contained and safe environment of the SPEAQ methodology and to finally derive feedback and consider lessons learned before institutional proposals could be formulated, if applicable.

The different institutional micro-projects proposed neatly followed the student journey through higher education, demonstrating a student-centeredness which anticipated one of the pillars of the ESG2015. These micro-projects took account of students' needs throughout their academic experience starting from when they are prospective students, through induction and services, to curriculum design, approaches to teaching, learning and assessment and not least feedback, and finally, employability. The underlying principles for all these actions were related to more focused discussion and increased motivation for all stakeholders. These were seen as essential building blocks in moving towards a shared quality culture. With this in mind, each partner institution, in developing their micro-project, would engage the various stakeholders in moving towards a shared quality culture responsive to contextual specificity.

The methodology adopted was piloted over a two-year period and produced positive outcomes in all nine partner institutions. It emerged that whether from institutional contexts operating in a stable, long-standing quality assurance environment or from those in settings where both internal and external quality assurance systems were still developing, participants equally appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their own understanding of quality, to contribute insight on their individual and collective roles, and to shape actions which, in their perception, foster a quality culture. A follow-up study, conducted two years on, provides data on whether the impact was a) momentary or more enduring and b) localised or on the broader institutional context and even beyond.

In what follows we propose to closely examine the data collected during the SPEAQ project and analyse the feedback from the follow-up study in order to detail those actions and initiatives which were found to contribute to a clearer understanding of and engagement with the concept of a quality culture in higher education. In particular, we aim to identify practices which more directly and effectively enhance its community value and which actively involve all members of that community, and to transform findings into a workable model which can offer concrete recommendations for practice.

IV. Findings: Perceptions of quality culture and how these may shift

Previous studies (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010; Vettori, 2012) demonstrated that quality assurance practices are largely implemented across European higher education, that quality assurance is best viewed as a building block of the quality culture concept. However, other building blocks are needed to

construct a solid foundation upon which to build a quality culture which academic communities can recognise and relate to.

Of paramount importance are participatory, inclusive processes where all stakeholders are viewed as actors in the quality cycle, and where there is a natural multi-way flow of opinions, proposals, feedback, i.e. bottom-up, top-down, peer-to-peer, and across stakeholder groups. Indeed, as mentioned above, there has long been widespread agreement that bottom-up initiatives and top-down frameworks and requirements need to converge and that an institutional culture is to be valued as a quality culture when it is in resonance with the expectations of all the members of the higher education environment (as also discussed in Greere and Riley 2014, Njiro 2016 and Greere 2023).

In mapping out initial perceptions about quality assurance and quality in SPEAQ partner institutions, we frequently found converging, symptomatic opinions expressed by quality managers, teaching staff, administrative staff and students (and these would align with findings in other academic studies, e.g. Newton 2002, Blanco Ramirez 2013, Udam and Heidmets 2013, Cardoso et al. 2018 and Seyfried and Pohlenz 2018).

Stakeholders participated in workshops, focus groups and interviews to express their views on how they perceived quality in their institution, how they related to practices targeted on quality and how they viewed their roles and level of potential involvement in supporting quality in their own institutions. For students, quality was primarily associated with the reputation of their teachers and the activities that these proposed in the classroom which may contribute to competence development and increased employability. Teachers connected quality to the student-teacher ratio in class and to opportunities for staff development. Quality managers related to quality by consideration of the overall educational environment and in comparison to other competitor institutions.

While each stakeholder group had predominantly different perceptions of quality, there were some commonalities between the groups. Largely, participants considered that *“it may well be that the structures and procedures for ensuring quality are in place, and respond well to especially external demands, but that sometimes there was a tendency to neglect what really counts”* [Denmark]. Unanimously, across all stakeholder groups, *“what really counts”* was related to the capacity of the institution and its actors to have individualised, more personalised higher education experiences, e.g. *“[g]etting to know the students as individuals rather than as numbers makes the learning process more fulfilling”* [Portugal].

All stakeholder groups acknowledged that *“[i]n general, the channels for everybody’s voice exist, but much depends on management and leadership*

whether these voices are actually heard” [Finland] and at what levels [Spain]. With some exceptions [Hungary, Portugal, Italy, Romania], most “... *agreed upon the idea of being listened to, [however] how their opinion was reacted upon was a different issue*” [Spain, Portugal, Denmark]. Often (re)actions were felt to occur only in response to critical (frequently negative) situations, rather than as part of a systematic, institutionalised approach, and this, in effect, made stakeholders question the relevance and value of their involvement and their own role in contributing to quality in their own institutions. As a consequence, beyond the formal processes for feedback and complaints (where they exist), roles and responsibilities regarding quality were felt to be quite fuzzy [Austria], with externality being the most common perception: “*participants understand quality as being somehow external to themselves (i.e. as being the responsibility of someone else in another stakeholder group) rather than a personal responsibility or individual practice*” [Portugal (and also in Spain)]. Inadequacies and failings were attributed to the system and there was little awareness or consideration of their own role in the process and what their own contribution could be to generating quality and remedying weaknesses. “*Students seemed to think it was down to the teachers*” [UK (also in Portugal)], while teachers felt that quality is down to motivated students [Finland, Portugal]. Where participants recognised that “*all higher education actors have responsibilities for all quality assurance aspects and that it took a collective effort to maintain and enhance quality*”, agreement was reached that “*some aspects were the main responsibility of a particular category of actors and should be clearly attributed accordingly*” [Romania].

Frequently statements invoked over bureaucratisation, quality assurance fatigue and time restrictions as reasons to justify reduced participation and lack of action: “*most teachers, administrative staff and students have no time and energy left to deal with quality professionally and on a daily basis*” [Hungary]; “*the majority of students seem more interested in moaning about their problems rather than taking action*” [UK]; for the “*ordinary teacher*” engaging in “*such work*”, i.e. quality assurance work, the time invested is frequently their own, rather than part of their workload [Denmark]. However, participants were keen to emphasise that quality “*should not become a ritualised process from the top but it should work from within each activity*” [Spain], even in such cultural contexts where actors are commonly driven by external requirements rather than internal goals and expectations [Italy, Romania].

Despite participants not having shown particularly eager to engage with the quality assurance processes for which they acknowledged a top-down direction, they did express great interest in contributing to the development

of the quality culture in their institution, and more specifically in their faculties or departments, predominantly in areas directly impacting their daily experiences. It was highlighted that the optimal solution was to organise more opportunities to discuss quality issues at different levels, “*involving the different higher education stakeholders, in order to improve dialogue within the institution*” [Portugal].

Overall, while quality was believed to be present in all institutions, it was viewed as being dispersed and insufficiently focused. Consistently, it was felt that “*the results of the quality assurance system should be used for quality enhancement and to contribute to the ‘institutionalisation’ of a quality culture otherwise it would continue to be perceived as a mere bureaucratic burden*” [Portugal].

On the basis of the activities/initiatives implemented and the data collected, the aim of the current study is to observe any change in the perceptions of the participants regarding quality and the quality culture in their institution or department and in their inclination to engage in and take ownership of quality related processes, as a result of their engagement and contribution to the SPEAQ experience.

It is not in the scope of this article to outline the individual partner micro-projects (see the project website for details and Greere and Riley 2014 for a discussion) or indeed the tangible/intangible outcomes of the micro-projects but rather, from collected SPEAQ data and feedback, to identify the common approaches, perceptions and practices which contributed to the emergence or fostered the development of what we intend as a quality culture. While the official SPEAQ reports provide invaluable data on outcomes and impact (speaqproject.wordpress.com/resources/) it is the feedback collected from participants thanks to interviews, questionnaires and informal (documented) communications which permit us to gain an insight into (changing) perceptions of and feelings towards the institutional quality culture. To this end, the selections below include numerous self-explanatory comments which together paint a picture of the quality culture evolving in the nine project partner institutions and the impact these bottom-up initiatives had, and continue to have, both in the narrow context of the project and the broader institutional context.

IV.1. Promoting dialogue about quality - Making space for and taking time to talk

Without doubt, giving space to bring people together to discuss quality and reflect on quality processes -whether formal or informal, assurance and

enhancement- was the most widely appreciated aspect of the SPEAQ project: *“the fact that all stakeholders (i.e. students, professors, [administrative] staff got together to discuss, evaluate, and propose eventual changes”* [Italy]; *“discussions were invaluable to share practices”* [Finland]; *“I understand how the system works much better and realise that I am not on my own or the only one who feels frustrated or angry at times. I don’t feel as isolated in relation to my concerns”* [Portugal]. What also emerged is that when stakeholders engaged in discussions regarding quality, whether with peers or among the different groups, if they adopted the same language (or as one partner put it were *SPEAQing*) then understanding, not least of other stakeholders’ viewpoints, was greatly enhanced: *“I learnt that quality can be ‘translated’ into everyday language”* [Hungary]. Thus, ensuring quality is discussed in terms which are both understandable by and relevant to all stakeholders engenders greater engagement, first of all in the dialogue, and subsequently in processes. Why ask students to become involved in ‘operationalising quality’ [a language which is so technical] when, in fact, all we are asking them is to discuss and contribute to developing good practice?

In some contexts there was genuine surprise among all stakeholder groups at being asked to discuss quality issues, to reflect on practices and to engage with other actors: *“students [...] were quite amazed that there could be something like quality culture out there and they could actually make a contribution”*; *“but I do quality every day, I don’t need to talk about it”* [teacher]. Evidently, at least in these institutions, there had been no explicit attempt at promoting an inclusive, dialogue/interaction-based approach to quality: *“there are attempts to involve teachers and students, but there is no regular dialogue”* [Hungary]. It was decided that what made dialogue valuable was that *“quality assurance managers found themselves embracing opinions of staff and students in an inclusive rather than exclusive approach”*.

Even in those contexts where quality processes and practices have a long-standing, proven history, participants, commented on how useful it had been to share and compare experiences and practices with peers and exchange views with other stakeholder groups: *“being reminded of the importance of integrating [different stakeholder groups] continually is important and has added value to internal discussions”* [Denmark]; *“more opportunities for sharing and discussing together with different actors is needed so that the whole becomes more synergetic and less fragmented and that all actor groups see their place and responsibility in quality enhancement”* [Finland]; *“there is almost no communication between the centre and ordinary academics, and this needs remedying”* [UK].

Indeed, compared with more traditional quality assurance processes which in many contexts were experiencing “*fatigue*” symptoms, in some cases with “*a perverse impact on quality in the classroom*”, the more informal approach to promoting dialogue and exchange, whether in seminars, workshops, focus groups, online forums or in classroom discussions, was seen to foster engagement and could result in constructive, often creative, suggestions: “*one positive aspect was the way students were open and creative in their approach to the issues and prepared to dedicate their time and effort*” [Italy]. In fact, rather than troubleshooting sessions or a dialogue focusing only on negative issues to be addressed, these different moments of collective reflection also sought to identify existing strengths which would provide a solid basis for further development, or rather highlight quality practices already in place and strive to improve them, with the potential of generating lasting impact: “*analysing the positive aspects of [...] those identified positive by current students, stressing these positive aspects will allow to strengthen them in the medium/long term*” [Italy, student].

The SPEAQ activities highlighted that reflection and communication are key to raising awareness, understanding who is responsible for quality and what role actors may take, with cross-stakeholder dialogue being perceived as an added value.

IV.2. Raising awareness to quality issues and roles – Allowing for better understanding

The greatly appreciated opportunities to discuss issues and to share and compare practices not only served the purpose of making sure all actors’ voices were heard, but also to increase awareness of the pervasive, all-encompassing nature of quality. Participants came to be more fully aware of how quality affects all actors in myriad ways, and importantly, in the every-day practices of academic life. At times, this only exacerbated frustrations with external practices which prevented a focus on every day quality: “*very often objective rules established from above are not always commensurate with daily activities and aspirations of students*” [Italy].

Discussions even resulted in some participants becoming aware of what quality assurance mechanisms were actually present in their institution: “*I came to the conclusion that the institution is far more concerned about ensuring quality than I had initially thought*” [Portugal] or even of the existence of a quality assurance manager, hitherto unknown [United Kingdom]. The activity of implementing micro-projects, also contributed to raising awareness on various levels even further: “*[we] set up a forum for the discussion of quality*

issues, [...] thus promoting dialogue between representatives of the three quality circles” [Portugal] to raise awareness as to their responsibilities and, consequently, “improve their sense of empowerment” [Portugal].

IV.3. Engaging in quality - Turning talk into action

The first year workshops, focus groups and interviews were an important step in engaging actors in discussing quality and sharing and comparing practices. All actors were co-decision makers in identifying which actions should be subsequently undertaken in the micro-projects. In some contexts this inclusive approach was a novelty: “*student proposals were not only heard, but moreover, acted upon in an effective manner*” [Italy]. While in other contexts reticence to engage in joint actions was still evident, in particular where hitherto there had been little dialogue or bottom-up actions (“*staff as well as students tend to be wary of action*” [Austria]), the micro-projects were all either co-led or in some cases, student-led: “*this project gave both mentors and mentees the opportunity to see they could change realities by having the courage of getting involved, and by proposing ways of improving ongoing projects*” [Romania]. By the end of the project timeline, however, this joint effort was overwhelmingly seen as worthwhile: “*the most challenging and at the same time most rewarding experience was working with students on quality issues*” [Hungary].

In micro-project proposals with concrete outcomes, the engagement of all stakeholders in the development, implementation and evaluation of actions often greatly exceeded expectations. There was also a positive spill-over effect thanks to this high degree of engagement. Those external to the SPEAQ project implementation team asked to become actively involved in micro-project delivery. In various institutional settings it was also suggested going beyond the scope of the SPEAQ project: “[*students*] also volunteered to set up small projects which could be implemented without financial support” [Romania] and to continue the actions after the conclusion of SPEAQ: “*they would be ready to get involved in a similar activity provided more meetings [...] according to a clear timetable were to be set up*” [Romania]. This feeling of working towards enhancing the educational experience of future/other students was almost tangible and became a driving force for implementation.

IV.4. Empowering for quality – Assuming responsibility and owning action

Once participants opened up to appreciate that quality is not only about top-down formal processes, that it is also about every day issues and that

there are myriad quality actions that they can take an active role in identifying and implementing, then quality becomes both relevant and personal: “*all participants agreed that quality [was] brought closer to them and by participating in project events quality became a personal issue*” [Hungary]. Embracing this concept of quality as something all actors should engage in, themselves included, had two outcomes. First, empowerment: taking quality into one’s own hands and doing something about it. This empowerment regards teachers and administrative staff just as much as students: “*I feel that teachers not only needed to improve their sense of empowerment and involvement in quality processes, but also to feel their voices were heard*” [Portugal]. Second, responsibility: actors are not only identifying strengths and weaknesses and proposing actions to build on the former and address the latter but rather undertaking a (concrete) role in achieving those very same objectives and/or outcomes in a context which first enables such role (i.e. gives power for action) and then recognises this role (i.e. values the effort and appreciates the outcome): “*[academic] staff, administration and students were able to share their responsibilities better, by having different roles assigned to them and to test the flexibility of these roles [...] with relatively few ‘prescriptive rules’*” [Romania].

In the way the micro-projects were set out, all actors became accountable for achieving the objectives and monitoring their own progress in a transparent way: “*I reflect upon how my actions impact the learners – I am responsible and accountable for what goes on in my classroom*” [Portugal]. Moreover, the reflective and inclusive quality model upon which the micro-projects were based (LANQUA network outcomes³), also meant that SPEAQ coordinators and participants alike were invited to monitor the micro-projects and take stock of any partial outcomes or make any necessary adjustments to any processes *in itinere*: “*some mentors ... adjust[ed] their interactions with mentees as the programme developed*” as well as evaluate the project at the end: [university administrator] “*it was interesting to see how [the students] asked themselves how to achieve the desired results in light of the current conditions with the rigid structure [...] and at the same time how they managed to highlight the need to create new working conditions (educational environment)*” [Italy]; [teacher] “*participating in the [project] has provided me an excellent opportunity for reflection about my pedagogical methods, share practices and learn from other peers*” [Portugal].

In feedback sessions, participants spoke of a growing belief in their own role and ability to instigate change in attitude, and, as a result, were

³ <https://www.lanqua.eu/> and <https://www.lanqua.eu/theme/>

more prepared to take on this responsibility. Their individual empowerment also resulted in increased enthusiasm, motivation and commitment, which further instilled a sense of community and sharing of common values and confidence in quality processes. Indeed, the quality question is not so much ‘What can be done to improve the educational experience?’ but rather ‘What can I/we do to improve the educational experience within my own context/institution?’ We might thus conclude that the reflective cycle engenders a virtuous cycle.

While this personal sense of empowerment and responsibility regards individual actors who embrace these shared values and work towards collective, common objectives, they are not acting in isolation but are part of the institution’s quality system and contribute to its success. This system necessitates leadership at all levels: coordinating action at the grassroots level, providing guidance on policy at the intermediate level and coordinating discussions on policy and promoting quality at the highest level: “*our micro-project consisted of a good strategy to promote spaces for discussion of quality issues and of teaching and learning practices at personal and at departmental level*” [Portugal]. Importantly, actors can take on roles only if the systems are in place to prompt them to do so, where there can be acceptance and timely approval for initiatives built on feelings of empowerment. Where this is insufficiently understood, systems are less able to absorb motivational initiatives generated at grassroots.

In SPEAQ, a few actors did still report on a reluctance in their institutions, in particular those with long-standing external/formal processes, to relinquish power: “*there is a tendency, however, for quality managers and admin staff to take over too much of the processes, as so often happens in big systems and organisations*” [Denmark]. This can hamper action and may become a risk to any aims of expanding engagement beyond the pool of formally-appointed stakeholders. If this more individualised approach is sought, where each stakeholder can see themselves playing an active role in areas of quality, it follows that the power model must be distributed and that responsibility and accountability become linked to a broad range of individuals within the system, rather than on the system, as an abstract whole.

IV.5. Appreciating efforts for quality – Turning action into institutional direction

Undoubtedly, micro-scale projects such as the ones conducted under SPEAQ depend to a large extent on the good will and dedication of a

relatively small number of actors (Greere and Riley 2014), be they administrators, academics or students: “*there are some people who really care about the quality culture, and others who don’t care at all*” [Italy]. One might even suggest that these stakeholders would probably be engaged in such activities with or without such projects as SPEAQ, creating their own pockets of excellence within the general academic culture. The risk is preaching to the converted and having little if any long term effect on the institution’s quality culture: “*invariably, the people who participated in the project were those concerned with issues such as quality, but it would be beneficial if this sort of discussion could include more people in order to spread the notion of quality*” [Portugal].

If SPEAQ’s overarching aim was to initiate, foster and spread the quality culture, directing efforts to encourage the engagement of actors who had not previously been involved in quality initiatives, other than those required by the institution, proved paramount. Still, several barriers became apparent, to a higher or lesser degree, depending on context, and generated challenges which needed to be overcome. The time and effort required both initially and throughout these hands-on projects brought about some difficulties: “*there is simply no time to become further involved*” [Austria]; “*one more ‘stakeholder’ not mentioned on the list TIME*” [Denmark]; “*some student-mentors took this activity more seriously [...] others got less involved as time passed*” [Romania]. In many academic contexts, students are focused on progressing academically and academics are focused on research and publication, as such prioritising other activities can be seen as challenging and undesirable, unless an evident link may be made which can demonstrate impact on the main goals they have set for themselves. In addition, even if actors are aware and might even buy into the broader interpretation of quality and even the need for a quality culture, they may not be willing to put themselves and their role into question: [teacher] “*development and change require reflection and self-awareness*” [Finland]. Furthermore, there is also an element of risk: participating actively in this inclusive approach to quality exposes participants to the scrutiny not only of peers but also other stakeholders and the wider educational community.

Despite these barriers, the SPEAQ micro-projects were implemented successfully and it was found that they could generate an attitude towards quality which was worthy of mainstreaming, institutionally, if it was coupled with actions promoting recognition and appreciation. Partners acknowledged the acute need for institutional leadership to be supportive and enabling of such initiatives and to view them as contributing to overarching institutional drivers: “*high level policy makers play the most important role in the overall Quality*

Culture [...] they have the power to determine the shape of the discourse on other levels.”; “support from top management would be needed to change the world – despite the enthusiasm of students, a quality manager and a humble teacher.” Put plainly, they are the ones who enable, in terms of resources and political clout, the discourse and action to take place: “*top University Management (rectors, councils, senate, etc.) need to be so committed to the issues that there are adequate resources to pursue the quality culture [...] and that there is reciprocity in the dialogue between the actors*” [Finland].

A system able to support individual initiative, to enable ownership, and to recognise and appreciate efforts towards quality would be one more readily amenable to take such initiatives and embed them in mainstream practice, with the contribution of the original participants. Where participants feel recognised and appreciated and given space to disseminate practices for systemic adoption, institutions can benefit from an attitude of engagement and commitment. If successful grassroots, bottom-up initiatives and practices are to have an impact on institutional practices and the quality culture as a whole, they should not only be lauded for their success, but given institutional backing. Such best practices should be continued, perhaps extended to other departments/courses, if not rolled out across the university. This support should not only take the form of resources (time, money, structures, services) but also in institutional policy.

In other words, bottom-up initiatives should have an impact on institutional policy: [departmental administrator] “*we are now waiting for the central offices to embrace (accept) these proposals and for them to create the conditions to implement them and thus meet the students’ needs. It is very important they accept that a change is needed*” [Italy]. In those projects where higher level leadership was seen to react to the bottom-up initiatives, then even greater trust was instilled in the system: “*the fact that the Rector’s Delegate [for didactics] even saw our project outcomes and asked for them to be communicated and even copied in other parts of the university is awesome*” [Italy]; “*the Dean’s office is considering how other departments could learn from our induction and mentoring model*” [Romania].

This reflects a genuine example of what we believe was meant by Loukkola and Zhang, quoted above, when they talk of combining the top-down managerial approach with the bottom-up approach to create a favourable academic environment. An environment we would extend beyond the classroom to include all aspects of the educational experience, or rather institutional community of practice, from communication channels to services, course programmes to teaching practices, dialogue within and without the classroom to assessment methods and criteria.

V. Discussion: Perceptions of quality culture revisited

Given that in many of the partner institutions, the SPEAQ project was the first time the different stakeholders had come together in a systematic way to discuss quality issues in a semi-formal setting, then it is perhaps natural that one of the major outcomes is the degree to which they perceived other stakeholders' roles in the processes: *“academic staff saw a new image of the students and realised that they could be partners for discussion”* [Austria]; *“through the project it has become clear that there is a role for everyone, that all involved in the educational process do have a contribution to make”* [Spain].

Perceptions were also transformed regarding the very nature of the concept of quality and what it might entail. Even those who had previously been formally involved in quality within their institutions came to a new understanding of quality: *“I associated the term with control. I had not considered that quality culture could also involve creativity”* [Austria]; *“in general there is little dialogue between teachers and students and little will to engage (above all in teachers), but thanks to this project, things are changing, thank goodness!”* [Italy] or took a different, more introspective, attitude towards quality: *“it’s just confirmed the views on quality I already have (though it’s helped me to reflect on them)”* [Denmark, and similarly Finland].

Stakeholders became aware of and were gratified by these changes in perception. The SPEAQ timeline saw an almost tangible shift from an attitude of abstractisation of quality and distancing from quality processes to one of involvement in and commitment for quality: *“this project has shown that quality can be seen differently”* [Hungary], *“quality became tangible and an issue to be addressed step by step by those involved in the issues”* [Austria], from a perception of quality assurance as burdensome and bureaucratic, removed from imminent preoccupation to one of recognition of benefits for direct improvement of daily activities: *“quality viewed as an every-day practice linked to existing priorities and engaging all stakeholder groups”* [Romania]; *“[the project] has certainly made me think about quality in the classroom and quality culture in the institution”* [Portugal]; from a culture of complaints to one of constructive action: *“[the project] has achieved a miracle: transform potential complaints into constructive proposals. It made us all think that we can all contribute to help improve things”* [Italy]. It also fostered alignment between individual objectives and institutional goals: *“the perception that the students now have a sense of belonging, they identify with the [institutional] objectives that we are pursuing”* [Italy] and targeted reflection about good practice, i.e. its

recognition, dissemination and multiplication, in equal share to investment afforded for areas in need of improvement; thus gearing up on positivity rather than negativity and advocating proactiveness rather than reactivity.

When asked which the most positive aspects of the micro-projects were, participants reported a sense of achievement, ownership and a feeling of belonging to the community. Participants took great satisfaction in knowing that their voice had not only been heard, but that they had collectively been instrumental in and responsible for implementing the proposals and monitoring the outcomes: “*the [participants] were eager to share their views on the project by filling in the questionnaires and providing insightful remarks*” [Romania].

Perhaps the most important indicator of the success of the micro-projects was, irrespective of content, the unanimous call for the actions to continue – in some cases in perpetuity and/or be extended to other departments within the institution: “*there should be a group composed of both teachers and students to carry on the project*” [Italy, student]; “*it is important to create a permanent window for dialogue between teachers and students*” [Austria, teacher]. Stakeholders from all groups volunteered to carry on working on the micro-projects, often underlining that they would enjoy doing so, even if they would not be able to reap the benefits of their efforts as they would be leaving before actions were fully implemented and ingrained in every day quality practices. This is further proof of a change in perception and attitude manifested via an increased commitment, as a direct result of SPEAQ.

To test the durability of the outcomes and see if, indeed, SPEAQ could claim more lasting impact, a follow-up study was organised two years after project completion. Participants interviewed were keen to report back on the on-going success of the initiatives undertaken during SPEAQ. In many instances practices proposed in the micro-projects were continued, built upon in the immediate context, embedded into every day practice, rolled out across the institution, and, in one case, expanded into a project which was awarded funding at a national level. In all cases, the success of the project had engendered two-directional dialogue which might not have been the case before the projects.

The follow-up also revealed an unanticipated expansion of SPEAQ implications towards actions of “championing”, with many of the SPEAQ participants, across all stakeholder groups, taking on active roles to further promote dialogue in the institution and assist in getting bottom-up initiatives off the ground. Examples include: one project institutional coordinator became Rector’s delegate for Quality Assurance; one coordinator and one

participant became members of their respective Universities' quality assurance boards; a student project coordinator applied for an internship in project management as a result of this project and was subsequently offered a job at Europe's second biggest think tank; one student became involved in quality assurance and enhancement in a more formal capacity within the institution; and one student took on lead/coordination tasks in other institutional project reporting to the European Commission. It was found that SPEAQ had developed "champions for quality", without the project having set this as an explicit aim. Importantly, it was concluded that varying champions across all stakeholder groups stood a better chance of driving impact and generating outcomes with institutional relevance for quality assurance and enhancement practices.

VI. Transferability: Recommendations for higher education institutions

In all partner institutional contexts, initially, consensus was expressed in relation to quality assurance mechanisms falling short in what regards recognition of quality "on the ground" and, more importantly, appropriate engagement of key actors. It was felt that there were still steps to be taken before participants could confidently state that their institutions were addressing the quality culture agenda, as called for by Harvey and Williams (2010, 4) and as defined by the Quality Culture project (EUA 2006, 10). If the structural/managerial component was well developed, the cultural/psychological was not widely perceived, if at all (a need confirmed also by Bendermacher et al. 2019, 656).

The methodology the SPEAQ project adopted was geared to developing a sense of community where, indeed, "shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality" (EUA 2006, 10 echoed by Ehlers 2009, 350, Sattler and Sonntag 2018, 314, Tutko 2018, 193 and Verschueren 2023, 3) could be at the forefront of quality-driven actions, where communication and collaboration amongst stakeholders could contribute to a greater sense of understanding, direction and engagement, and, subsequently, determine empowerment and ownership (Gordon 2002, 101-103). In brief, we found that the strengthening of the cultural, psychological and interpersonal elements is underpinned by changes in perception about how quality may be understood, how it may be put in focus, how it may be approached and how it may be developed. This is the difference between practices embedded in a quality culture as opposed to quality processes which are bolted on (Sursock 2011, 12; Njiro 2016, 85).

The shift in mindset from an approach geared on complaints and externality to one highlighting constructive, inclusive actions is, in our view, synonymous with the journey from a rather limited approach to quality assurance to an overarching attitude focusing on quality culture, a journey all the participants in our study embarked upon. This journey started with stakeholders participating in focus group discussions where their curiosity was aroused and their awareness was raised to a different way of perceiving and experiencing quality, through their creative proposals and subsequent participation in the micro-projects, to their assuming responsibility for the outcomes of the micro-projects, and, not least, for due recognition of what they had achieved. This all was characterised and supported by constant dialogue amongst the various stakeholder groups, at every level of the institution, in a two-way communication highway from the bottom to the top and vice versa (a desideratum highlighted also by Njiro 2016 and Nygren-Landgärds et al. 2024).

As part of any awareness raising exercise, the adjustment of the discourse associated with quality assurance must be factored in. It is worth repeating the importance of ‘speaking’ the same language, thus ensuring everyone understands the quality discourse, which is essential in this process of shaping perceptions. With quality duly recognised as a context-dependent construct, it is likely that different perspectives on roles and responsibilities will emerge, and these will necessitate clarity, if a shared position is to be achieved (as confirmed also by Van Hung 2021, Greere 2023 and Nygren-Landgärds et al. 2024).

During SPEAQ, “simplifying” and giving clarity to the quality discourse resulted in students and staff, both administrative and academic, relating to quality in more concrete terms, thereby making it their own. Quality presented in relevant terms and couched in understandable language can also help shape perceptions resulting in increased engagement, as already noted, an essential requisite in nurturing an institution’s quality culture.

Furthermore, realising that quality need not involve additional burdens or be perceived as alien to stakeholders, given they are already participants in creating and maintaining quality in their own contexts, also engenders greater engagement. Engagement is the definitive result of dialogue, of those social interactions which are the cornerstone of any culture (Ehers 2009). It draws in stakeholders by giving them the opportunity to adopt a reflective, inward-facing approach while outlining their position, their concerns, their challenges, their opportunities for improvement, their quality-related needs with other stakeholders. It also provides the opportunity for reflection on a potential personal contribution, and involvement in areas that are of immediate interest and which they may feel quite strongly about. It allows

not only for opinions to be voiced but more importantly initiatives to be proposed knowing their voice will be heard.

Both these stages, awareness and engagement, were found to be applicable, to a lesser or greater degree, in partner higher education institutions. Nonetheless, it is the following actions (as piloted in SPEAQ) that address what the Quality Culture report (EUA 2006, 29) refers to as “the most prominent challenge [which] is to ensure commitment and ownership of the quality process” and the underpinning actions which can determine their effectiveness.

Empowerment gives stakeholders the opportunity to take their ideas forward (Vettori and Lueger 2010, 50; Greere and Riley 2014; Nygren-Landgärds et al. 2024, 49-52), bestowing responsibilities onto the initiators of various proposals and allowing them to invest in and take lead on their own initiatives, effectively taking quality into their own hands. We have seen that this generates a sense of involvement and ownership (see also Sursock 2011, 21-22, Powell 2011 cited in Njiro 2016, 88 and Bendermacher 2019, 647-648), i.e. identifying with the community practicing quality. This must be coupled with institutional recognition of the actions taken and the results achieved in order to support the quality culture shift. As such, initiatives are then to be evaluated in the larger institutional framework and consideration must be given to whether they are replicable (maybe with adjustments) in other areas of the institution and if there is the potential to integrate them into mainstream practices.

When adopting such an approach, institutions need to consider contextual and cultural elements as they decide: how to promote fruitful dialogue and to share practice within and across stakeholder groups; how best to encourage a change in attitude, if necessary, from merely voicing complaints to offering constructive feedback; what actions can feasibly result in measurable and tangible outcomes that participants can readily relate to etc. Rather than introducing drastic change, institutions might best focus on what is in existence, promoting quality as continuity, encouraging teams/projects where enthusiasm about quality can be generated. This can be successful only if “the leadership [senior management] create conditions that are beneficial to quality culture and that ensure that [stakeholders] can perform to the best of their abilities in a way that is congruent with the values of the organisation” (EUA 2006, 21). However, “achieving [quality culture] goals requires honesty, openness and trust and that difficult topics can and must be discussed in an equal dialogue” (Nygren-Landgärds et al. 2024, 51) otherwise the availability of stakeholders towards collaboration and contribution may be undermined.

As already indicated, this approach is predicated on the understanding that quality already exists: it is an every-day preoccupation for many stakeholders (Elken and Stensaker 2018; Greere 2023). Our approach supports institutions to take stock of and highlight what is already present and to then build on existing and emerging (best) practices. While, at first scrutiny, stakeholders might not perceive the existence of a quality culture, quality in its multifaceted embodiment is identifiable if looked at under a particular lens. Recognition of quality practices, individual contributions to quality enhancement, and an awakening to the ownership of quality, all foster quality culture and can determine a change in perception in a fairly limited time span (the SPEAQ project lasted two years), even if only locally. Moreover, as cultures are dynamic and in continual evolution, a reflective and responsive quality culture will likely engage other stakeholders at all levels creating thus a positive reinforcement loop.

VII. Towards a working model: Nurturing a Quality Culture in five stages

In a project involving nine different higher education institutions in nine different contexts and at nine different stages in the evolution of their own quality culture it might seem a tall order to draw any general conclusions. Still, there are several overarching commonalities uniting all experiences outlined under SPEAQ, with interaction between and among all stakeholder groups underpinning essential action.

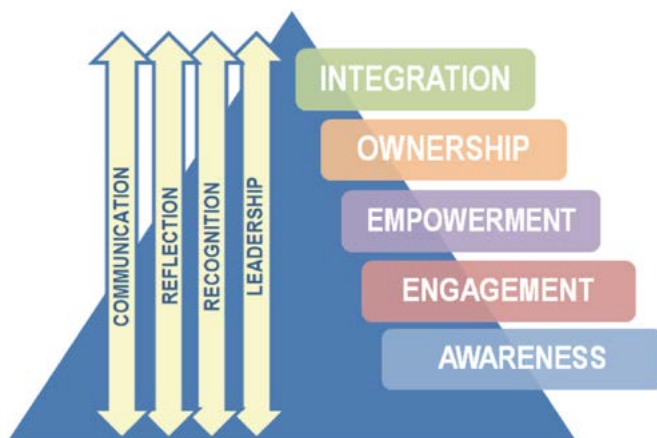


Figure 1

Practices for interaction as enablers for smooth transitioning through the stages

What clearly emerges from the project is the need for an incremental approach, enabled by consistent practices for interaction (Figure 1).

From the data, we identified five distinct stages necessary for the growth of a community-wide quality culture: (1) awareness: raising awareness about ‘quality as good, every-day practice’; (2) engagement: engaging in dialogue and collaborating towards action; (3) empowerment: empowering for contribution to focussed initiatives; (4) ownership: disseminating outcomes and endorsing ownership; (5) integration: embedding developments and expanding institutionally.

The movement from one stage to the next will be dependent on the effectiveness demonstrated for practices of communication, reflection, recognition and leadership. The different actors (Figure 2) will need to come together and interact in ways which can maintain communication channels open, can facilitate collective reflection, can recognise efforts made in support of quality and can translate micro-level outcomes into institution-wide mainstream, highlighting the relevance for its community. When this is ensured, the transition from one stage to the next will prove less challenging, and have broader and longer lasting impact.

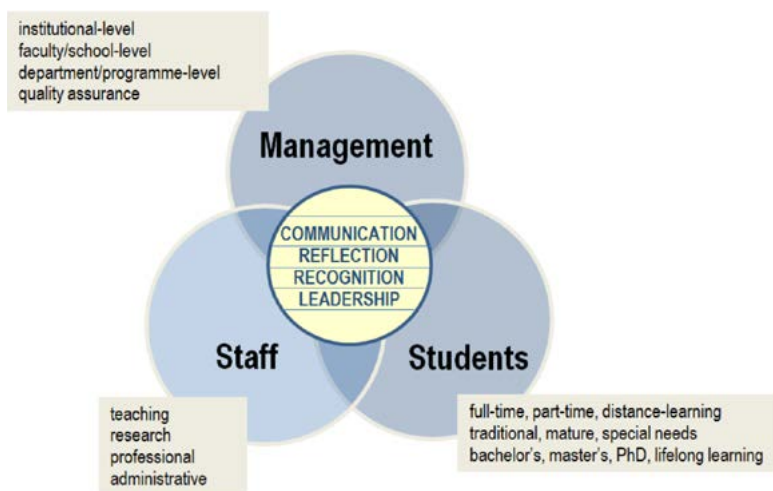


Figure 2

Actors and their multi-dimensional practices for interaction

Stakeholder involvement is key across all of these stages, with different participant profiles (management, staff and students) taking priority across the

various stages, as needed. With the emphasis on multi-directional patterns of interaction, this step-by-step approach allows stakeholders to see the value of processes on the ground, to trust their outcomes and to become involved. More specifically, it allows stakeholders to freely decide where their interventions are likely to impact most and how their contributions can unfold.

Promoting dialogue among and between stakeholders raises awareness of the every-day nature of quality, of their own role in quality processes and of the interdependent role of other actors. This awareness is a fundamental step in engaging stakeholders in grassroots initiatives. In initiating such initiatives, empowerment and the sharing of responsibility, when properly orchestrated, lead to positive outcomes, which can be measured via a change in the mindset and perceptions of the participants. Empowered and responsible stakeholders embrace the values and beliefs of the community, own their actions, feel accountable and commit to working together to further identify and achieve common goals. Such engagement in reflective practices contributes to the advancement of a quality culture. Thus, the progressive quality cycle is set in (hopefully perpetual) motion. It remains for the institution to harness this commitment and integrate developments which the community can embrace, sustain and multiply. (Figure 3)

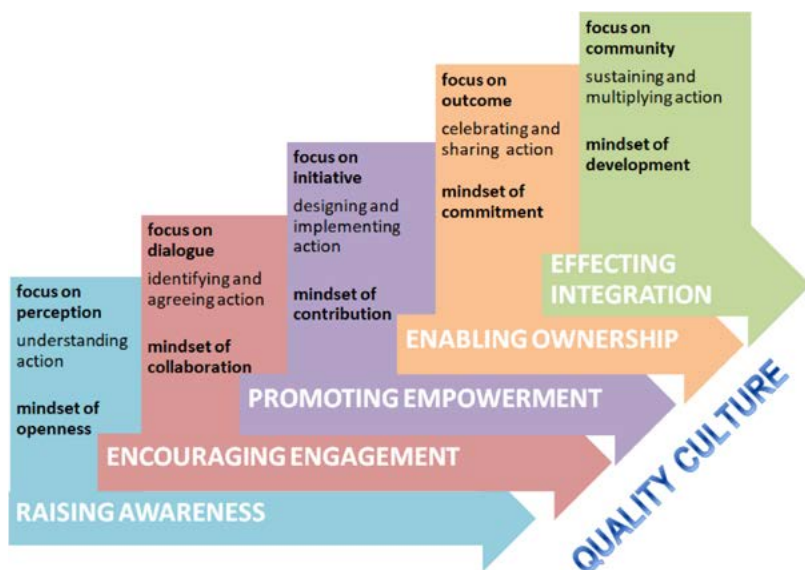


Figure 3

Stages for higher education institutions to advance their quality culture

As SPEAQ has shown, if actors are given the opportunity to collaborate with other stakeholders and allowed to take the initiative, they are not only cooperative and creative, but also committed. Importantly, giving stakeholders the option to instigate small scale projects which are close to their daily activities will make a subsequent difference in the way roles can be successfully discharged, and can have impactful results with minimum financial investment. As SPEAQ has found, stakeholders are eager to broaden their responsibilities, engage with others and invest time and effort in activities they believe can make a positive impact on their own educational experience as well as on the experience of others. It is often that stakeholders require only that trust is placed in their capabilities to drive action and finally that their efforts are recognised and appreciated systemically, without there necessarily being a claim on additional remuneration. This is also because impact is perceived first at individual level, for the benefit of those involved in implementation, and subsequently for a wider audience, institutionally, in alignment with community objectives, which resonate with the quality culture desired.

In sum, when institutions formally and systematically encourage actors to collaboratively interact, the stages of awareness, engagement, empowerment, ownership and integration are set in motion. If the stages are fuelled by effective practices of communication, reflection, recognition and leadership, actors develop a stronger sense of belonging to the institutional community of practice and a more acute sense of professional identity; feelings which have to be maintained or rather sustained if quality cultures are to flourish.

The empirical findings of the SPEAQ project advocate an approach to fostering quality cultures as manifestations of different contexts and different communities, rather than promoting a blueprint for a single perception of 'the' Quality Culture or even a single interpretation of the construct of quality. It is an approach based on discussing quality in action, or quality rooted in daily practice. Quality in existence needs to be discussed, recognised, disseminated and multiplied, with the involvement and commitment of those who are promoting it via routine academic engagements. Contexts differ, whether this be discipline, institution or national; however, the stages in evolution, namely awareness raising, engagement, empowerment, ownership and integration and certain fundamental concepts such as inclusion, dialogue between different stakeholder groups, effective communication between levels of the system, both top-down and bottom up, etc., are applicable to all contexts and can lead to the effective stabilising of institutional approaches, representative of systemic quality.

Development of a quality culture depends both on collective and individual efforts and on top-down structures enabling bottom-up initiatives. To engage actors, institutions and project leaders must adopt a more individual, personalised, human approach to quality, offering both support and recognition. Only in this way will actors feel acknowledged and their efforts appreciated and therefore they will be more likely to continue contributing.

While bottom-up initiatives can have an immediate impact in their own context, it is widely acknowledged that alone they are less effective in driving institutional change, as the SPEAQ follow-up study also shows. Indeed, they may remain mere drops in the ocean, creating just localised ripples, unless they are embraced and incorporated into institutional policy.

VIII. Conclusions

SPEAQ data conclusively highlights that a quality culture exists where there is the constant and unequivocal commitment to recognising, supporting, developing, innovating and creating quality, i.e. a preoccupation for quality that goes beyond the roles and responsibilities attributed within a formal quality assurance structure. At grassroots level, a quality culture is not viewed as implementable; it is not viewed as something that can be introduced in conjunction with the institutional policy or strategy, or formal procedures. Undoubtedly, it has to be sustained by such structural elements. However, in essence, it can be more accurately described as relating to perceptions in the broadest sense, i.e. the embodiment of a professional feeling or attitude that is generated by various practices in the institution which the particular actors are (closely) involved with. With stakeholders becoming actively involved in identifying, generating and disseminating quality they may experience positive changes in perception which are strengthened as institutional actions lead to a substantive shift. The concrete means by which this can be achieved, in terms of actions, were the prime focus of our analysis.

The five stages proposed for the working model derived from SPEAQ activities has the demonstrated potential to allow institutions to take concrete action towards the desired quality culture, even where financial resources may be more limited, by drawing on individual engagement with and collective commitment towards quality. Observations in nine institutional contexts collate towards similar findings and advocate an incremental approach which successfully takes stakeholders through the different stages of relating to quality-driven initiatives. The application of these stages evidences that perceptions of a burdensome quality system can change with

stakeholders understanding their roles better and being given opportunity to take action forward. Quality assurance processes become less of a tick-box administrative exercise as they are found to carry potential for positive impact on areas of daily responsibilities. Furthermore, an emphasis on enhancement of existing good practices, in counterbalance with resolving emerging problems via collectively acceptable solutions, can generate added buy-in. Concrete contributions, especially in areas of direct interest, should be warmly encouraged, supported, and delegated, with confidence, to any of the stakeholders, and the outcomes should be considered for wider institutional embedding. All stakeholders not only assume responsibility for the initiatives but also for monitoring the success of implementation via a reflective quality cycle, where action is not a sporadic exercise but a constant process of which they are an intrinsic and fundamental part.

Ultimately, there is no blueprint for a quality culture, it is context specific, and the form it takes and how it develops will depend on the institution, comprising all its stakeholders. A shared vision, shared values and shared responsibilities will lead to a community-driven quality culture and one which continuously reinforces commitment.

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