Conceptualizations of Quality Culture among Higher Education Institutions in the ASEAN Region

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高等教育機関におけるクオリティカルチャー(品質重視の文化を確立し制度的に保証する体制)の重要性は東南アジア諸国でも指摘されているが、まだ深く理解されているとは言いがたい。その実態を調査し課題を探った。

Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have become increasingly competitive, thus, over the past few years, HEI administrators have mainstreamed the concept of quality into the core of their system, program design, and service improvement, creating an environment where employees 'live' quality—not merely for compliance, but more for outcomes. It is evident that the interpretation and application of quality culture differ in practice and in principle, as well as the outcomes. This study looks at quality culture, defined by the European University Association (2006) and Sattler and Sonntag (2018) as "something that intends to enhance quality permanently, characterized by two elements: the cultural psychological element and the structural/managerial component," and what it means to the HEIs. The study conducted a survey, a focus group discussion, and secondary data collection. The findings suggest that although quality culture is associated with two major concepts: organizational culture, and institutional structures within the organization, there is a lack of conceptual understanding of the phenomenon itself, thus, it is not yet fully embedded in most HEIs in the ASEAN region.

Keywords	quality culture, higher education institutions, institutional outcomes

Introduction

Quality has never mattered more in most higher education institutions (HEIs) as education has become a privilege, effectively creating competition among HEIs. Choosing an institution that will give the best value for money or has the best reputation are common considerations being asked by potential students and employers. Moreover, new technologies have allowed students and employers to research and compare which programs and services among different HEIs worldwide have produced the best outcomes.

As a result of these pressures, administrators in HEIs must find a new approach to quality—one that looks beyond compliance to focus efforts on outcomes. Students, employers, and partners alike are looking for HEIs that can answer why they do what they do rather than just what they offer.

Over the past few years, HEIs have mainstreamed the concept of quality into the core of their system, program design, and service improvement, creating an environment where employees 'live' quality. They are dedicated and passionate about quality as part of their value system, not simply complying with every memorandum downloaded without knowing the results.

In this paper, quality culture is defined using Sattler and Sonntag's (2018) definition, which closely resembles the definition of organizational culture. To be more precise, the European University Association (2006) defined quality culture as, "something that intends to enhance quality permanently, characterized by two elements: the cultural psychological element and the structural/managerial component."

Objectives

In view of its relevance, understanding how quality culture is interpreted and practiced could provide useful information on how quality culture will be incorporated into higher education institutions in the future.

A broader understanding of quality culture will be useful if these multiple definitions and practices are unraveled. It may also be that normative debates about the principles and adequacy of quality cultures are disconnected from empirical research or are at least not context-specific. Against this background, the study examines how quality culture is conceptualized, interpreted, and practiced by quality assurance (QA) practitioners in the ASEAN region.

Related Literature

Quality assurance is not new to higher education. Many have established systems to evaluate, assess, accredit, and audit their respective institutions. However, quality work and quality improvement is not yet integrated in the sector (Harvey & Stensaker, 2007). Research shows that although systems and procedures have been laid down, there is still a lack of active involvement, from both staff and students, in these processes (Harvey & Stensaker, 2007, citing Newton, 2000; Vidal, 2003).

Harvey and Stensaker (2007) posit that quality culture can be used as a tool for asking questions about how institutions function or how things work. The authors claim that it is a concept that could help identify potential challenges; it should not be considered the answer to challenges. Culture by design is a transformative process which can be seen by an institution's commitment for continuous improvement as well as integration of quality systems that involve people and align values and mission (The Peregrine Team, 2021). This is supported by Bendermarcher et al (2017) who stated that a 'human relation' value orientation and ownership can positively affect quality improvement practices. The authors also state that the interplay of organizational value/psychological elements and organizational structure/management should be recognized. Thus, nurturing a collaborative teaching and learning culture while attempting to increase effectiveness and efficiency in HEIs is fundamental (Bendermarher et al, 2017).

Similarly, Ehlers (2009) claims that quality development in HEIs is mostly limited to bureaucratic documentation and often disregards the development of quality as an organization's holistic culture. He asserts the need for HEIs to promote a quality culture which would enable individual actors to continuously improve their educational practice.

A study by Ali and Mussah (2012), for instance, examined the relationship between quality culture and workforce performance in the Malaysian higher education sector. The findings show that there is a statistically significant correlation between quality culture and workforce performance, indicating that a quality culture initiative can help enhance academic staff performance.

On the other hand, a study by Sattler and Sonntag (2018) focused on the aspects of organizational psychology, such as shared attitudes and commitment to quality. The researchers recommend involving both leaders and staff members in the development of quality culture initiatives to enhance commitment to, responsibility for, and engagement in quality.

Meanwhile, Eales-Reynolds and Rugg (n.d.) share some of the strategies that helped promote a culture of enhancement in teaching and learning in the case of the University of Westminster, London: providing financial support to develop institutional strategies for teaching and learning, introducing a formal development program for new lecturers, and developing post-graduate certifications in higher education. These initiatives led to a better understanding of teaching and learning in higher education, and also helped raise the profile of academics. Furthermore, it has influenced the institution in the way it manages and supports the development of learning and teaching standards.

Researchers say that this could be a challenging time for HEIs given the increased competition, diversification, and massification in the sector (Bendermarher et al, 2017). These developments, plus the pressure to increase effectiveness and efficiency when resources are low, show that the significance of an internal quality management where "all activities and processes

deliberately organised by HEI to design, assure, evaluate and improve the quality of teaching and learning" (Bendermarher et al, 2017, citing Kleijnen et al. 2014, 104) have become all the more necessary (Bendermarher et al, 2017, citing Harvey and Newton, 2007; Jarvis, 2014).

Methodology

The methodological framework takes a generally discursive approach at gathering data. In order to exploit this potential of discourse, a survey instrument was developed based on literature review with a focus on operationalization (Ali & Mussah, 2012) and organizational psychology (Sattler & Sonntag, 2018).

Additionally, a focus group discussion was conducted via a video conferencing platform, Zoom, on 27 August 2022, and secondary data from related literature was collected throughout the duration of the study.

Results and Discussion

The survey was developed and implemented via Google Form between 28 July and 15 August 2022.

Table 1. Profile of the Respondents

Profile	Level	Frequency	Percent
Age	39 and below	21	28.8
	40 and above	52	71.2
Sex	Male	31	42.5
	Female	41	56.2
	Prefer not to say	1	1.4
Educational Attainment	Doctorate	37	50.7
	Master's	36	49.3
HEI Affiliation	University of the Philippines	39	53.4
	Others	22	30.1
	Universitas Indonesia	6	8.2
	Didn't Say	6	8.2
Country	Philippines	42	57.5
	Others	15	20.5
	Indonesia	10	13.7
	Myanmar	6	8.2
Role in the HEI	Faculty	36	49.3
	Concurrent positions	24	32.9
	Administrator	8	11.0
	Researcher	5	6.8
Job Title	QA committee member/ representative	34	46.6
	QA officer/director/ coordinator/head	15	20.5
	QA personnel/staff/ secretary/organizer/ assessor/monitor/ researcher	7	9.6
	Administrator/Dean/ Program Head	8	11.0
	Didn't say	9	12.3
Length of service as QA in HEI	1 year	18	24.7
	2 years	10	13.7
	3 years	14	19.2
	4-6 years	14	19.2
	7 years and above	10	13.7
	Didn't say	7	9.7
Length of service in HEI	1-5 years	12	16.4
	6-10 years	8	11.0
	11-15 years	10	13.7
	16-20 years	23	31.5
	21 years and above	15	20.5
	Didn't say	5	6.8
Total		73	100

Table 1 shows that 71% of the respondents are 40 years old and older, and 56% are female. Fifty one percent have a doctorate degree, and more than half (53%) are currently employed in the University of the Philippines System. The rest of the participants come from other HEIs located in the Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, including Ateneo de Manila University, De La Salle University, Saint Mary's University, Philippine Normal University, University of Santo Tomas, Royal University of Phnom Penh, National University of Laos, Savannakhet University, Gadja Maha University, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahnamn, University of Nottinghman in Malaysia, International University in Vietnam, and Vietnam National University. Fifty-seven percent are from the Philippines, serving their institution as faculty (49.3%) or in concurrent positions as faculty, administrator, or researcher (32.95). Almost 47% serve as a QA committee member or representative. Most of the respondents (24.7%) have been working in QA for only about a year, but have been serving their institutions for 16-20 years (31.5%) or more (20.5%). This shows that most of them are relatively new to

quality assurance, but have considerable experience with their respective HEIs.

Table 2. Agreement to organizational-psychological dimensions

Dimension	Statements	Mean	SD	Description
Commitment	I am particularly intent on supporting the quality development of my university	2.38	.49	Very true
Engagement	I am willing to make additional effort to meet the quality demands of my work	2.45	.50	Very true
Responsibility	I feel that I am jointly responsible for the quality development of my own university	2.34	.56	Very true
Individual		2.39	.42	Very true
Leadership	It is important to me to appreciate good working results adequately	2.27	.53	Very true
Communication	Ideas concerning quality improvement are openly discussed in our department	2.55	.60	Very true
Participation	I keep myself up to date concerning new developments at our University	2.47	.60	Very true
Shared values	Quality values of our University are actually put into practice.	2.52	.71	Very true
Trust	I have full confidence in my employee's skills in quality improvement	2.34	.80	Very true
Global aspects	Our University is characterized by high quality awareness	2.38	.72	Very true
Collective		2.42	.40	Very true

Legend: 0=Not applicable; 1.00-1.49=Not true at all; 1.50-2.49=Very true; 2.50-3.00=Occasionally true

Table 2 indicates that respondents agree with the statements on the individual and collective organizational-psychological dimensions of a quality culture. On the individual level, among the three dimensions of commitment, engagement, and responsibility, engagement yielded the highest mean score (M=2.45) showing that participants agree to meet the quality demands of their work. On the collective level, communication yielded the highest mean score (M=2.55), followed by shared values (M=2.52), and participation (M=2.47). It is noted that these three are collective dimensions of organizational culture, manifesting participants' agreement that collaborative processes are critical elements in quality culture.

Overall, results show that participants are open and accepting of organizational and psychological dimensions of quality culture.

The results support Sattler and Sonntag's (2018) study which found that more than 95% of experts agree that a relevant dimension of quality culture is communication. Also, more than 70% of Sattler and Sonntag's (2018) participants revealed the importance of commitment and participation in the dimensions of a quality culture. In addition, Do and Dang's (2021) findings are similar to the current study when they concluded that a quality culture is rooted in communication. In their study, they underscored sufficient and timely communication with students and school stakeholders as behaviors that can enhance quality culture.

Moreover, Tutko (2019) stated that organizational/psychological components pertain to the role of individuals in developing a quality culture. Structural or formal elements that nurture a quality culture are important, but there has to be a dynamic interaction between these and the organizational/psychological elements. Bendermacher et al (2017) proposed that communication and leadership are binding forces to these two elements.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Individual Level

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.441[a]	.194	.64	.41076

a. Predictors: (Constant), Length of Service In QA, Country, Age, Role in the HEI, Sex, Job Title, Length of Service in HEI, Educational Attainment, HEI Affiliation
b. Dependent Variable: INDIVIDUAL

Multiple regression using method enter was employed to determine predictors of individual level dimensions of quality culture. As shown on Table 3, length of service in QA is the first predictor in the model, followed by country, age, role in the HEI, sex, job title, length of service in the HEI, educational attainment, and HEI affiliation. Together, the predictors account for 19.4% of the variation in scores for the organizational-psychological dimensions of quality culture.

Those serving in QA the longest exhibit higher trust and shared organizational values. There are also variations in the extent to which participants demonstrate these dimensions by country, age, their role in the HEI, their sex, job title, length of service in the HEI, educational attainment, and HEI affiliation.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Collective Level

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.397[a]	.158	0.22	.39885

a. Predictors: (Constant), Length of Service In QA, Country, Age, Role in the HEI, Sex, Job Title, Length of Service in HEI, Educational Attainment, HEI Affiliation
b. Dependent Variable: COLLECTIVE

Table 4 shows multiple regression results using method enter for collective level dimensions of quality culture. Results show that length of service in QA, country, age, role in the HEI, sex, job title, length of service in HEI, educational attainment, and HEI affiliation predict leadership, communication, participation, shared values, trust, and global aspects of quality culture. Specifically, the predictors accounting for 15.8% of the variation in scores for collective organizational-psychological dimensions, with length of service working as a QA being the foremost predictor.

Table 3 and 4 results indicate that one's experience working in the QA contributes to a greater commitment and engagement in quality culture.

The focus group discussion, on the other hand, was conducted on 27 August 2022 via Zoom. Eleven QA officers who have attended QA training in the past took part. They come from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, representing Mapua University, National University, University of the Philippines Cebu, Ubon Rathcani University, Binus University, King Mongkut Institute of Technology, and Banking Academy in Vietnam.

From the responses of these participants, the following insights were revealed: how quality culture is embedded in their respective HEIs, what they associate with quality culture, and how they believe it can be sustained.

Quality culture is not yet a core value

At the heart of this research was a question on whether there is a quality culture in their own HEIs—and only a minority (27%) of the respondents believe that their organizations have succeeded in making quality a core value, while a majority (73%) says otherwise.

Five areas of concern are identified by the 73% as to why quality culture has not yet become embedded in their HEIs: a complacent mindset, continuous improvement processes that undermine previous efforts, lack of resources, the 'Quality Officer' being an additional role, and no shared understanding of the concept of quality.

Complacent mindset

Many participants think that there is no need to improve as 'things are working fine as they are' since no formal complaint has been made and a few praises have been given on what they do. The problem with this mindset is, once there's a setback, however minor, they are immobilized into doing anything and when change is inevitable, they then think it's a burden. This is how some respondents see quality culture, or the lack of it, in their universities as manifested in their resistant

behavior to any change that their office has set out for them to do. This sense of complacency is seen in those who have been in the HEI for more than five years.

Continuous improvement undermines previous efforts

Respondents think that continuous improvement is seen as undermining previous efforts and demotivating others to work 'in the name of improvement' especially so if incentives are given based on outcomes and less about contribution towards that outcome.

Lack of resources

HEIs, especially public ones, generally have limited resources. This is a contentious statement because some respondents say that there are resources but they are not managed well. Quality culture is slow in its uptake because the approach towards building quality culture is on a piecemeal basis in the guise of insufficient resources. One may have a Quality unit in the university but the functions provided for by the unit are simply coordination and monitoring. Resources for technical personnel, training for quality competence needed by faculty and staff, and systems for data collection and analysis are not part of the QA unit. With such limitations, the QA office is left with nothing but poor execution of mainstreaming quality culture and working on small projects, such as compliance to submission of reports that add little value to the entire outcome of programs or service delivery. These things are not necessarily bad, but in the long run, staff and even the people assigned to work in QA will be confined to thinking 'small' just so they can do something with limited resources. This will eventually lead to dissatisfaction and frustrations on the redirection of the rationale—why the QA unit was set up in the first place.

Quality Officer as an additional role

Many QA officers are also faculty members which means that not only do they perform their instruction, research, and extension duties, but they are also assigned to an administrative role in the Quality unit without or with limited training, experience, or knowledge on

Quality for HEIs. The very notion of quality is to have competent and rightful individuals placed in such an important role, and this contradicts the practice or 'trend' among HEIs. When such happens, expecting quality officers to function well may seem an unfair and tall order. However, participants also mentioned that training is provided although this training is not necessarily to be attended by quality officers all at the same time, given a limited budget for training. Hence, a lack of shared understanding of frameworks, tools, and techniques may result as well. It should also be mentioned that the results indicated that there are opportunities for training where everybody can participate but these are not scheduled early, so some may be unable to participate. The training appears to be a tactical approach to quality (adopting more of a reactive mode of operation towards fixing defects in an existing or limited capacity) which is not sufficient nor strategic to enable quality officers to produce outputs consistently. This reactive approach of the Quality units does not ensure that organizations think and live quality every day.

No shared understanding of Quality in HEIs

The absence of a shared understanding and appreciation of quality in HEIs has been pointed out in the survey as manifested by associating quality to compliance, and processes where tangible program and service delivery are not linked. This leads to an erosion of trust in what quality efforts can mean to the HEI. The self-assessment report is an important step in the whole quality process and would have been a good opportunity to unite faculty, research personnel, and administrative staff to focus on what matters for the unit but such is not necessarily appreciated because the end goal of why assessments are done is lost due to how quality is positioned. It is evident that quality in HEIs is generally seen to answer WHAT we should do, not WHY we do what we do. Quality has been relegated to compliance and not about the outcomes that we wish to accomplish by doing so. Furthermore, the top-down approach, as what most HEIs have, may not necessarily work for quality units that require a more tailored-fit approach.

These responses from the majority echo Ehlers'

(2009) findings that quality development in HEIs mostly disregards the development of quality as an organization's holistic culture, and is often restricted to bureaucratic documentation.

Quality culture is already a core value

On a different note, the 27% who believe that their respective organizations have succeeded in making quality a core value, state they are willing to put in extra effort to meet the quality demands of their work, and that they keep themselves updated on quality improvements in their departments. In addition, they openly discuss ideas on quality improvement with colleagues, and they believe that their university actually puts quality values into practice.

It can be observed from such statements that both the individual and the organization must put in effort to make quality work, and to make it a core value. This is a manifestation of Sattler and Sonntag's (2018) recommendation of involving leaders and staff in the development of quality culture initiatives to enhance commitment to, responsibility for, and engagement in quality. This also proves true what Bendermarher et al (2017) stated that a 'human relation' value orientation and ownership can positively affect quality improvement practices in an organization.

Quality culture defined

As with the works of Sattler and Sonntag (2018), what came out in the survey suggests that quality culture is understood to be associated with two major concepts: organizational culture, and institutional structures within the organization. Organizational culture is manifested through individual and collective attitudes and behavior toward quality.

Organizational culture: everybody's responsibility

From an individual standpoint, quality culture is seen as the participation of employees from different levels with different functions, shared responsibility in doing and achieving the mission, and a belief that one has a contribution to make to support the process of quality assurance and its outcomes. Thus, an individual's

complacent mindset can affect the quality development process.

Collectively, quality officers view quality culture as something that stems not only from an individual's attitude and behavior but also comes with the expectation that other members of the organization, including management, have roles to play in the process and the outputs that it will produce from such a process. Further, quality culture is thought to be mainstreamed or lived through transparency in the process, where results are communicated, and where there is a shared awareness and understanding of the role of quality in the many aspects of their work in the organization.

Institutional structures

Institutional structures as seen from the survey responses include the following components: quality policy and guidelines, the presence of a formal Quality unit with personnel, and budget. A quality culture can be lived by having those components that interact with one another and are communicated and accessible to all. The absence of these, or a fragmented operationalization of these elements may lead to futile efforts by quality officers and erode the trust in the quality development process.

These pronouncements are similar to what Bendermarcher at el (2017) claimed about the importance of interplay of organizational value/psychological elements and organizational structure/management in quality culture, as well as what Ehlers (2009) asserted that quality development in HEIs should not be limited to bureaucratic documentation; it should give more focus on the development of quality as an organization's holistic culture. Ehlers (2009) further stated the need to focus on "promoting a quality culture which is enabling individual actors to continuously improve their educational practice."

Sustaining Quality initiatives

Respondents were asked how quality initiatives can be furthered sustainably, and several strategies were put forward. A few still think that "quality work is added work" but the majority acknowledge that to move away

from that paradigm, 'improvement' and quality shall be their new way of doing things. This acknowledges what researchers say that although quality systems and procedures are in place, there is still lack of active involvement from staff and students in these processes (Harvey & Stensaker, 2007, citing Newton, 2000; Vidal, 2003). Below are their suggestions on how these should be operationalized.

Embedding Quality through policy, structure, and systems

A quality culture will manifest not just through enforcement but understanding that embracing quality into their work—whether as quality officers or acting in other roles—is a gradual and continuous process. In saying that, a strong quality culture no longer requires just a quality assurance system or the process of undertaking quality initiatives but it is also anchored on a quality policy that needs support in the form of clear guidelines, structure, resources, and incentives for it to work.

There is also a need to recognize that quality culture is nurtured by acknowledging the nuances of the organization's context, therefore, quality in HEIs must look at the benefit of an autonomous quality system based on capacities and trust, and is not simply enforced for compliance.

Customer focus

Additionally, institutionalizing quality also means that an HEI may have to shift from the traditional process-based and rules-based quality environment to a more customer-centric kind of approach, where the burden of adjustment is not with the customers but with those who are involved in designing and implementing a quality system.

Training for promotion and development

Efforts towards promoting and developing Quality competencies must be pursued. This means that sustained and targeted responses to what is needed in terms of building skills, providing an opportunity to practice with feedback, and giving incentives on how such competencies can be achieved should be designed.

Commitment to results

Commitment to quality means one should be able to see results and how these results translate to achieving the outcomes set by the HEI. The need to reflect and show what has transpired after the rigorous process of assessment has to be done not just as an afterthought, but rather as the main point of the whole exercise about quality.

Increase employee ownership and empowerment

Quality culture may be furthered by creating a space where employees apply skills and make decisions in highly ambiguous but critical areas while leading them toward deeper reflection about the risks and payoffs of their actions. Providing such an opportunity to question and clarify and giving the right level of guidance may be the key to building a quality culture. Emphasis on compliance stifles creativity and discretionary action while too little leaves quality officers and employees unclear about their authority to make decisions and carry them out.

These strategies, which are similar to the strategies employed by the University of Westminster in London (Eales-Reynolds & Rugg, n.d.), could lead to a better understanding of teaching and learning in higher education, could influence the institution in the way it manages and supports the development of learning and teaching standards, and could eventually promote/contribute to building a culture of quality in the institution.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that culture is a transformative process—an institution's commitment for continuous improvement, the integration of quality systems that involves people and aligns values and mission—which play a big role in how culture is defined and practiced. All these support what Harvey and Stensaker (2007) said that quality culture should not be considered the answer to challenges, but it could be a tool to help identify potential challenges.

Conclusion

This study's findings suggest that quality culture is understood to be associated with two major concepts: organizational culture, and institutional structures

within the organization, similar to the claims of Sattler and Sonntag (2018).

Organizational components pertain to the role of individuals and groups in developing a quality culture (Tutko, 2019). This is mostly how QA is conceptualized in the HEIs. Organizational culture is manifested through individual and collective attitudes and behavior toward quality. Individually, it is seen as the participation of employees in supporting the process of quality assurance and its outcomes. Collectively, it is something that stems not only from an individual's attitude and behavior but also with the expectation that other members of the organization, including management, have roles to play in the process and the outputs that it will produce from such a process.

Institutional structures, on the other hand, include the following components: quality policy and guidelines, the presence of a formal Quality unit with personnel, and budget. These structures show how QA is interpreted and practiced in HEIs. A quality culture can be lived by having these components that interact with one another, are communicated, and made accessible to all. Their absence, or a fragmented operationalization of these elements may lead to futile efforts by quality officers and erode the trust in the quality. This supports what Tutko (2019) and Ehlers (2009) claimed that structural or formal elements that nurture a quality culture are important, but there has to be a dynamic interaction between this element of institutional structures, and the organizational-psychological element.

Overall, the appreciation of the importance of a quality culture in HEIs is gaining ground, but there is still a lack of understanding of the concept itself, thus, it is not yet fully embedded in most HEIs in the ASEAN region.

Moreover, the results suggest how the diversity of culture in the ASEAN region can be an advantage in developing, improving, and addressing the gaps in higher education, which merits further studies in the future.

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