NWCCU's Paradigm Shift: Part II

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In the November 2019 Beacon we wrestled with the seemingly disharmonious fundamentals of accreditation: *accountability* and *improvement*. Continuing on in our discussion, we seek to unpack how people understand quality assurance (QA) processes; what underpins their views; and, what (and how) do internal and external factors curb the positive intentions of assuring academic quality?

Why does it matter?

QA practitioners and higher education leaders are required by regulators to ensure policies and processes are met, yet they operate within a system of collegial governance with faculty autonomy over teaching and learning pedagogy. The over reliance on quantitative measures for performance assessment feeds the tension between quality assurance processes as an accountability measure versus as a tool for continuous quality improvement. Despite new rhetoric for accreditation as *mission-driven accountability* – suggesting a contextualized approach to performance measurement - we continue to see attempts to rate the quality of institutions by numeric metrics alone. Can the essence of the value of higher education be captured in a number? Not likely.

Increasing external demands solidify the need for higher education institutions to focus internally on their quality assurance processes and to embed them meaningfully within strategic planning frameworks.

What should we aim for?

A *culture of quality* is achieved when two discrete elements are present: a psychological component that includes a shared set of values and a commitment to quality; and, a well-coordinated structural mechanism that includes clearly defined policies and processes aimed at enhancing quality (EUA, 2006).

What does it look like?

"A culture of quality is one in which everybody in the organization, not just the quality controllers, is responsible for quality" (Crosby, 1986).

The points of tension and barriers to a culture of quality fall predominantly within the cultural realm and, therefore, we recommend that the points of intervention and potential solutions should draw from theories that focus on relational, socio-historical, and subjective principles of social constructivism. These contextual influencers are important considerations for higher education leaders because,

> Member and candidate institutions range from large, urban, multi-campus universities to small, rural colleges and Tribal colleges; from religiously-affiliated colleges to non-denominational institutions; from liberal arts-focused, private

> institutions to professional/technical public colleges; from institutions of residential student communities to colleges of all-commuter student bodies; and from those institutions that are highly selective to those with open admission policies. *In respecting such diversity, indicators of educational quality and institutional effectiveness cannot be defined in absolute terms.* (emphasis added) (NWCCU 2020 Handbook)

How can we move towards a culture of quality?

Qualitative performance indicators

Political and academic leaders acknowledge the contextualized nature of education – hence the call to action for *mission-driven accountability*. Yet, little evidence exists of higher education institutions that embed qualitative indicators into their performance measurement systems, nor are there federal or state governments (provincial, for our Canadian friends) that require institutions to collect and report on qualitative measures.

One method that holds promise results from the work of Dr. Will Garrett-Petts and Ms. Sukh Heer Matonovich in BC, Canada. They are exploring how techniques designed for mapping local communities can be adapted to mapping university research cultures. During this process, both students and faculty develop research journey maps in order to compare assumptions, expectations, and experiences. Cultural mapping, argues Garrett-Petts (2020) "affords participants an enhanced understanding of how expert and official institutional representations of the research journey differ from those produced by students; and in the process, how inclusion of student voices and viewpoints can contribute to—and possibly change—undergraduate research planning at our universities" (p.1). The hope is that this pilot project could be adapted as a meaningful performance indicator to inform institutional planning.

How do quality assurance practitioners promote the use of qualitative performance indicators? We have some ideas and we are sure you do too, and over the next year we aim to develop a framework for higher education institutions to begin embedding qualitative measures into their performance measurement systems. For now, we recommend reading the following articles detailing studies related to this endeavor:

> Grebennikov, L. & Shah, M. (2013). Student voice: Using qualitative feedback from students to enhance their university experience. *Teaching in Higher Education, 18* (6), 606-618. https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1080/13562517.2013.774353
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> Nygaard, C. & Belluigi, D. Z. (2011). A proposed methodology for contextualized evaluation in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 36*(6), 657-671. https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1080/026029310036500
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> Tam, M. (2001). Measuring quality and performance in higher education. *Quality in Higher Education, 7*(1), 47-54. https://doi org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.1080/13538320120045076

Collaboration and trust

Multiple stakeholders have the power to determine the success or failure of a culture of quality and therefore it is necessary for QA practitioners to analyze how people perceive QA processes and what underpins their views. To achieve a culture of quality, we contend, requires a pluralistic lens that explores the impact of espoused values and beliefs, and underlying basic assumptions of an institution.

A leadership approach that prioritizes partnerships could mediate tensions between academics and their adversaries - *regulation* and *control.* A relational approach has been linked to the effectiveness of a culture of quality (Bendermacher, oude Egbrink, Wolfhagen & Dolmans, 2016). For example, Hildesheim and Sonntag (2019) discovered that quality-oriented leadership behavior, a key element of which is trust, was positively related to employee commitment, job satisfaction, and professional exchange. Similarly, Dziminska, Fijalkowska, and Sulkowski (2018) found that a partnership approach leads to empowerment of participants within the educational process and facilitated ownership of teaching and learning processes.

What does it look like?

What leadership strategies help build trust and collaboration in North American institutions of higher education? Research in the field of higher education leadership abounds with recommendations (*hello! Entire graduate degrees are built upon this idea)*, yet much of the existing literature in the field draws from the European system. While there is much that can be learned from these scholar-practitioners, there is a noticeable gap in the literature exploring QA practices in relation to leadership interventions in North America. We intend to reduce this gap but, for now, we recommend reading the following articles:

> 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
>
> Hildesheim, C. & Sonntag, K. (2019). The quality culture inventory: A comprehensive approach towards measuring quality culture in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education,* 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1672639

Next steps

By surveying institutions and conducting focus groups, we to aim uncover how common misconceptions may be influencing the accreditation efforts within the region. Data on three areas – perceptions of accreditation, leadership styles, and performance measurement of institutional effectiveness – will be collected to provide NWCCU information to develop resources that strategically lessen the adverse influence of these factors on accreditation efforts. In addition, we intend to map a path for higher education institutions to embed a culture of quality within their organization by identifying approaches to address prevailing misconceptions about QA.

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 will provide

you with a small biography to read ahead of time and 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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