

Factors Influencing the Process of Developing Quality Culture at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University-Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract

The research paper identifies some key factors that influence the process of developing quality culture (QC) at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University-Ho Chi Minh City (USSH, VNU-HCM) from the result of the study carried out at this institution in 2012-2013. It firstly presents the process of developing QC at USSH, VNU-HCM, secondly analyzes some factors affecting this process positively and negatively, and finally makes some recommendations to the teaching and management staff, the university and its units in order to develop QC by taking advantage of the positive factors and trying to overcome the negative ones.

Keywords: Quality culture; Vietnamese higher education; Quality culture

1.Introduction

One of the goals of *Vietnam Higher Education Reform Agenda*¹ in accordance with the Decree No. 14 promulgated by the Government is to set up Quality Assurance (QA) mechanism in higher education. To enhance quality, there should be strong commitment from leaders at all levels together with the synergy of teaching and management staff as well as students in the whole higher education institution. In other words, everyone should be imbued with *QC*. One of the key factors for an effective Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) system is successful QC. Therefore, it is necessary to study the factors influencing the process of building QC in order to make use of the positive factors and to overcome the obstacles in this process.

2.Quality Culture and Quality Culture in Higher Education

2.1 Quality culture

Among many definitions of QC, the following definition from European University Association² is quite complete and easy to understand: "Quality culture refers to an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and it is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts." (EUA 2006:10)

The first element is quite intangible, but for sustainable development, quality should be a well-defined value that everyone in the same organization believes, understands, shares and makes commitment for continuous improvement to obtain its quality aims on the basis of specific procedures. QC focuses on the quality value which is one of the values of an institution. If we define the quality of an organization as the fulfillment of its aims/objectives and we want to create the quality value, clear objectives need to be specified in all activities and then activities are carried out to reach the objectives; the efficiency or degree of this attainment must be assessed as well as improvements must be made and new objectives at higher level will be set up in a new PLAN-DO-CHECK-ACT cycle (Deming cycle).

2.2 Quality culture in higher education

QC at a higher education institution (HEI) can be shown at several levels: *desire* for quality or *awareness/belief* (cultural/psychological element) in the importance of quality, *understanding* of tools/processes to measure and enhance quality and performing *action* towards quality improvement to satisfy different stakeholders, including learners, employers and meet the demands of the society.

At the first level, QC represents everyone's *belief* in the continuous improvement and adjustment to meet the minimum and higher requirements/expectations of stakeholders, their good *awareness* of the importance of making contributions to the shared improvement objectives, and as a result the long-term benefits for each individual and the organization.

At the level of understanding, everyone *has a good understanding* of their duties/obligations, the objectives and requirements of their tasks and of how to apply the tools/procedures to fulfill their tasks effectively and meet increasingly higher requirements. That means, they understand their responsibilities towards the society and the accountability to satisfy the stakeholders as well as the common objectives of their HEIs.

The level of *operation/action* can be manifested in the case when everyone not only knows how to make and implement plans, but they also voluntarily and really *participate in the continuous improvement* in all daily tasks and activities (action with appropriate procedures/initiatives/skills). More specifically, they must be able to make *assessment* and get feedback from the stakeholders related to their current jobs to define the real situation and measure their success in their task, to learn from the best practices to make corrections.

At the higher level, everyone will be willing to *share* the results and benefits of improvements, can *learn* from each other's best practices, make contributions or give initiatives/recommendations/ suggestions to their colleagues or other units to make improvements together.

Therefore, we can find that the factors necessary for the development of QC include: (1) The *specification* of criteria, quality indicators and requirements for each task, other tools/procedures to fulfill the tasks including QA policies, guidelines, data system, quality handbook; (2) *Informing, giving instructions or training* to enhance everyone's understanding of these criteria, requirements and tools; (3) Creation of *mechanism* to develop the habit of monitoring, making self-assessment, peer review, getting feedback from external evaluation; (4) Creation of *mechanism and measures for rewarding, recognizing and encouraging* people to make improvements and share best practices; and (5) Regular *support/consultancy* from experts and adequate resources.

3.The Factors Influencing the Development of Quality Culture at USSH, VNU-HCM

The study was based on 642 respondents, including 437 students at 9 faculties and 111 faculty members at 15 faculties/departments as well as 94 management staff members at 11 typical administrative units (offices/departments/centers) at USSH, VNU-HCM.

3.1 General awareness of importance of quality culture

The respondents' awareness of QC can be represented through their desire to fulfil their duties successfully to get stakeholders' satisfaction. The result of the survey to get the staff and students' opinions on the importance of QC with 5 degrees of importance is shown in the table below:

Table 3.1. Awareness of the importance of QC

The importance of QC	Teaching staff (%)	Managing staff (%)	Students (%)
Very important	56.9	53.0	52.5
Important	41.1	38.6	37.9
Quite important	2.0	8.4	6.8
Not important	0	0	0.2
Totally unimportant	0	0	0.2
No opinions	0	0	2.4

The result from *Table 3.1* shows that, in general, all the respondents value highly the importance of QC in HEI, in which the teaching staff value its importance more highly than the other 2 groups, managing staff and students (98% faculty members find it *important* and *very important* compared with 91.6% in managing staff and 90.4% in students)

In reality, there may be various viewpoints about quality, but there should be certain common quality values that everyone shares. The result of the study into the attitude of working towards quality of the respondents in the survey is reflected through their opinion on the necessity/importance of the following values: *Continuous improvement* (98.2% by faculty, 97.7% by managing staff), *Creativity* (94.6% by faculty members, 94.0% by managing staff), *Discipline* (89.1% by faculty, 92.0% by managing staff), *Responsibility* (98.2% by faculty, 97.7% by managing staff), *Enthusiasm* (92.7% by faculty, 94.1% by managing staff), *Respect* (94.6% by faculty, 93.1% by managing staff), *Democracy* (91.8% by faculty, 90.7% by managing staff), *Cooperation* (93.5% by faculty, 90.7% by managing staff), *Transparency* (97.2% by faculty, 96.6% by managing staff), *Academic freedom* (92.6 by faculty, 74.2% by managing staff), *Sustainability* (89.1% by faculty, 86.9% by managing staff), *High quality* (91.6% by faculty, 86.1% by managing staff), *Excellence* (70.2% by faculty, 70.2% by managing staff),...

In general, both teaching and managing staff value highly the following values: *Improvement*, *Creativity*, *Responsibility*, *Enthusiasm*, *Cooperation* and *Transparency*; in which *Responsibility* and *Transparency* are the values which receive the highest level of evaluation by both groups. This is a good signal to show that the staff of USSH, VNU-HCM have quite a good sense of responsibility in their tasks/assignments and value the publicity, transparency of information.

3.2. Opinions on the importance of QA activities

The opinions of the staff members of USSH, VNU-HCM about the importance of the quality of all QA activities currently carried out at each unit of USSH, VNU-HCM or in the whole institution have been shown in the following table:

Table 3.2. Opinion on the importance of QA activities

The necessity/importance of the QA activities	Totally agree (%)		Agree (%)	
	Teaching staff	Managing staff	Teaching staff	Managing staff
Periodical surveys to get feedback from stakeholders	40.6	36.2	41.5	48.9
Periodical self-assessment at institutional level by MOET requirements/criteria	26.9	20.4	44.4	59.1
Periodical self-assessment at program level by AUN-QA criteria	24.1	19.6	50.0	56.5
Periodical review of the programs according to the faculty's plan or in compliance with the HEI's requirements	33.6	21.7	43.0	51.1
Periodical training for QA officers and regular meetings of QA units to share best practices.	25.0	24.5	47.2	54.3
Efficient running and updating QA data system	35.5	36.3	52.3	46.2
Formulation, review and adjustment of procedures for core activities	27.4	27.2	54.7	51.1
Periodical evaluation/preliminary review and making QA plans for each individual, each unit and the whole HEI	19.4	21.7	54.6	56.5
Developing recognition and reward system for QA activities	36.1	34.0	44.4	44.7
Organizing seminars, conferences about QA	23.1	16.3	53.7	57.6

The table 3.2 above shows that, in general, the teaching and managing staff recognize the importance of quality in all QA activities in their units and in the whole institution. The high degree of agreement of both groups (more than 80% choose the option from *agreement* and above) including: (1) *Periodical surveys to get feedback from stakeholders*, (2) *Efficient running and updating QA data system* and especially (3) *Developing recognition and reward system for QA activities*. These activities should be maintained and developed further as they are positive factors influencing QC in the whole institution at the level of understanding and operation.

However, some activities which are not highly appreciated by both groups include: *Periodical evaluation/preliminary review, making specific QA plans for individuals, units and the whole HEI* (only 19.4% faculty and 21.7% non-academic/managing staff find it *very necessary*); *Organizing training courses, seminars, conferences about QA, accreditation* (only 23.1% faculty and 16.3% non-academic staff find this activity *very necessary*). These are new activities at the HEI which have not been popular and they are not in the habit of carrying out these activities.

The students are well aware of their *active participation in personal development, making contributions by giving feedback on the courses and teaching activities, giving feedback during the survey or program review* (80% students choose the option of *importance* or *great importance*). The lowest level of importance can be found in *Participation in the self-assessment at institutional and program level* (only 12.3% and 13.5% students find it *very necessary*). These activities have not been communicated widely to students; therefore, they have not seen the benefits from these activities.

3.3. Staff's understanding of quality requirements

3.3.1 Teaching staff's understanding of quality requirements

Good understanding of quality indicators/requirements or competence in complying with the requirements is very important in developing QC at a HEI. The result of the survey on the teaching staff's understanding of quality requirements for each activity is shown in the following table:

Table 3.3.1. Teachers' understanding of the task requirements

Teaching staff's understanding of quality requirements	Very good understanding	Good understanding	Fairly good understanding	No understanding
Curricula	24.1%	58.3%	15.7%	1.9%
Course syllabi	39.8%	50.9%	8.3%	0.9%
Teaching activities	35.2%	53.7%	10.2%	0.9%
Learning assessment	29.6%	54.6%	15.7%	0.1%
Scientific research	28.0%	55.1%	15.0%	1.9%
Academic advising	17.9%	56.6%	21.7%	3.8%

Table 3.3.1 shows that, the teaching staff admit that they have the best knowledge of the quality requirements for the course syllabi (more than 90% faculty choose the level from good understanding and higher) and the lowest level of understanding is found in *Academic advising*, only about 70% faculty members choose the options of good and very good understanding, in which the level of *very good understanding* account for only 17.9%. *Academic advising* should be taken into more serious consideration especially in the credit-based system. Due to the lack of good understanding of the specific quality requirements for the activities mentioned above, the teaching staff cannot know what their real weaknesses are and what should be done to overcome the weaknesses or how, not mentioning that their self-evaluation without considering feedback from stakeholders is usually subjective since they have no basis for comparison with the requirements/criteria in the set of requirements.

3.3.2 Managing staff's and students' understanding of the quality requirements

The following table shows the understanding of the quality requirements by the managing staff for their tasks:

Table 3.3.2. Managing staff's knowledge of QA requirements

Managing staff's understanding of the quality requirements	Very good knowledge	Good knowledge	Fairly good knowledge	No knowledge
Supporting students	16.1%	50.5%	31.2%	2.2%
Supporting colleagues	14.3%	50.5%	30.8%	4.4%
Professional knowledge	23.3%	50.0%	25.6%	1.1%
Coordination with other units in the HEI	9.0%	51.7%	37.1%	2.2%

Table 3.3.2 shows that the non-academic staff themselves consider their understanding of the quality requirements for their tasks *not quite high* in all the activities of *Supporting students, colleagues; Professional knowledge* and *Coordination with other units in the HEI*. About 50% of these non-academic staff choose the

level of good understanding; very few respondents choose the level of very good understanding. Especially the *Coordination with other units in the HEI* get the lowest level of understanding, only about 60% of the staff know about it (only 9% staff know very well). The institution has not set the specific requirements of coordination among the units and faculties/departments and they do not get into the habit of getting feedback from stakeholders, listening to colleagues for efficient coordination.

As for the students, the result shows that they are in the need of getting information related to *student support/services* as well as the *information/feedback from alumni/employers on the job requirements and training quality, strategic plans of the institution on the solutions for quality improvement* (in average, about 80% of students find these pieces of information of great importance to them). Many students do not understand well the learning outcomes and the requirements for their study (nearly 30%).

3.4. Participation of staff in QA activities

Not only the strong commitment but also the real active participation in QA activities will lead to the success of developing QC in the HEI, especially in the improvement activities, continuous quality enhancement, which is the highest and most specific level of QC. The result of the survey on the participation of all staff in QA activities is as follows:

In short, the level of participation of all staff in QA activities is not quite high, only at average level (about 50% of the respondents admit that they *sometimes* take part in these activities or even at lower frequency). Except for the compulsory activities required by the HEI at the end of each academic year for the final evaluation and for rewarding (such as *Periodical review of the QA activities in the unit; Updating adequate individual QA data...*), other voluntary QA activities receive very low level of participation of the staff (only *sometimes* or *rarely*), especially lower by the non-academic staff. For instance, only 50.3% faculty staff often and very often *formulate the objectives, development plans and quality improvements for their individual tasks* compared with 43.5% non-academic staff; 45.8% faculty staff *make contributions/give suggestions to QA objectives and improvement plans at their units* (compared with 39.1% non-academic staff); 24.5 % faculty staff *make contributions to QA objectives and improvement plans at the institution level* (compared with 19.6% non-academic staff); 42% *make contributions or give initiatives to curricula/training programs, training activities, student and colleague support* (compared with 28.1% non-academic staff)...

Especially, only 25% faculty members regularly *consider their students' feedback on their teaching courses to improve their teaching content and activities*; only 3.6% non-academic staff regularly *consider the senior students' and alumni's feedback on all the training activities of HEI* to make improvements for their units or give suggestions of improvement to their units.

3.5. Advantages and disadvantages in QA activities

The staff of both groups focus on the following advantages in developing QC at the HEI: (1) *The determination and concern for QA of the Party Committee and the managing board of the HEI*, (2) *The determination and concern for QA of the managing board of the faculties/departments*, (3) *Love for career, good sense of responsibility of the whole staff at USSH, VNU-HCM...* (nearly 80% of all the staff agree with these factors as positive factors). *The establishment and activities of QA teams at all units at the institution,*

which is another positive factor, is agreed on by nearly 80% of the staff of both groups). The lower level of agreement by the staff of both groups is found in: (1) *Chances for learning best practices from other HEIs*, (2) *The concern and support from VNU-HCM*, (3) *History, culture/tradition and national reputation of USSH, VNU-HCM*, (4) *Support, instructions, guidance from the Office of Educational Testing & QA* (over 70% choose *agree* and *totally agree*).

The difficulties, obstacles or factors negatively influencing the development the QC or QA activities are shown in the following (both through questionnaires and interview) result (around between 70% and 80% of the staff in the survey agree): (1) *Constraints in financial support and facilities/infrastructure for QA activities while salaries are too low* (2) *Shortage in human resources for QA*, (3) *Time limit due to holding 2 or more positions concurrently or various obligations, part-time jobs,...* (4) *Limit in the knowledge and experience of QA and quality assessment, indicators for measurement* and (5) *Limits in consultants and experts who support QA activities*. There are sometimes differences in the opinions of the 2 groups in: *Lack of habit in sharing and coordinating between the units in the HEI* (71.3% faculty staff see it as a kind of difficulty compared with 64.2% non-academic staff). The faculty staff also express higher expectation on *the policies for recognition and rewarding for QA achievements* than non-academic staff (71.3% faculty staff, 59.4% non-academic *agree* and *totally agree*).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion on the development of QC and influencing factors

QC has initially been formed at the USSH-HCM, VNU-HCM in recent years, which is relatively well-developed at the level of awareness/belief. In spite of some good chances and favorable conditions for its further development, the process of building and developing QC is still quite slow and faced with many difficulties, not only due to a variety of conceptions about the quality of education and methods of performing QA activities, but also due to limited understanding related to quality requirements/indicators, tools for measurement/revision and other factors. There are advantages and disadvantages reflecting various main positive and negative factors influencing the process of building and improving QC at the University. External factors include the objective factors (such as the competitive context/environment, regional integration, culture/traditions, autonomy, working pressure, life-necessity...) and the subjective ones (such as senior authority, human resources, material resources, financial resources, policies, guidelines, working /coordination methods of units...). The internal factors of intrinsic motivation of the individuals include the subjective and objective factors such as the working habits, sense of responsibility, knowledge of QA, awareness of the long-term benefits, perspectives/viewpoints, the eagerness to learn, enthusiasm, determination, concern... A good understanding of these factors as well as their roots/causes will lead to the solutions for overcoming the disadvantages and making use of the positive factors in order to develop QC effectively.

4.2 Recommendations

The HEI needs to promote rewarding and recognition/encouragement measures to attract more contributions/participation of all the staff and students in quality improvement, pay due attention to the incomes

and life circumstances of the staff and try to give them appropriate support, create a friendly environment for sharing quality value, organizational values in the institution such as *improvement, responsibility and creativity*, making stronger commitment in QA together with real actions. The QA unit of the institution needs to play a better role in consulting, coordinating and monitoring the development of QC, creating the habit of periodical review/evaluation, developing a good information or database system, guidelines with clear quality indicators.

The faculties/departments need to improve their knowledge in curriculum development, syllabus design and development, active and modern teaching activities/strategies, accreditation/evaluation criteria of the training programs..., voluntarily and regularly enhance the teaching quality, getting feedback from stakeholders, formulating the quality objectives, strategies for quality improvement and enhancement at their faculties/departments. Deans and department heads should have leadership and change management competence in addition to their QA knowledge. The administrative offices need to improve their attitude, enthusiasm in supporting students, colleagues, contribute initiatives, teamwork habit and skills...

Students nowadays play an increasingly important role in the improvement of training quality in the HEI with their constructive feedback on different channels. They need to be well aware of their responsibility and benefits in giving feedback in the survey at their faculties or in the HEI.

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