NWCCU's Paradigm Shift: Part III

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In the November 2019 Beacon we wrestled with the seemingly disharmonious fundamentals of accreditation: *accountability* and *improvement*. In March 2020, we introduced two potential interventions to resolve this conflict: 1) contextualized, qualitative performance indicators; and, 2) leadership strategies that promote collaboration and trust. Continuing on in our discussion, we will explore early findings from the NWCCU Quality Culture Project – an initiative aimed at understanding how higher education stakeholders in the Northwest region understand quality assurance (QA) processes; what underpins their views; and, the internal and external factors that may curtail the positive intentions of assuring academic quality.

NWCCU Quality Culture Project

In Fall 2019, we embarked on an ambitious project to study factors that positively and negatively impact a *culture of quality* in NWCCU membership institutions. A culture of quality is defined as a culture "in which structural/managerial and cultural/psychological elements act in synergy to continuously improve education" (Bendermacher, Egbrink, Wolfhagen & Dolmans, 2016, p.39). The study involves a systematic literature review and interrogation of organizational frameworks and leadership theories to examine the conceptual elements of a culture of quality, the results of which informed the development of a survey and focus group discussion questions.

The Covid-19 crisis has impacted our project timelines; yet, we were fortunate to host four focus groups in early March with 37 participants representative of four-year private, four-year public, and two-year public institutions; and, one tribal college. The unexpected variable of Covid-19 was not present at the beginning of our research but will undoubtably influence future participant responses. As such, the March focus groups of faculty members, ALOs, provosts, and institutional research staff will act as a control group as we press forward with a revised research question that considers how perspectives on QA processes shift in a time of crisis. It is our hope to have more data collected via surveys and analyzed in time to share at the November 17-20, 2020 NWCCU Annual Conference, whether that be in person or virtually time will tell. While times are uncertain, we remain determined and so will necessarily move forward with revised methods of investigation in the near future (*tentatively:* August survey and October focus groups) with the intent to submit recommendations to the NWCCU Commission in January 2021 and deliver a comprehensive presentation at the March 2021 ALO Workshop.

Perspectives from the Field
March 2020 Focus Groups: Preliminary Findings

A glimpse into the focus group data offers some expected and some conceptually intriguing results! The first discussion topic we posed to participants explored *stakeholder perspectives*. We asked:

1. How are the current accreditation practices perceived by different stakeholder groups at your organization?
2. Where could the differences stem from? Are the perceptions congruent with the institution's quality assurance philosophy or do they subvert it?
3. How do you balance competing perspectives and priorities to meet different stakeholder needs?

When we dove into the responses we searched for themes by coding the text and clustering similar topics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Consistent with existing conceptual frameworks (for example, see Bendermacher etl al., 2019; Dziminska et. al., 2018; Sattler & Sonntag, 2018; Vettori, 2018) and personal experience, the coded text was categorized and eventually sorted into broad themes. Several expected themes emerged, such as *accountability*, *leadership*, and *improvement*; however, a theme we found conceptually fascinating was the interweaving of the *affective* (emotional) domain, which we will begin to unpack below.

Theme 1: Leadership (example subtopics: trust, communication, collaboration)
    The most frequently cited theme and corresponding subtopics was *leadership*, with 27% of participants attributing leadership behaviours to promoting or inhibiting quality. Participant narratives described *trust* most commonly with a positive sentiment when associated with *improvement, collaboration, communication, learning,* and *development* (emphases are added):

> Everyone at all levels is **engaged** in quality improvement. We have embedded group discussions and reviews with feedback which has lessened siloes. We have a great accreditation **team** who are all wanting to do the best, especially for students. **Trust** - we have very good people who really want students to succeed. (Institutional Research staff, 4-year public)

> We strive to hear **everyone** out and understand and be comfortable that different cultures exist in various units. It is OK to have different views but we need to find a way to **work together** and move towards **trust** and **development** over compliance. It is important to have good **communication** and include faculty and students. (Provost, 4-year public)

Contrastingly, a negative sentiment appeared when trust was associated with *siloes, overloaded faculty, regulation, control,* and *stick* (as opposed to carrot).

> Accreditation serves as the **stick**… It does not really square with trust. A challenge is how to emphasize improvement. (Dean, 2-year public)

> For those closely involved in accreditation, they see it as relating to trust and development. However, some faculty view it as **regulatory** and **control**. (ALO, 4-year private)

The literature tells a similar story of trust and its associated inhibitors. Dziminska, Fijalkowska, and Sulkowski's (2018) *Trust-Based Quality Culture Conceptual Model* maps the relationships between similar concepts in order to find the critical elements of a trust-based model. The model considers the cultural and structural components necessary for achieving quality, and elaborates upon key drivers of change (e.g., avoiding excessive bureaucracy, transparency, user-friendly systems). They found that a partnership approach leads to empowerment of participants within the educational process and facilitated ownership of teaching and learning processes.

    As we have argued in a previous Beacon article, a leadership approach that prioritizes partnerships, reciprocity, and trust could mediate tensions between competing stakeholders. A people-oriented approach associated with the *clan subculture,* which incorporates "empowerment, team building, employee involvement, human resource development, and open communication" (Cameron & Quinn, 2011, p.57) is found to be positively correlated to the effectiveness of a culture of quality (Bendermacher et. al., 2016).

    To enact these concepts, we can look to Jones, Lefoe, Harvey, and Ryland's (2012) *Action Self Enabling Reflective Tool* (ASERT). The tool presents inputs (people are involved; processes are supportive; professional development; resources) that support the dimensions and values (context/trust; culture/respect; change/recognition; relationships/collaboration*)* associated with distributed leadership. The tool

encompasses both cultural and structural components that are necessary for implementing distributed leadership and offers some practical applications for QA practitioners (e.g., involving many people in the process; and, an organizational culture in which trust is emphasized rather than regulation).

Theme 2: Affective (example subtopics: scary, apathy, threat)

The affective dimension of organizational culture is profoundly influential in how accreditation processes are subjectively and emotionally experienced. Affect theory points to phenomena below the surface, those parts of our subconscious that influence emotions and feelings and have a powerful ability to influence our behaviour and decision-making. Interestingly, whether people eagerly or passively engage, covertly or overtly resist QA processes has been linked to how the processes are framed (Ewell, 2009). Not surprisingly, that sentiment was shared by focus group participants, as well. For example, one participant felt *pressure* when accreditation was associated with *compliance* (faculty member, 4-year public). Similarly, a participant witnessed *resistance* when it was associated with *bureaucracy* (institutional research staff, 4-year public). Several faculty members cited it as a *threat* (ALO, 4-year public) or *scary* (ALO, 4-year public) when accreditation was viewed as *extra work* (institutional research staff, 4-year public) or a *cultural imposition* (Provost, tribal college). As one participant alludes to, perceived value of the processes effect stakeholder engagement (emphases are added):

> Viewed positively by a few. Others are **ambivalent**, and viewed negatively by many depending on the group. There are differences in understanding, goals, and **perceived value**. (ALO, 4-year private)

> There is a **culture of fear**. Some perceive accreditation as **threatening** and a **risk** to the university's reputation. Remedies to this could include: meetings with stakeholders to share information about the **purpose** of accreditation (e.g., it is a version of peer review); and, simple check-in to see how well the institution is keeping its' promise. (Provost, 4-year public)

> Perception varies due to levels, or lack of, information and **engagement**, shared or **inclusion** in the accreditation process. Too much focus on **urgency** and completion and not part of **institutional fabric**. (Chief Financial Officer, 2-year public)

However, when accreditation was viewed as an opportunity for learning and development, the mindset shifted from one of fear to one of progress, yet acknowledged that cultural change takes time:

> Old leadership equated accreditation with compliance so we are moving to get out from under that view. The college needs to see the NWCCU Standards as **best practice** and attempt to move towards them in a **formative** way. This will take time. (IR staff, 2-year public)

> The fall year-7 visit greatly alleviated the previous perception of accreditation as a "**scary**" compliance-focused endeavour. It changed the focus to accreditation as a self-guided "check-in" to see how well we are keeping our promises. We need to continue the process of cultural change and **development**. (ALO, 4-year public)

We have discussed this tension and need for a shift in interpretation and narrative surrounding accreditation (from accountability to improvement) many times before because evidence suggests reframing the discourse can improve organisational success and, ultimately, student success.

Changing the narrative sounds like a simple task yet global trends towards managerialism and marketization combine to create a climate of accountability and greater scrutiny despite local efforts, such as those from NWCCU:

My intent is to create and implement a formative, i.e., developmental approach in working with institutional leadership to achieve this vision, rather than a summative or punitive approach (Ramaswamy, 2018).

Responsive and responsible leadership, the kind that can produce social change, must consider the fundamental wants and needs, aspirations, and values of all stakeholders. This requires, as a minimum, that participative and inclusive mechanisms be put in place that recognize the right of participants to have adequate knowledge of alternate options, goals, and programs, as well as the capacity to choose among them. Leadership processes are ethical if the people in the relationship (faculty, staff, administrators, and students) freely agree that the intended changes fairly reflect their mutual purposes. Consensus is an important part of what makes leadership *leadership*, and it does so because free choice is a moral necessity.

Conclusion

The preliminary findings tell us that whether someone perceives accreditation to be a threat (accountability) or an opportunity (improvement) is dependent upon how it is framed in the local context, and on how leadership behaviours promote or inhibit trust, communication, and collaboration. This first glimpse at the research shows a tight web of interrelated topics, which we will unpack further and share with you in the next Beacon. In particular, we will explore results from the second discussion topic: *performance measurement and assessment.* In preparation for this, we recommend reading the following articles which provide diverse perspectives on contextualized evaluation methodologies:

Disterheft, A., Azeitero, U.M., Filho, W.L. & Caeiro, S. (2015). Participatory processes in sustainable universities: What to assess? *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education, 16*(5), 748-771.

Kirkhart, K.E. (2010). Eyes on the prize: Multicultural validity and evaluation theory. *American Journal of Evaluation, 31*(3), 400-413.

LaFrance, J., Nichols, R. & Kirkhart, K.E. (2012). Culture writes the script: On the centrality of context in indigenous evaluation. In D.J. Rog, J.L. Fitzpatrick & R.F. Conner (Eds.), *Context: A framework for its influence on evaluation practice. New Directions for Evaluation, 135*, 59-74.

In the interim, please "follow" us in future issues of The Beacon where we will discuss the theories and applications pertaining to the areas described earlier in this article. We hope that you engage with us in commenting about the content. Please email us at pgoad@nwccu.org or ahoare@tru.ca.

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Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J.D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5[th ed].). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Dzimiska, M., Fijalkowska, J. & Sulkowski, L. (2018). Trust-based quality culture conceptual model for higher education institutions. *Sustainability, 10*(8), 2599. https://doi.org/10.3390/su10082599

Ewell, P.T. (2009). Assessment, accountability, and improvement: Revisiting the tension. *National Institute for Learning Outcomes and Assessment,* Occasional Paper #1. Retrieved from http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/documents/PeterEwell_005.pdf

Jones, S., Lefoe, G., Harvey, M. & Ryland, K. (2012). Distributed leadership: A collaborative framework for academics, executives, and professionals in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 34*(1), 67-78.

Nygaard, C. & Belluigi, D. Z. (2011). A proposed methodology for contextualised evaluation in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 36*(6), 657-671. https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1080/026029310036500

Sattler, C. & Sonntag, K. (2018). Quality cultures in higher education institutions: Development of the quality culture inventory. In Meusburger, P. et. al. (Eds.), *Geographics of the university, Knowledge and Space* (pp.313-327), DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75593-9_9

Vettori, O. (2018). Shared misunderstandings? Competing and conflicting meaning structures in quality assurance. *Quality in Higher Education, 24*(2), 85-101.