

Valuing Learning and Quality in Higher Education: Considerations of an Appropriate Assurance Model

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A photograph of a busy street at dusk, filled with a large number of motorcyclists and some cars. The scene is illuminated by streetlights and the headlights of the vehicles. In the background, there are buildings with lit-up signs, including one for 'SYM'. The overall atmosphere is one of a crowded, active urban environment.

***“ A problem is not solved
at the same level of
thinking that created it.”***

Einstein

Introduction

- Should academia be seen as a defined process that can then be monitored for QA?
- Can there be rules to regulate academic activity?
- Who might be knowledgeable enough to monitor the situation?
 - *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*
- And what about academic freedom?

Systems Thinking

- A way to fully understand the situation is to first understand complexities within the system as a whole
- Traditional scientific approach
 - Isolating small parts of the system
- Systems thinking
 - Considering the many interactions simultaneously

Systems Thinking

- System
 - A system can be seen as an interrelated unit with each separate part working together for a common purpose
 - A system has characteristics
 - A system exists within an environment
 - A boundary separates a system from its environment

System Characteristics

- Boundary
- Components
- Constraints
- Environment
- Interfaces
- Input
- Output
- Purpose



Seeing the Whole System

- Is there a difference?



- How might we see it, to then QA it?

Systems Structure

- Every organisation exists within a broader social culture
 - And it perpetuates its own internal culture
- Structure:
 - Influences Behaviour;
 - In human systems structure is subtle;
 - Leverage often comes from seeing and thinking about structure appropriately

Organisational Culture

- The Aggregate of
 - Beliefs;
 - Attitudes;
 - Values;
 - Assumptions; and
 - Ways of thinking
- Shared by members of an organisation
 - Taught to new members who may also have inherent identity and understandings about how things might otherwise be.

Organisational Culture

- Organisational Culture
 - A valuable ally when strategy execution matches it;
 - A formidable enemy when strategy doesn't match it;
 - Can stifle creative impulses and enforce conformist thinking;
 - Does not guarantee success; and
 - May not encourage adaptation

Organisational Culture and Performance

- The link between culture and performance in organisations is not easy to determine
- Strong culture is associated with short-term performance
 - Not long-term performance
- It is important that culture aligns with the strategy and standards mandated by the landscape in which the organisation seeks to compete

Appropriately Aligning Resources



Being Strictly Academic

- ‘Quality’ relates to process
 - (e.g. the quality of the educational process experienced by students),
- ‘Standards’ refers to required outcomes
 - Guidelines to measurable achievements.
- The link between them can be expressed
 - The contribution of the educational process (or ‘quality’), to the attainment of a defined standard of Higher Education.

The Education Landscape

- Increased diversity in Higher Education
 - New providers (including private providers)
 - The growth in new forms of teaching and learning
 - Blended
 - Distance
 - Work Integrated
- Increased Government involvement
 - Greater Accountability for external funding
 - From Government and Business
 - Accompanied by a reduction in certain controls
 - e.g. Removal of enrolment caps

The Education Landscape

- Increases in student mobility
 - Growth in trans-national programs
- The need for Portability
 - The need for recognition of qualifications and higher education credits, and other related learnings
- Reviews
 - External Reviews (organisational);
 - Peer reviews (pedagogical);
 - Student feedback

The Education Landscape

- A greater reliance on processes and associated documentation to satisfy regulation
 - Threshold Standards;
 - Qualification Frameworks;
 - Subject Unit Benchmarking
 - Published Graduate Outcomes
 - Published Assessment Rubrics
- One Result
 - Increased conformity and standardisation
- Academic Freedom?

Industrial QA Models

- Existing QA Models consider control within an organisation as linear activity, a 'Model Puzzle' to be solved
 - A series of interventions that can be interpreted as discrete projects in themselves;
 - Concerned with job design, productivity management, work flow analysis and design, work measurement etc.,
 - To identify who might shirk responsibility towards their 'parts', or alternatively not engage in other 'parts' towards a holistic outcome.

Higher Education Models

- Quality has always been a part of the tradition of learning, especially in the Higher Education culture
- But Higher Education and its context is changing
 - Education is also now being used as a public policy tool of governments.
 - It is subject to major influences
 - By Society;
 - By Government;
 - By Industry;
 - By Globalisation (including student mobility)
- Industry has an increasing focus on quality – a welcome trend.
 - And we are also being caught up in this trend

Higher Education as an Industry?

- The Supply Chain?
- In Higher Education, unlike in industry, students are:
 - The raw material input into the process;
 - The processor of the material; and
 - One of the consumers of the process outcome
- The traditional notion of supply chain relationships only provides, at best, a simplistic understanding of the Higher Education setting.

Contemporary Developments

- A shift in function of the university
 - From influencing social and cultural developments
 - To now also having a major economic function
- An Example - the desire to attract international students
 - For additional prestige
 - For additional income
- QA systems are becoming international
 - ISO 9001
 - Six Sigma
- We can't be ostriches
 - But we shouldn't also be leminggs..

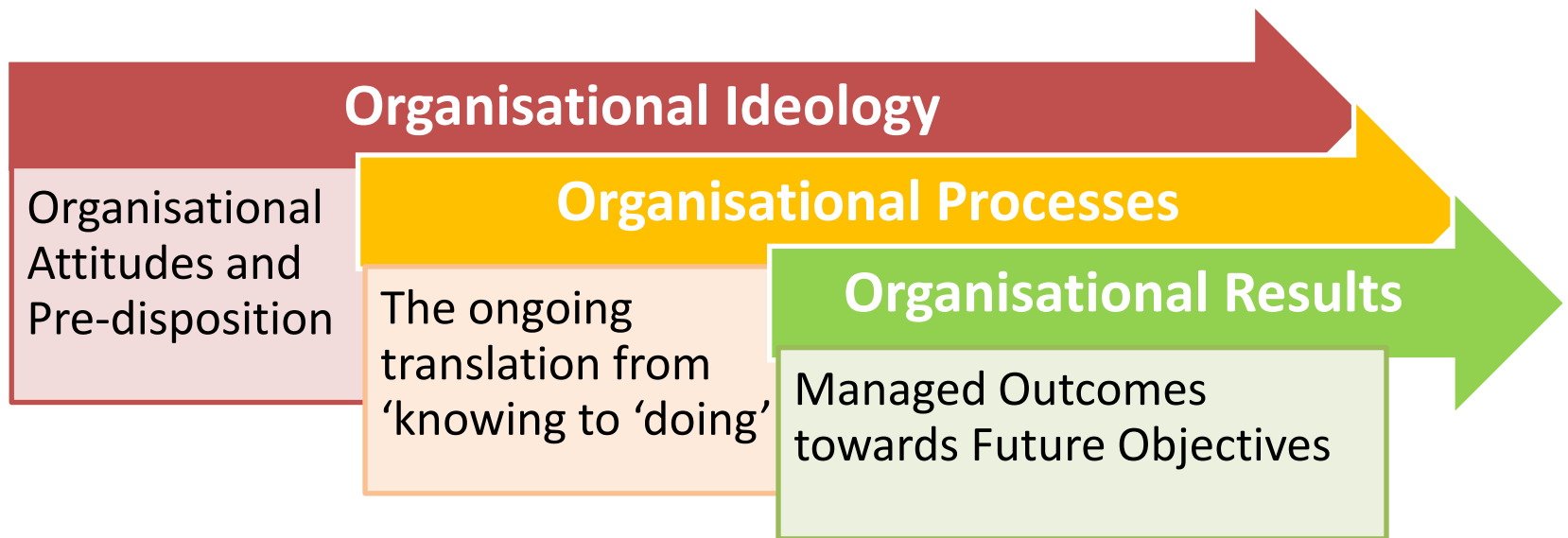
Quality and the System

- An effective quality assurance system needs to be reflective of three components:
 - Organisation Ideology;
 - Organisational Processes; and
 - Organisational Results
- Organisational Ideology
 - Is embedded in organisational practices to support the organisation's predisposition
 - The vision and the mission

Quality and the System

- Is cognisant of Organisational Impact on Organisational Processes
 - Has a clear acknowledgement of organisational structural components;
 - Objectively informs decision making (knowing to doing)
- Organisational Results
 - Is repeatable over time but is flexible in response to change
 - Creates a climate of continual improvement to support organisational objectives (managed change)

Conceptualising for Higher Education



Conclusion

- Industrial QA measurement strategies will not truly reflect the Higher Education situation for evaluation
 - The parameters in the Higher Educational System are more nebulous, dynamic and open ended.
 - They are not able to capture the dynamic nature of a Higher Education learning culture.
- The basic issue
 - The Higher Education system is one that does not strive to perfect the *status quo*, rather it seeks to establish a learning model that is dynamic and innovative.
- There appears much scope for further research in this area.

Sharing Questions & Answers

