Whitepaper

Quality culture
in higher education

July 2023

Table of
Contents

OUR
TEAM

Pieter Huisman

Pieter Huisman is an endowed professor of Education Law at Tilburg University and has extensive experience in teaching and writing books. He also conducted research including governance and law in education for the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.
Professor Huisman is a Senior Advisor for Hobéon, advising governing bodies and supervisory boards, both national and international, on legal issues and legal structures. He is a member of the Dutch Education Council since 2014.

Roel van Krieken

Roel van Krieken is Senior Advisor of the Consultancy and Training Department of Hobéon. He has extensive experience with advising educational institutes about strategie issues and organisational development. He pursued studies in Educational Sciences with a specialisation in Learning in Organisations and Change Management.

Hobéon is a Dutch consulting firm in specializing in education that was founded in 1992.
We offer services in The Netherlands and around the world. We are member of Group Kiwa.

Abstract

A strong quality culture at the study program level is a key factor in ensuring the quality of education, student performance, and the overall social impact of educational organizations. This raises the question of how to define a "good" quality culture and how it interacts with governance and quality assurance within institutions. There are three main questions to consider: What are the primary characteristics of a "good" quality culture? How can these characteristics be translated into policies, processes, and quality assurance systems? How can governing bodies of institutions ensure that internal quality assurance measures strengthen the quality culture rather than disrupt it? Additionally, how can professionals and stakeholders be involved in this process?

> **A strong quality culture at the study program level is a key factor in ensuring the quality of education**

From the perspective of good governance and organizational development, enhancing the quality culture is crucial for improving educational institutes as a whole. In this paper, we will primarily draw on experiences in the Netherlands to identify the most important prerequisites and factors for implementing a strong quality culture in higher education organizations, supported by research and practical examples. Our focus will be on establishing the necessary connections between governance, process development, and community formation, with a particular emphasis on strengthening leadership within study programs. By aligning these elements, we aim to provide evidence for the development of a sustainable culture that enhances the quality of education.

1. Definition of Quality, Quality Culture, and Main Characteristics of a 'Good' Quality Culture

First and foremost, one could argue that the definition of quality itself is an "essentially contested concept." The definition of quality in higher education largely depends on the context in which the concept is used and the views on the quality of education held by all actors involved. Harvey & Green (1993), for instance, refer to it as "a slippery concept," both in terms of description, discussion, and practical implementation. Their model of five ways of defining quality is still widely used.

Exceptional	Quality as 'excellence', usually operationalised as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. Quality is achieved if the standards are surpassed.
Perfection or consistency	... focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet. Quality in this sense is summed up by the interrelated ideas of zero defects and getting things right first time.
Fitness of purpose	... judges quality by the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose. The purpose may be customer-defined to meet requirements or (in education) is usually institution-defined to reflect institutional mission (or course objectives), or indeed defined by external professional bodies.
Value of money	... assesses quality via return on investment or expenditure. At the heart of value-for-money approach in education is the notion of accountability. Public services, including education, are expected to be accountable to the funders. Increasingly, students are also considering the value for money of their own investment in higher education.
Transformation	This view sees quality as a process of change, which in higher education adds value to students through their learning experience. Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant.

Quality is monitored through various methods and instruments. A quality assurance system encompasses the organizational structure, responsibilities, procedures, processes, and resources that ensure continuous and systematic care for the quality of education. Quality control involves observing products, processes, and services to determine if the achieved quality aligns with the predetermined standards. Finally, quality assurance involves maintaining the quality assurance system, including demonstrating that it meets the necessary criteria and that the realized quality corresponds to the predetermined quality (Van Dam, 2002).

Moreover, internal quality assurance must systematically and continuously monitor and improve the quality of study programs. This requires active involvement of employees, students, alumni, and professionals from the relevant field or industry. Monitoring and improving quality entails periodic evaluations of target realization and taking necessary improvement measures when needed. External quality assurance focuses on the role of accreditation and program visitation by independent peers.

Bollaert's model (2014) describes several stages in the development of quality assurance

Phase	Organisational Process	results
1	Quality is the result of individual commitment	Quality is variable
2	A start has been made with thinking in terms of quality in processes	Quality is the result of a beginning in systematic attention to quality
3	The organisation is managed in a professional manner managed	Quality is guaranteed
4	There is a continuous renewal of the organisation and the management	Quality is continuously linked to innovation
5	The organisation has an external focus and strives for excellence	Quality is recognised by external parties and is seen as excellent and as an international example

So where does the definition of quality culture fit in? This is also a complex and subject to multiple interpretations. Quality culture is deeply ingrained in the policies of many universities and higher education institutions world-wide. The definition of quality culture, first used about 16 years ago by the European University Association (2006), states: "Quality culture refers to an organizational culture that aims to enhance quality permanently and is characterized by two distinct elements: a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations, and commitment towards quality, and a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim to coordinate individual efforts." In this view, quality culture represents a set of values and norms within an organization that contributes to the development of effective and efficient quality assurance. It involves an organization that fosters effective and efficient quality assurance, thereby increasing the quality of education. This implies that quality culture also has a direct relationship with the broader organizational culture within a university or higher education institution. As part of the organizational culture, the quality culture consists of subcultures at various levels within the institution, each with different standards and values. Thus, the quality culture can differ not only between study programs or educational departments but also between institutions (see also Kleijnen et al., 2011).

If we place quality culture within the different stages of quality development as mentioned by Bollaert, it can be situated in stage 4 and/or 5. Based on widely supported scientific research, we can assume that quality culture is thus a part of the broader organizational culture. One of the most well-known and frequently used models for determining the organizational culture of institutions is the "competing values framework" by Quinn & Rohrbaugh (1983). The model recognizes that different values can play important and useful roles within an organization but can also conflict with each other when it comes to implementing change.

When we consider higher education institutions specifically, how can we define a strong or robust quality culture? The Dutch Education Council (Onderwijsraad) provided advice to the Dutch Minister of Education in 2015 on quality culture in higher education. Based on Bollaert (2014), the Council

proposed the following definition: "A culture that encourages all those involved, both internally and externally, to continually focus on defining and achieving the desired quality. It also involves fostering a constructive-critical attitude to strive for necessary quality improvements."

The question then arises: how can we translate this definition into practice? What kind of processes, policies, and interventions are necessary to establish and promote a culture that drives quality within educational institutions?

2. Translation into policies, processes, and systems of quality assurance

Based on an investigation of good practices among 40 higher education institutions in the Netherlands (Leest, Mommers, Sijstermans & Verrijt, 2015), the Dutch Education Council formulated seven common principles for a good quality culture (Onderwijsraad, 2015). It is important to note that these seven characteristics are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. In summary, the principles are as follows:

1. A clear, shared, and embedded educational vision resulting from open dialogue.

    In programs with a strong quality culture, there is a clear vision for the future. The focus is on the program as a whole rather than individual modules. There is extensive coordination and cross-curricular work, with consensus on underlying values and goals. This vision is developed collaboratively with teachers and students, with ongoing discussions about the quality of education and opportunities for improvement.

2. Improvement orientation from a collective and individual learning perspective.

    External quality assurance complements the internal improvement process. External quality assessment serves as a catalyst for advancing the internal conversation about quality. Internal quality assurance supports quality discussions and fosters reflection. Quality assurance is not isolated but connected to professional practice, the educational vision, and core values of the program. Properly implemented PDCA cycles (Plan-Do-Check-Act) encourage reflection, improvement actions, and the use of quality assurance instruments such as course evaluations and feedback from various channels.

3. Educational leadership

   Educational leadership promotes coherence within a program and the implementation of the shared educational vision in practice. It connects formal quality assurance systems and institutional policies, while considering the views, values, and work of individual instructors. Leadership is characterized by a facilitating, coaching, and connecting style.

4. Supportive organizational structure that encourages teamwork and cooperation.

   Working in a team is a crucial concept in programs with a strong quality culture. Teachers share responsibility for education, and the small-scale environment facilitates collective learning, teamwork, coordination, and student involvement. Teachers from different subjects know and interact with each other, promoting continuous communication, feedback, and a non-interventionist approach. Effective communication channels exist between management, teachers, and students.

5. Strong human resource policy

   A key element here is emphasizing the value of a strong HR policy, including assessments, promotions, and conscious talent and competence management. Teacher development aligns with the program's strength and growth. Management is also willing to part ways with lecturers who do not fit the program due to differing ambitions, approaches, or adherence to program norms and values.

6. Student involvement

   Programs with a strong quality culture prioritize high student involvement. The focus is on personal attention and a student-centred approach. Attention is given to the student's personal development, aligning with professional values and standards. Students are not treat-

ed as customers but as members of the academic or college community. Balancing independent study and guidance, students take responsibility 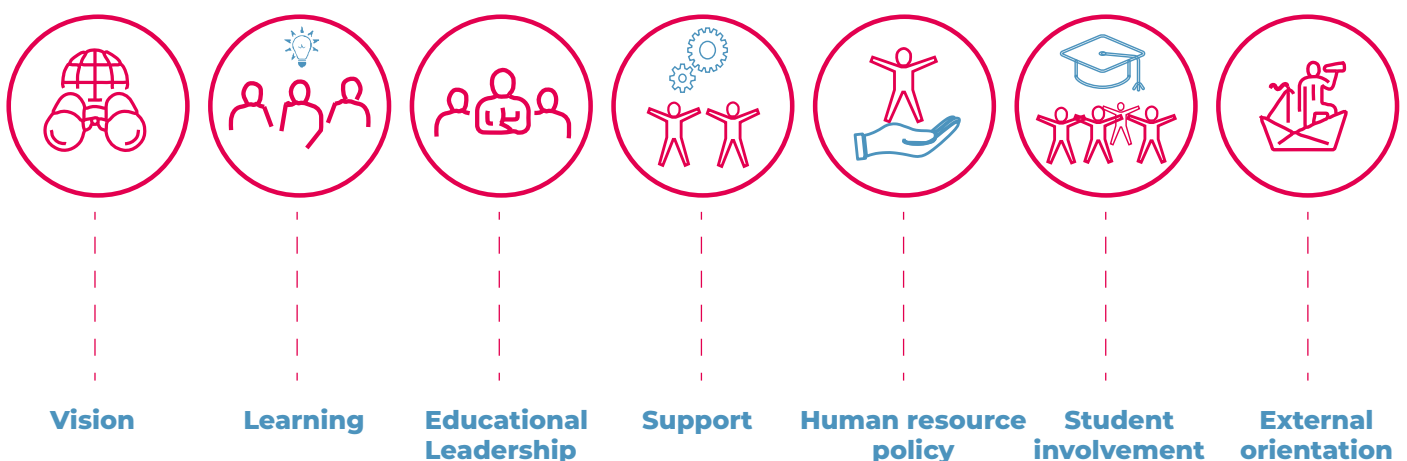for their learning process and academic success. Research indicates that "deep learning" and "student engagement" are strong indicators of good education (Brockerhoff, Huisman & Laufer, 2015).

7. External orientation

Programs with a strong quality culture exhibit a robust external orientation. The management is aware of external developments in research and/or professional practice and adapts accordingly. Feedback from international peers is utilized, and developments in the working field are incorporated into education. There is openness to collaborating with professional field committees, advisory boards, alumni, and organizations within regional, national, and international networks.

Having identified the important elements characterizing a strong quality culture according to the Dutch Education Council, this paper now shifts the focus to the role of governing bodies and how they can steer the organization using quality assurance mechanisms, as well as their influence on the organization as a whole.

Seven common principles for a good quality culture

Vision	Learning	Educational Leadership	Support	Human resource policy	Student involvement	External orientation

(c) Hobéon, juli 2023
bron: Onderwijsraad 2015

3. Ensuring Quality Culture: The Role of Governing Bodies and Institutional

The role and responsibility of governing bodies or executive boards of higher education institutions in fostering a quality culture are crucial. The board of an institution plays a significant role in the decision-making process. According to Dutch law, the executive board is accountable for the quality of education and its assessment: "The executive board of a higher education institution ensures that, as much as possible in cooperation with other institutions, there is a regular assessment, also by independent experts, of the quality of the institution's activities" (translated from art. 1.18 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act).

The executive board is considered a pivotal arena for institutional change and is responsible for quality assurance, organizational efficiency, and effectiveness. In the Netherlands, the higher education policy has shifted towards institutional audits or institutional accreditation, rather than accreditation of individual study programs. The Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization (NVAO) defines an institutional audit as a periodic, external, and independent assessment of the internal quality assurance at an institution. It encompasses both the quality culture and the internal quality assurance system of the institution. The purpose of the institutional audit is to verify that the institution's internal quality assurance system, in conjunction with its quality culture, ensures the realization of its individual vision of good education (NVAO, 2018).

Within the institutional audit, NVAO distinguishes between 'hard' and 'soft' controls: A quality assurance system consists of clear and verifiable aims and objectives, procedures to safeguard quality, embedding of the Plan Do Check Act (PDCA) cycle in the organization, "hard controls," periodic evaluations, and systematic monitoring of improvements. Quality culture, on the other hand, refers to a distinct and manifested vision, a shared focus

on improvements, leadership, accountability, and "soft controls" such as cooperation, self-management, (academic) professionalism, student commitment, and external orientation. Both dimensions, focusing on and pursuing a good quality of education, are considered in the institutional audit. The institution demonstrates the effectiveness of its own synergy between the two dimensions, allowing to determine its own balance. In this framework, the term "quality assurance" explicitly refers to both dimensions: the quality assurance system and the quality culture (NVAO, 2018).

Empirical evidence regarding the influence of governing bodies on the quality of education at the program level is scarce. However, Sursock (2011) has emphasized that further improvement of higher education necessitates a clear division of roles and responsibilities. Therefore, the governance model within the institution is also crucial for optimizing quality culture. The Dutch Education Council has advocated for a subsidiarity model in which the primary responsibility for educational quality and improvement lies with the program as a community of students and teachers. Decisions on objectives, content, educational methods, the pedagogical-didactic process, and the assessment of student and teacher performance are made at this level. The program management is part of this community, and other bodies at the program level, such as the study program committee, the Board of Examiners, the student association, and a possible social advisory board or a professional field committee, also play essential roles (Onderwijsraad, 2015).

The central task of the executive board and/or a supervisory board is to ensure that the expectations and requirements from the government and society are met. The stakeholders at the institutional level should moderate, channel, and stabilize these expectations and demands. By doing so, they create a safe environment in which professionals can perform their work, and students can develop themselves, according to the Dutch Education Council.
The design and functioning of an internal quality assurance system are the responsibilities of the executive board. Quality assurance mechanisms

should not be used merely as checklists. Subsequently, discussions should be held to understand the underlying factors behind the figures and determine the appropriate consequences. In this process, national quality standards and the institutional vision serve as guiding principles. Participation bodies, program committees, the examination committees, and alumni are important sources of information about the quality of education. In summary, when it comes to the role of executive boards in fostering a quality culture, it is expected that they actively engage within the institution and have dialogues with teachers and students.

Furthermore, executive boards have a facilitating role in aspects that contribute to a good quality culture, such as human resource policy. It is also important for the institution to maintain financial stability. The organizational structure can also be utilized to ensure effective leadership. Ensuring the proper functioning of management and support services, which establish frameworks and coordinate courses, is another responsibility in this regard. Bendermacher (2021) conducted empirical research on quality culture, focusing on how it can be enhanced based on the experiences and perspectives of educational leaders. Interviews were conducted with educational leaders from three study programs in the field of healthcare and medicines offered at Maastricht University in the Netherlands. The study involved 25 participants, including course coordinators, bachelor coordinators, and directors of education. Bendermacher concluded that peer learning in teams and communities, attention to professional development, and the establishment of support and innovation networks are at the core of quality culture enhancement. The emphasis on human resources, interrelations, and whole systems thinking stood out as catalysts for quality culture. This finding aligns with the previous study conducted by the Education Council (2015). Therefore, creating an environment that supports such learning and development is crucial for executive boards to foster a quality culture within study programs.

In any case, executive boards must periodically engage in "reality checks." If board members confine themselves to the boardroom, there is a higher risk of neglecting qualitative instruments and steering towards a paper reality. This can create difficulties in effectively assessing educational visions and program quality. This problem is well-known when managing professionals. Therefore, executive boards must ensure that their frameworks enjoy broad support and are established through interactive processes. This approach also helps to align policies with processes and people.

4. Conclusions: Improving Quality Culture through (Educational) Leadership and Constant Reflection

The aim of this paper was to explore ways to connect structures, processes, and people to enhance quality culture within higher education organizations. Based on a sample study by the Dutch Education Council, which provided advice on the quality of higher education, we have defined seven characteristics for a good quality culture.

One of these characteristics is (educational) leadership. In our opinion, leadership is an essential element that the Executive Board has competence over and can influence the culture of an organization. Leadership acts as a bridge between the structural/managerial and cultural/psychological elements by creating trust and shared understanding. According to Bendermacher et al. (2017), "Leaders within Higher Education Institutions act as central drivers for quality culture development by influencing the allocation of resources, clarifying roles and responsibilities, establishing partnerships, and influencing people and process management."

Leadership in educational organizations is widely recognized as an important factor in achieving good performance. Both national and international research has shown that leadership influences student performance and the overall performance of the school organization. Leadership in education specifically focuses on managing education, creating a conducive learning environment, and fostering a culture of quality.

The Executive Board can influence quality culture in programs by selecting, leading, and directing key figures in educational leadership practices, such as the program director in higher education. Program directors have a responsibility to establish a well-embedded quality culture through four elements. Firstly, they provide direction to the program by formulating a mission and vision in collaboration with students and lecturers (the aca-

demic community). Secondly, they promote collective learning and development for individual teachers and the collective group. Thirdly, they establish program management, paying attention to structures, processes, and culture. Lastly, they manage the educational program through constant reflection on the quality of actions and results. These practices can be seen as an elaboration of "transformational leadership" complemented by views on shared leadership and the development of a culture of collective learning. The transformational approach to educational leadership focuses on developing the organization's capacity to innovate. As a transformational leader, the program director inspires staff with a vision, seeks to improve individual and collective problem-solving and learning processes, fosters a collaborative professional culture, encourages professional development among lecturers in the context of program development, and stimulates the team to identify and solve problems together (Verbiest, 2010).

As mentioned earlier in chapter 1, quality culture is defined by continuous movement, constant thinking, and reflection on the quality of education. This reflection should be broadly shared, not limited to the "internal audit committee" or a "quality assurance" officer, and not only during accreditation processes. It is a collective responsibility. We have previously referred to this as the educational institution being a reflective organization (Hanssens et al., 2022).

Reflective organizations, focused on achieving a strong quality culture through consistent reflection, are also more resilient. This conclusion is supported by the Dutch Inspectorate, which examined the performance of various student groups in relation to the changes implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic in its yearly report "The Staat van het Onderwijs 2021" (State of Education, Dutch Inspectorate 2021). An effective quality culture was identified as an important predictor for good educational performance.

In conclusion, managing educational leadership and providing time for constant reflection are essential for embedding a strong quality culture

within an institution. By fostering trust, establishing a shared system for measuring quality performance, working collaboratively across departments and institutions, and creating professional learning communities (as mentioned in Bendermacher's dissertation, 2021), quality culture can flourish. In this way, systematic improvement can be achieved, and connections between processes, policies, and people can truly be established.

Leadership in educational organizations is widely recognized as an important factor in achieving good performance

References

- Bendermacher, G.W.G., oude Egbrink, M.G.A., Wolfhagen, I.H.A.P. et al. (2017) Unravelling quality culture in higher education: a realist review. High Educ 73, 39–60.

- Bendermacher, G. (2021). Navigating from quality management to quality culture. [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. Ipskamp. https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20210702gb

- Bollaert, L. (2014). Quality Assurance (Qa) in Europe (2005–2015). Journal of the European Higher Education Area, 3

- Dam, F. van (2002). Kwaliteitszorg in de onderwijspraktijk. Alphen aan den Rijn: Kluwer.

- Hanssens, H., Huisman, P.W.A, Krieken, R. van., Leerdam, M. (2022), De reflectieve onderwijsor- ganisatie', whitepaper, https://www.hobeon.nl/white-paper-de-reflectieve-onderwijsorganisatie

- Harvey, L. & Green, D. (1993). Defining Quality. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 18(1), 9-34.

- Huisman, J., Brockerhoff, L., & Laufer, M. (2015). Factors affecting the quality of higher education: a literature review: scoping report for the Dutch Education Council.

- Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2021). Staat van het hoger onderwijs. Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs.

- Kleijnen, J., Dolmans, D., Willems, J. & Hout, H. van (2011). Effectieve Kwaliteitszorg vereist een Kwaliteitscultuur (paper). Maastricht: Onderwijs Research Dagen

- Leest, B., Mommers, A., Sijstermans, E., Verrijt T. (2015). Kwaliteitszorg en kwaliteitscultuur in het hoger onderwijs. Deel 2: Empirisch onderzoek. Nijmegen: ITS.

- NVAO (2018). Assessment framework for the higher education system of the Netherlands https://www.nvao.net/en/procedures/the-netherlands/institutional-audit

- Onderwijsraad (2015). Kwaliteit in het hoger onderwijs. Den Haag: Onderwijsraad

- Quinn, R.E., & Rohrbaugh, J. (1983). A spatial model of effectiveness criteria: towards a competing values approach to organizational analysis. Management Science, 29 (3), 363-3

- Sursock, A. (2011). Examining Quality Culture - Part II: Processes and Tools - Participation, Owner- ship and Bureaucracy. Brussel: EUA

- Verbiest, E. (2010) 'Op weg naar Nieuw Onderwijskundig leiderschap', december 2010; https://www.nso-cna.nl/kenniscentrum/inspiratiebronnen/op-weg-naar-onderwijskundig-leiderschap/