

1 **Quality Culture: understandings, boundaries and** 2 **linkages**

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6 As part of the process of enhancing quality, quality culture has become a taken-
7 for-granted concept intended to support development and improvement processes
8 in higher education. By taking a theoretical approach to examining quality culture,
9 starting with a scholarly examination of the concept of culture, and exploring how
10 it is related to quality, quality improvement and quality assurance, the aim of this
11 paper is to create a better understanding of how one can make sense of quality
12 culture, its boundaries but also its links to the fundamental processes of teaching
13 and learning.

Quality Culture: understandings, boundaries and linkages

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Introduction

Quality assurance is no longer a novelty to higher education. National and institutional systems for evaluation, assessment, accreditation and audit are now a routine in the majority of European countries (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). However, this does not mean that quality work and quality improvement are integrated parts of the sector. Available evidence rather suggests that while systems, procedures and rules are being laid down, creating much data, many reports and much attention (Stensaker, 2003), there is still a lack of staff and student attachment and active involvement in these processes (Newton, 2000; Vidal, 2003).

When trying to describe the ideal involvement of student and staff in such processes, the concept of quality culture has in the latter years often been highlighted as a description of the social processes intended to characterise well-functioning quality systems and quality work processes (Baštová *et al.*, 2004; Rozsnyai, 2003). While quality culture has a taken-for-granted meaning attached to it, it is not really helpful for those wanting to improve the link between quality work and the fundamental processes of teaching and learning.

The problem related to a poor understanding of the concept of quality culture is that it opens up for processes more dominated by belief, faith and ideology than processes more characterised by knowledge, analyses and empirical studies of the elements that are important for a better description and understanding of such a culture. Hence, the aim of this article is to create a better understanding of how one can make sense of the concept of quality culture, its boundaries and limitations, but also its possible links to the fundamental processes of teaching and learning. To do so, it will start by providing a short overview of the recent and more general history of theory of culture, since developments in higher education are increasingly influenced and interrelated to broader development trends in society.

Culture: A Short Historical Account

It is an understatement to say that much has been written about culture. However, much of the writing has taken a rather uncritical approach and used the concept in an *ad hoc* manner in the higher education policy discourse (Kogan, 1999).

Culture, as Williams (1983, p. 87) pointed out, 'is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language'. The complications arise because the concept has evolved differently in different European languages and in different

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1 disciplines. The word derives from the Latin *colere*, which had various meanings,
2 including cultivate, protect, inhabit and honour with worship. Williams noted that
3 some of these meanings dropped away although they remain linked through
4 derived nouns such as cult, for honour with worship and colony for inhabit. The
5 Latin noun *cultura* evolved and its main meaning was cultivation in the sense of
6 husbandry. Much later, after it passed into English early in 15th century, it came
7 also to include cultivation of the mind. Thus:

8
9 Bacon: 'the culture and manurance of minds' (1605);
10 Hobbes: 'a culture of their minds' (1651);
11 Johnson: 'she neglected the culture of her understanding' (1759).

12
13 Williams argued that the noun culture began, in the mid 19th century, to develop
14 as an abstract concept, away from the specific cultivation of something, and this is
15 where the complications were compounded. In French, culture started to become
16 linked with civilisation and, in German, *Kultur* (which evolved from, *Cultur* in the
17 19th century) was a synonym for civilisation.

18 The tendency, then, was to align culture with a notion of civility and refinement
19 and this is evident, for example, in the works of Arnold (1869). His neo-Platonic
20 view of culture, equating it with such characteristics as beauty and intelligence, saw
21 it as the crucial component of a healthy democratic state. For him, culture is a
22 study of perfection: it is about 'contact with the best which has been thought and
23 said in the world'. Subsequently, this view was replicated by conservative com-
24 mentators such as Eliot (1948) who argued that Western European Christian
25 culture was the highest form of culture and Ortega y Gasset (1930) who argued
26 that the apparent move from elitist to democratic views of culture was undesirable,
27 as not enough effort was put into conserving the best.

28 However, in Germany, the concept was being fractured. Herder (1784–91)
29 attacked the assumption of a linear progress through history of civilisation and
30 (high) culture to the dominant 18th century European view. He attacked cultural
31 imperialism (although he did not call it that): 'The very thought of a superior
32 European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature.' He argued that there
33 were different cultures relating to different nations and periods, as well as specific
34 and variable cultures of different social and economic groups within a nation. For
35 the understanding of quality culture it is important to retain awareness of this
36 critique of homogeneous, evolving elitist concept of culture.

37 Herder's approach was reflected in some branches of anthropology. Initially,
38 the focus was on 'primitive cultures' but subsequently developed into an appre-
39 ciation of cultural diversity: that culture is descriptive, inclusive, and relativistic
40 (Bodley, 1994). Since Tylor (1872) first proposed a list of aspects that described
41 culture, there have been many variants and Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952)
42 identified 156 different anthropological definitions, which Bodley reconstructed
43 into eight broad groups:

- 44
45
- 46 • Topical: culture consists of everything on a list of topics, or categories, such
47 as social organisation, religion, or economy.
 - 48 • Historical: culture is social heritage, or tradition, that is passed on to future
49 generations.
 - Behavioural: culture is shared, learned human behaviour, a way of life.

- 1 • Normative: culture is ideals, values, or rules for living.
- 2 • Functional: culture is the way humans solve problems of adapting to the
- 3 environment or living together.
- 4 • Mental: culture is a complex of ideas, or learned habits that inhibit impulses
- 5 and distinguish people from animals.
- 6 • Structural: culture consists of patterned and interrelated ideas, symbols, or
- 7 behaviours.
- 8 • Symbolic: culture is based on arbitrarily assigned meanings that are shared
- 9 by a society.¹

10
11 In essence, Bodley (1994) argues that culture is shared, learned and symbolic.
12 Being shared means that it is a social phenomenon that is learned and involves
13 arbitrarily assigned, symbolic meanings (e.g. that a rose, in some societies, implies
14 romance); culture is not biologically inherited nor is idiosyncratic behaviour cultural.
15 Further, he argues that culture is transmitted cross-generations, is adaptive,
16 and integrated. This means, for some, that it is not dependent on the individual but
17 precedes and survives any individual: a super-organic view of culture. This some-
18 times manifests itself as seeing culture as an abstract rather than, as Bodley prefers,
19 an 'objective reality'. Bodley (1994) insists that culture includes its human carriers
20 and argues that many 'humanistic anthropologists would agree that culture is an
21 observable phenomenon, and a people's unique possession'.

22 So culture moved away from the notion of husbandry, although never abandon-
23 ing it: the culture in which laboratory specimens are grown and, of course,
24 attempts to create or grow a culture [of quality]. Culture, in the sense of a system
25 of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts, developed along three
26 lines. First, culture is used as an abstract noun implying civilised. Second, culture
27 implies artistic culture, which was initially 'high' culture but has also developed to
28 mean any form of artistic endeavour, including the subset of 'popular culture'. This
29 artistic construction, at its broadest, refers to all aspects of human achievement
30 that are recorded in some kind of documentary form, including, painting, sculp-
31 ture, literature, film, photographs and video. Third, is the notion of diverse cultures
32 (including subcultures), which linked culture firmly with a way of life. This demo-
33 cratic view includes everything that is part of a society or indicative of a class or
34 other group. Thus, culture, in this version, is closely associated with the idea of
35 society.

36 37 *Cultural Relativism*

38 This third, democratic, view is, furthermore, conducive to a cultural relativist
39 perspective. The core thesis of cultural relativism is that there are no absolute
40 standards of human cognition. Different cultures have different standards. The
41 implication of this is that social, political, ethical or indeed any cultural phenomena
42 should be considered against the prevailing standards of the particular culture in
43 which they occur. Similarly, no judgements can be made that the institutions of
44 one culture are superior or inferior to those of another culture. Cultural relativism
45 denies the legitimacy of cross-cultural evaluations. Indeed, knowledge, notions of
46 truth and moral imperatives are relative to cultures and subcultures (as will be
47 shown later, this is relevant, although ignored, in construction of quality culture).

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1 *Culturologism and the Sociology of Knowledge*

2 Cultural relativism, although an anthropological construct, was not the focus of
3 early development of cultural analysis in sociology. Instead, in the early culturolo-
4 gist approach, culture was linked to the production of knowledge. The argument
5 was that knowledge, and invention in particular, was not a function of genius but
6 of culture. Given a specific cultural setting, someone would come up with the
7 invention. The empirical grounding of this view, held, *inter alia* by Ogburn, White
8 and Dorothy Thomas at the University of Chicago in the 1920s, was the identifi-
9 cation of simultaneous discoveries (Duncan, 1964). Although much of the empiri-
10 cal evidence has subsequently been discounted (Branningan 1981), this cultural [2]
11 element to discovery has been developed in Merton's (1957) early work on the [3]
12 sociology of knowledge in the US. This sociological analysis of culture placed
13 considerable emphasis on the relationship between culture and knowledge. Along-
14 side this were developments in Europe, not least the development of cultural
15 theory by Adorno and the Frankfurt School. Critical Theory's approach to culture
16 was, despite their Marxist intent, an élitist one. Adorno saw culture as an industry
17 that potentially eliminated critical thought through the production of cultural
18 commodities distributed through the mass media, which manipulated the popu-
19 lation. Put simply, populist mass media output served to provide simple pleasure
20 and make the population docile, irrespective of their economic circumstances. He
21 saw this mass-produced culture as a danger to the more difficult high arts. Culture
22 industries cultivate false needs through the manipulation of appearance: things
23 with superficial differences are made to appear significantly different, which
24 Adorno conceptualised as *pseudo-individualisation*. The false needs created are
25 satisfied by capitalism. True needs, in contrast, are freedom, creativity, and genuine
26 happiness (Adorno, 1973–1986).

27 What these approaches to culture all argued, in various ways, is that knowledge,
28 explanation, interpretation and understanding are all culturally embedded.

29 *Cultural Studies*

30
31 These developments were taken a step further with the advent of cultural studies,
32 for example in the UK, in the wake of Williams's pioneering work, with its insistence
33 on a democratic notion of culture. For Williams (1958, p. 5): [4]

34
35 Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own
36 shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. . . . We use the word culture
37 in . . . two senses: to mean a whole way of life — the common meanings; to
38 mean the arts and learning — the special processes of discovery and creative
39 effort.

40
41 Cultural studies in the UK were developed at the University of Birmingham in the
42 Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), headed initially by Hoggart
43 and then Hall. Taking a cue from Williams, CCCS was concerned to examine the
44 symbolic nature of culture. It argued against the Frankfurt School distinction
45 between cultural produces and consumers, taking instead the view of Eco, which
46 emphasised the role of the reader in cultural production. Furthermore, and sig-
47 nificantly, Hall and CCCS shifted attention towards the relationship between
48 culture and ideology: reinterpreting culture in relation to dominant political struc-

1 tures and social hierarchies. Among other things, CCCS gave ‘popular culture’
2 much more importance by re-conceptualising it as a ‘site of resistance’ for ‘mar-
3 ginalized and disempowered groups’ rather than as the embodiment of a non-
4 critical, simplistic art form.

5 This was part of a radical Marxist critique from the 1960s and 1970s, and drew,
6 *inter alia*, on Gramsci’s (1926–34) work, which questioned the deterministic
7 Marxist notion that the social superstructure was determined by the economic
8 base.

9 10 **From Culture to Quality**

11 Interest in and analysis of cultural theory continued with studies in the 1980s
12 further exploring the critical reaction to the dominant position of rational theories
13 of the 1970s (Van Maanen, 1988; Gagliardi, 1990). In essence, those advocating a
14 cultural perspective for understanding social and organisational behaviour reacted
15 against the functionalist neglect of how rationalist meaning is constructed in
16 modern societies (Pedersen & Dobbin, 2006, p. 899).

17 During the 1980s, those advocating the cultural approach to organisations
18 could be divided into two basic camps (Alvesson & Berg, 1992). On the one side,
19 those seeing culture as something an organisation *has*, i.e. culture as a potentially
20 identifiable and manipulative factor, and those seeing culture as something an
21 organisation *is*, i.e. culture as an integrated product of social interaction and
22 organisational life that is impossible to differentiate from other factors. In the latter
23 version, culture was an integrated dimension of (most often) sociological and
24 anthropological research into social behaviour. In the former version, it was
25 emphasised as the new organisational instrument by reformers, consultants and
26 management gurus — sometimes because they simply had ‘run out of specifics’
27 (Kogan, 1999, p. 64). Culture became the umbrella term for all possible intangible
28 factors in organisational life.

29 During the 1980s, it was this perspective that dominated business and industry
30 and received considerable attention in private companies. The international best-
31 seller by Peter & Waterman (1982) *In Search of Excellence* paved the way for a [5]
32 number of studies aiming at identifying general ‘intangible’ factors that could
33 boost organisational performance and profit.

34 The emerging interest in quality during the 1980s can be related to this
35 perspective. The success of Japanese business after World-War II has been related
36 by a number of authors to cultural factors and how these positively affect organi-
37 sation and organisational behaviour (Mickletwait & Wooldridge, 1996). One of the
38 central ideas of the quality movement — continuous improvement or *kaizen* — was
39 very much intertwined with what management gurus wrote about culture at that
40 time (Mickletwait & Wooldridge, 1996, p. 274). Hence, rather than understanding [6]
41 culture and quality as independent entities, it is important to understand that
42 quality actually stems from a broader cultural perspective.

43 Partly as a result of the also emergent emphasis on new public management
44 where structures, responsibility, decentralisation and de-regulation became core
45 factors of interest (Hood 1998), and partly as a result of much more complexity in
46 the field of cultural studies, in the 1990s there was less interest in culture as a
47 dominant independent factor for understanding organisational behaviour. Due to
48 this increasing complexity, the dichotomy between perspectives of organisations as

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1 either *having* or *being* culture became less relevant for understanding the scholarly
2 development of the field. As such, one could argue that it was the interpretative
3 perspective of culture that dominated the 1990s. Hence, studies in organisational
4 symbolism (Alvesson & Berg, 1992) and organisational identities (Czarniawska [7]
5 Joerges & Sevón, 1996) received considerable attention and led to the establish-
6 ment of new arenas for more interdisciplinary approaches into organisational
7 culture where the distinction between the two categories (*having* or *being*) became
8 increasingly blurred (Schultz *et al.*, 2000).

9 However, it is important to note that the interest in culture as an instrument for
10 improving organisational performance is still a dominant theme in much of the
11 available management literature. 'Value-based management' and similar concepts
12 are currently highly recommended readings in the business sphere providing
13 advice for how managers can change their organisation from one that is locked in
14 tradition to one that is flexible enough to respond positively to constant change. In
15 essence, the emergent message is that an emphasis on values and norms in an
16 organisation is easily combined with the aim of securing the interest of share-
17 holders in making a profit (Martin *et al.*, 2000; Stratten, 2006). Whether these and [8]
18 similar concepts are as novel as claimed is another question. As Røvik (1996) has [9]
19 pointed out, there are a number of similarities between older and newer manage-
20 ment concepts, although the labels under which they are presented may have
21 changed. Hence, the interest in culture as something manipulative, 'designed' and
22 something that can be imposed on an organisation is still a dominant perspective.
23

24 **Quality Culture and Higher Education**

25 As indicated above, the emergence of quality in business and industry can be
26 linked to a broader cultural perspective. In higher education, the influence of new
27 public management paved the way for an understanding of quality that was more
28 influenced by new public management ideas, which led to the establishment of
29 various national (and partly institutional) structures for evaluating or enhancing
30 quality (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). Hence, the cultural influence was less
31 evident within higher education in the 1990s². If we use the schemata outlined in
32 the *Bologna Handbook* by Harvey (2006) refining an early well-cited version
33 (Harvey & Green, 1993) of various ways to define quality (see Table I), one could
34 argue that most attention in this decade was given to a fitness-for-purpose and a
35 value-for-money approach (Henkel, 2000; Newton, 2000; Stensaker, 2003).

36 However, in the aftermath of the Bologna Process and as a result of an
37 increasing interest in the outcome of the established structures of higher educa-
38 tion, one can observe a shift in definitions that dominate international and national
39 policy agendas. For example, the European Commission currently seems to be *in*
40 *search of excellence* when arguing for how European higher education should be
41 reformed in the coming years (Olsen & Maassen, 2007, p. 16). Thus, it is tempting
42 to link the introduction of the whole concept of quality culture in European higher
43 education to this search for excellence: privileging an excellence notion of quality
44 culture. This can also be found, to some extent, in the 'Quality Culture' project of
45 the European Universities Association (EUA) that ran between 2002 and 2006.
46 This project can be seen as a spin-off from the Bologna Process with its emphasis
47 on quality assurance and was instigated by the EUA with economic support from
48 The European Commission (EUA, 2006). The formal description of the project

TABLE I. Five ways of defining quality in higher education

1		
2		
3	Exceptional	a traditional concept of quality linked to the idea of
4		'excellence', usually operationalised as exceptionally high
5		standards of academic achievement. Quality is achieved if the
6		standards are surpassed
7	Perfection or consistency	focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet.
8		Quality in this sense is summed up by the interrelated ideas
9		of zero defects and getting things right first time. Often
10		thought not to apply to a learning situation where no one
11		wants students to be all the same, it does, however, have
12		relevance in areas such as consistency of academic judgement
13		and reliability of management information
14	Fitness for purpose	judges quality by the extent to which a product or service
15		meets its stated purpose. The purpose may be
16		customer-defined to meet requirements or (in education) is
17		usually institution-defined to reflect institutional mission (or
18		course objectives), or indeed defined by external professional
19		bodies. Fitness for purpose is often allied with another
20		so-called definition of quality 'fitness of purpose', which
21		evaluates whether the quality-related intentions of an
22		organisation are adequate. It provides a check on fitness for
23		purpose. As such, fitness of purpose is not a definition of
24		quality <i>per se</i>
25	Value for money	assesses quality via return on investment or expenditure. At the
26		heart of the value-for-money approach in education is the
27		notion of accountability. Public services, including education,
28		are expected to be accountable to the funders. Increasingly,
29		students are also considering the value for money of their
30		own investment in higher education
31	Transformation	this view sees quality as a process of change, which in higher
32		education adds value to students through their learning
33		experience. Education is not a service for a customer but an
34		ongoing process of transformation of the participant. This
35		leads to two notions of transformative quality in education:
36		enhancing the consumer and empowering the consumer
37		

38

39 is that it had a bottom-up approach in which the higher education institutions
 40 and those working within these should have a voice and be invited to engage in
 41 discussions on how to 'establish a quality culture' (EUA, 2006, p. 4). The project
 42 aimed to increase awareness of the need to develop an internal quality culture in
 43 universities and aid wide dissemination of existing best practices in the field. It
 44 further wanted to promote the introduction of *internal* quality management to
 45 improve quality levels and help universities to approach external procedures of
 46 quality assurance in a constructive way. Finally, it aimed to contribute to the
 47 Bologna Process by strengthening the attractiveness of European universities.

48 This implies a search for excellence through the dissemination of best practices
 49 but is principally about the introduction, implicitly, of a culture of quality improve-
 50 ment, so does not militate against any of the schematic definitions. What it does do,
 51 though, is presume that an internal quality culture is worth striving for because of
 52 its improvement potential and that practice in developing a quality culture is
 53 transferable. It also presumes that external quality assurance is useful and that,
 54 somehow, a quality culture will make European universities attractive.

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1 Although the belief related to the 'establishment' of a culture might hint at a
2 more manipulative approach for understanding culture, the project still empha-
3 sised that quality should not be defined from above, that it was up to the individual
4 institution to define quality, as it would not be feasible, or even desirable, to apply
5 a shared definition of quality to institutions with different missions and purposes
6 (EUA, 2006, p. 9). Still, when reporting from the project, EUA did argue that any
7 quality culture was based on two distinct elements. First, a set of shared values,
8 beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality (a psychological aspect,
9 which refers to understanding, flexibility, participation, hopes and emotions).
10 Second, a structural or managerial element with well-defined processes that
11 enhance quality and coordinate efforts (which refers to tasks, standards and
12 responsibilities of individuals, units and services) (EUA, 2006, p. 10).

13 The Report (EUA, 2006, p. 11) noted that most of the consultation groups
14 took the notion of 'quality culture' for granted: a situation reflected in other
15 publications that want to build (Mehta, undated), create (Enemark, 2000) or
16 embed (Korbel & Lis, undated) a quality culture. In the EUA study, only the
17 Student Support Services Network agreed on a formal definition of quality
18 culture. It defined it as 'an organisational climate in which groups of staff work
19 together to realise their specific tasks'.

20 Hence, if we relate the concept of quality culture as outlined by the EUA to
21 more established perspectives on how to understand culture, it seems evident that
22 the definitions and understandings brought forward are characterised by a rela-
23 tively high degree of ambiguity. Quality culture is, on the one hand, impossible to
24 define since every higher education institution is unique (culture as something an
25 organisation is), while on the other it could be brought forward by structural or
26 managerial efforts stimulating shared values and beliefs.

27 To further complicate the picture, one could also argue that the quality culture
28 concept is heavily related to political ambitions, nationally and internationally, of
29 changing the way higher education institutions work and function in a more
30 fundamental way. The strong pressure for reform stemming from the European
31 Commission has already been mentioned. The pressure for reform may be equally
32 strong from national governments in certain countries. In such a political perspec-
33 tive, quality culture is a tool for preparing the institutions for the consequences of
34 this autonomy, both with respect to how they handle external demands (e.g. the
35 ability to respond to external quality assurance schemes), and internal develop-
36 ments in governance (e.g. promoting stronger internal management structures). As
37 such, it seems that quality culture, in practice, is everything for everyone.

38 However, this account of the history of the notion of culture, combined with a
39 brief overview of more recent developments concerning quality in higher educa-
40 tion, is not just an esoteric analysis of a concept but raises important issues and
41 relationships for the idea of a quality culture. First, in developing this notion, one
42 needs to be aware of the critique of culture as a homogeneous, evolving elitist
43 concept. Second, culture still retains a sense that it is about creative endeavours of
44 a particular artistic form. Third, counter to a view of separate cultural producers
45 and consumers is the dialectical synthesis of the 'producer' and the 'reader', which
46 is important in thinking about the way quality cultures are developed. Fourth,
47 culture, in its democratic form, is about a learned way of life, a context for
48 knowledge production. Fifth, culture is symbolic as much as it is material. Sixth,
49 culture and ideology are related, which tends to be overlooked in analyses of

1 'quality culture'. Seventh, there is, arguably, a dialectical relationship between
2 culture and economy, not a deterministic one. Eighth, culture may be construed as
3 transcending the human actors or as possessed uniquely by people. Ninth, sub-
4 cultures can be sites of resistance; a documented effect of the quality movement in
5 higher education (Newton, 2000). Hence, if we are to take the whole concept of
6 quality culture seriously, we need to acknowledge this complexity. Given five
7 different definitions of quality and an array of notions of culture, the intersections
8 between the two concepts are potentially vast.

9 10 **Quality Culture and the Links to Teaching and Learning**

11 The question then is whether we should just accept this seemingly never-ending
12 complexity. It seems indeed difficult not to. Still, it is important to note that
13 much of this complexity is related to an implicit understanding of quality culture
14 as manipulative, as seeing it as an end product, and by relating it to various
15 functions raised by external and internal stakeholders in higher education. If we,
16 as a point of departure, accept that culture is a way of life, then quality culture
17 becomes a tool that can be useful for analysis, questioning and dialogue in
18 higher education. This implies a change of perspective concerning the purpose
19 associated with quality culture. Hence, instead of starting by asking 'who do we
20 want to be?' perhaps a better question would be 'who are we?' It also implies that
21 we should look for tools that could be helpful in answering more fundamental
22 questions about individual, group and organisational functioning. The purpose of
23 this article is not to argue for a special approach in this respect. If culture is
24 democratic and a way of life, then one can also imagine various ways to answer
25 the question of who we are.

26 However, as a demonstration of one possible approach forward, *Cultural*
27 *Theory*, inspired by Douglas (1982) and outlined by Thompson *et al.* (1990),
28 suggests that there are only two dimensions that are of importance in understand-
29 ing an individual's involvement in social life:

- 30 • group: i.e. whether individual behaviour is group-controlled
- 31 • grid: i.e. whether individual behaviour is pre-scribed by external rules and
32 regulations
- 33
- 34

35 The advantages of this theory are that it reduces complexity by linking values,
36 beliefs, structure and actions into an integrated framework (Maassen, 1996, p. 77),
37 suggesting that there are a very limited number of possible 'ways of life'³. Another
38 advantage is that it includes the political or normative dimension so often found
39 related to quality and quality assurance (Hood, 1998; Henkel, 2000; Newton,
40 2000), while it at the same time pays attention to the potential dynamic character
41 of quality and how it might be interpreted (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Stensaker,
42 1998).

43 The point here is not to outline the details of the cultural theory approach or
44 to claim the superiority of this approach, but to hint to the advantages to linking
45 analysis in higher education to more established theories and concepts within the
46 social sciences in general (see Maassen, 1996 on the application of cultural theory
47 within higher education).

Combining the group/grid dimensions as suggested by Douglas (1982) results in four possible Weberian ideal-types of 'quality culture' (see Table II).

TABLE II. 'Quality Culture' in a 'Cultural Theory' framework

Degree of group-control	Strong	Weak
Intensity of external rules		
Strong	<i>Responsive</i>	<i>Reactive</i>
Weak	<i>Regenerative</i>	<i>Reproductive</i>

(Inspired by Thompson *et al.*, 1990 and Hood, 1998).

Responsive Quality Culture

as an ideal-type is primarily led by external demands, be they governmental imperatives, such as widening access, or agency expectations of compliance, such as delivering a self-assessment document. The responsive mode is positive in taking the opportunities offered (or forced on) the institution and using them to review practices, create forward-looking agendas, explore how to maximise benefit from engagement with policies or requirements and to engineer improvement. The responsive mode will thus have an improvement agenda for quality assurance, although it will be acutely aware of accountability issues and compliance requirements. It is likely that the responsive mode will attempt to learn from culturally similar good practice, adopt it and (hopefully) modify it, but essentially see the culture as something created to deal with the evaluation problem, a solution to an issue created by others. This is likely to be exacerbated internally by a lack of buy-in to a quality culture as a way of life and lack of feeling of ownership or of any real control. Rather, quality culture will appear as existing beyond their control as something, perhaps, that the institution encourages its staff to embrace but which is unconnected with everyday experience, a parallel reality that staff journey to periodically.

Reactive Quality Culture

as an ideal-type reacts to, rather than engages with external demands. The reactive mode may take advantage when action is linked to reward, such as research evaluations linked to funding, but is likely to be reluctant to embrace most forms of quality evaluation, having reservations about the potential outcomes. The reactive mode will have doubts about any improvement potential resulting from evaluation, will tend to be driven by compliance and, reluctantly, accountability; although mourning the loss of trust (and autonomy). The reactive mode will tend to deal with one thing at a time, with a rather disjointed or dislocated cultural ethos that may well reinvent wheels. The quality culture is likely to be construed as externally constructed, managed and imposed, with little or no sense of ownership. It is more likely to be something delegated to a specific space (a quality office). The reactive mode may, for example, harbour counter cultures among academics that perceives any kind of quality culture as a beast to be fed (Newton, 2000).

1 *Regenerative Quality Culture*

2 as an ideal-type is focused on internal developments, albeit fully aware of the
3 external context and expectations. The regenerative mode, although taking the
4 opportunities afforded via review exercises and making the most of government
5 initiatives, is one that has a coordinated plan for its own internal regeneration
6 which has primacy and external opportunities are included where they add value,
7 otherwise they are accommodated at the margins or even actively subverted. A
8 regenerative quality culture tends to be widespread, with clear overall goals, in a
9 state of flux as activities and events evolve. Its dynamism is manifest not just in an
10 improvement agenda but in an ongoing reconceptualisation of what it knows,
11 where it is going and even the language in which it frames its future direction. The
12 improvement process will be a taken-for-granted norm and the regenerative mode
13 will assume that its continual improvement programme is itself a form of account-
14 ability. The regenerative mode will likely encompass a learning-organisation
15 approach, seeking out learning opportunities, benchmarking possibilities and gener-
16 ating space for reflective review. The quality culture will be indistinguishable
17 from everyday work practice and while it leads to regeneration it will be unques-
18 tioned. Ideologically, the quality culture will be attuned with the aspirations of the
19 team. However, if regeneration stalls or is interfered with externally, be it by a
20 higher layer of management or by an external force, the quality culture will have an
21 intrinsic subversive potential.

22
23 *Reproductive Quality Culture*

24 as an ideal-type is focused on reproducing the *status quo*, manipulating the situation
25 to minimise the impact of external factors as far as possible. The reproductive
26 mode is focused on what the institution or its sub units do best and for what it is
27 rewarded and its plans go little beyond reproducing them. A widespread, interna-
28 lised quality but with clear boundaries, it has established norms and is unlikely to
29 reconceptualise core concepts or future goals. The quality culture, although indis-
30 tinguishable from everyday work practice, is not transparent and is encoded in
31 various taken-for-granted or esoteric practices. Nonetheless a sense of a job well
32 done is maintained and perpetuated through the culture. Ideologically, the quality
33 culture reflects the expertise and individual aspirations of members. Any attempt
34 to develop a more open, self-critical approach is likely to result in an implacable
35 resistance culture.

36 The four quality cultures outlines are, of course, ideal-types. However, central
37 characteristics of all of them are most likely to be found in various higher education
38 settings, and may serve as a starting point for investigating how structure and
39 culture can be matched with respect to quality assurance. This is an important
40 point as studies have shown how structures of quality assurance are often designed
41 without taking into account existing social structures and tacit institutional ways of
42 handling quality assurance issues (Henkel, 2000; Newton, 2000). Hence, it should
43 be quite obvious that a quality assurance system (and 'quality cultures') will be
44 inclined to look very different within a reactive or regenerative cultural setting, or
45 within a responsive or reproductive cultural setting.

46 Our simple argument is that 'localised' knowledge and practice should play a
47 more important part in developing institutional quality assurance schemes, and
48 that it is only when including such localised knowledge that the structure and

1 culture will merge into a specific 'quality culture'. In this article we have used
2 cultural theory to illustrate one way forward in this respect. As mentioned, there
3 may be a number of other ways to capture 'localized' knowledge. Given the
4 different academic profiles of higher education institutions, another way forward
5 would be to link quality culture to a more disciplinary approach, identifying both
6 common grounds and different territories (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Yet another
7 approach could be to emphasise more the symbolic dimensions of academic
8 organisation, investigating the conditions (and limitations) for social integration in
9 the modern university (Dill, 1982).

10 Regardless of the approach chosen they all depend on empirical investment
11 into the culture, the identity and organisational climate of the given institution. As
12 such, the concept of 'quality culture' brings an important dimension into the
13 quality assurance setting; that structures are not enough to enhance quality.

14 **Conclusion**

15
16 What we have done in this article is to offer a more solid theoretical basis for
17 understanding the concept of quality culture. We have identified some of the
18 different understandings of (quality) culture, shown the links between culture and
19 quality and suggested a more simple and empirical way forward for those wanting
20 to make use of the concept in their own institutional settings.

21 In this conclusion, we still want to underline that applying 'quality culture' in
22 a higher education setting should be done with caution. Thus, our main conclusion
23 is that 'quality culture' first and foremost can be a tool for asking questions about
24 how things work, how institutions function, who they relate to, and how they see
25 themselves. The dominant problem with quality culture as it is used today is that
26 the concept is thought of as the *answer* to challenges, while in reality, it is a concept
27 for *identifying* potential challenges.

28 However, in the process of identifying potential challenges, the following nine
29 caveats should still be kept in mind. First, there is often an implicit cultural
30 imperialism associated with quality culture. This ranges from the presumption that
31 quality culture is necessary through to an assumption that best practice is trans-
32 ferable from one context to another: usually, in higher education, from north-west
33 European or North American practices. Second, one should be careful in seeing
34 quality culture as pre-defined, rather viewing it as a way of life. Third, if the latter,
35 quality culture is not mechanistic or codified, a system produced by specialists for
36 adoption by others but an iterative, indeed dialectical, process of evolution that
37 does not just focus on internal processes but relates them to a wider appreciation
38 of social and political forces and locates them historically. Quality culture is not a
39 panacea, something that can be disengaged from a wider lived reality. Fourth, the
40 dialectical evolution is compatible with a democratic notion of quality culture as a
41 lived, learned experience that itself generates knowledge, rather than simply pro-
42 cesses it. Fifth, a quality culture is not just about checking outputs at each stage but
43 is also a frame of mind, as much of the management literature implies. However,
44 sixth, this is not just a matter of raising consciousness but a fundamental question
45 of ideology. A quality culture is an ideological construct, a fact that cannot be
46 glossed by a set of prescriptions or recipes for implementation. Seventh, a quality
47 culture is not likely to be constructed irrespective of the context in which it is
48 located, which again limit the possibilities for knowledge transfer. Eighth, a quality

1 culture is nothing if it isn't owned by the people who live it, which raises the issue,
2 ninth, of resistance to and engagement with quality cultures, that will be endemic
3 in higher education if academics see quality culture as a managerialist fad, as a
4 means to reduce their academic freedom or as in any other way disempowering.
5

6 NOTES

- 7 1. Williams (1983, p. 91), noted that:
8 in archaeology and in *cultural anthropology* the reference to **culture** or a
9 **culture** is primarily to *material* production, while in history and *cultural*
10 *studies* the reference is primarily to *signifying* or *symbolic* systems. . . . The
11 anthropological use is common in the German, Scandinavian and
12 Slavonic language groups, but . . . subordinate to the senses of art and
13 learning, or of a general process of human development, in Italian and
14 French.
15 2. However, this does not imply that culture was absent in higher education
16 research all together. Studies by Välimaa (1995) and Maassen (1996) are just ^[10]
17 some examples of research in higher education with an applied cultural frame-
18 work. Our point is that within the area of quality assurance, such links have
19 been absent in the main.
20 3. Thompson *et al.* (1990, p. 7) suggests that there are only five ways of life;
21 Hierarchy, Fatalism, Egalitarianism, Individualism and Autonomy. However,
22 the latter refers to those who totally withdraw from social involvement. The
23 latter way of life is not included as a category in this article.
24

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