

Leadership for Enhancing Quality Culture in Higher Education

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Abstract

The mission of higher education institutions is to produce quality graduates as what society expects. To ensure the institutions accomplish such mission, they have to continuously improve their performances based on quality assurance standards at national or international levels. Achieving to comply with these standards reflects the quality of institution administration, academic functions, and outcomes. Administrators, faculty members, and staff play roles in delivering quality assurance tasks which concerns systematic planning, implementation, assessment and development processes. Their success significantly depends on institution culture, which creates a considerable impact on quality assurance systems while their leaders shape institution culture. This paper aims to identify to what extent institutional leaders affect the achievement of quality assurance standards and to determine their roles to enhance quality culture in higher education. The selected data were from scholarly published articles related to leadership influencing quality culture in higher education and quality assurance systems from the year 2000 onwards. The data analysis was through qualitative content analysis. The findings demonstrated what leadership functions and roles are effective to encourage administrators, faculty members, and staff to improve and develop their performances in alignment with expected outcomes and goals of institutions while achieving national or international quality assurance standards. Through synergistic collaboration under the strategic leadership, higher education institutions can improve and sustain quality culture enabling authentic quality development of education responding to stakeholders' needs.

Keywords: leadership, quality assurance culture, higher education

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Introduction

The ultimate goal of higher education institutions is to produce quality graduates as what society expects or will expect in the future. To ensure the institutions accomplish such mission, they have to continuously check and improve their performances based on quality standards at national or international levels. Based on these standards, it is essential to explore the institutional culture where administration, academic functions, and outcomes are functioned. Even though administrators, faculty members, and staff play active roles in delivering quality tasks which require systematic planning, implementation, assessment and development processes. Their success significantly depends on institutional leadership that affects considerably how the whole system is run and shaped and to what extent leaders engage themselves with the team and have the team well-engaged.

Objectives

This paper aims to identify to what extent institutional leaders affect the achievement of quality assurance standards and to determine their roles to enhance quality culture in higher education.

Literature Review

This section presents brief concepts encompassing the quality culture that is based on the critical notions of what higher educational institutions (HEIs) should adopt into their institutional practices. The type of culture in HEIs shapes the attitudes towards quality assurance systems, but the overall influences affecting the whole institutional systems lies within institutional leadership's functional roles and accountability.

Quality Culture in Higher Education

Quality is well-defined by Harvey and Knight (1996) as exceptional, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation. In the context of higher education, the dominant role of a higher education institution (HEI) is to facilitate the learning of their students, and their quality is in fact as 'moral purpose' for maximized output quality. By the meaning of moral purpose defined by Barber and Fullan (2005) that it is "the link between systems thinking and sustainability. The central 'moral purpose' consists of constantly improving student achievement and ensuring that achievement gaps, wherever they exist, are narrowed. In short, it is about raising the bar and narrowing the gap." Achieving such quality output is necessary to draw a clear distinction between managing *for* quality and managing *of* quality. According to Barnett (1992), managing *for* quality reflects in the traditional practices of teaching that focus on the quality of student learning experiences while managing of quality lies in the span of authority that creates conditions in which academics are to committed to quality standards stipulated by institutions or external stakeholders. Both processes towards quality are inevitably indispensable to quality education. However, they must be surrounded by the right atmosphere of a quality culture. As Yorke (2000) emphasizes that a quality culture is a crucial success factor for the sustainability of HEIs. The culture of quality relies on a widespread commitment from concerned stakeholders to quality and a system ensuring its improvement be continuously carried out. Institutional leadership comes into play as

the establishment of a quality culture demands a higher order of leadership and management accountability. The major functional roles of HEI leaders are to determine and clarify direction and to improve institutional climate through effective communication as suggested by Middlehurst (1993). Some methods proffered to managing *for* quality widely exist but this paper focuses on the core concepts of benchmarking, total quality management, and Baldrige excellence framework in the scope of leadership roles and functions.

Benchmarking in Higher Education.

According to Alstete (1995), benchmarking enables higher education institutions to overcome resistance to change and quality assurance systems. It is the method that gives a structure for external assessment and creates networks of communication among HEIs, which could open opportunities for them to share valuation resources and practices. Therefore, some scholars advocate the HEIs adopt benchmarking into the strategic directions for the development of their institutions. As benchmarking, compares performances among other institutions, could help HEIs reflect their strong and weak points while introducing processes for the improvement of performance results. Based on the synthesis of Paliulis & Labanauskis (2015), benchmarking can be internal and external, intended for the comparison of results and processes, and involved at a strategic level of the institution. Mainly, institution leadership is the crucial factor of success when any HEIs aim to exercise benchmarking in their system. At the operation of a strategic planning and quality management system, any HEI calls for good governance and leadership as well as a quality organizational culture that could adapt to changes.

Total Quality Management in Higher Education

TQM, in an education context, has been adapted and applied to quality assurance systems. TQM described by Sallis (2002) is a philosophy that educational institutions have to uphold continuous improvement and also is a technique to ensure such improvement be implemented on an ongoing basis. Curriculum has to be designed to have expected learning outcomes, instructional strategies, and learning assessment methods aligned through a valid assessment of student achievement. The alignment of the three vital functions is through tremendous effort and meaningful commitment to developing a useful PDCA cycle (plan, do, check and act). Thus, TQM has to be embedded into the culture of a HEI as a learning organization where their academic leaders demonstrate a high level of engagement based on the principles posited by Yorke (2000): to develop a vision and a strategy (engaging influential but capable players to gain broader support); to create a sense of urgency as posited by Kotter (1996) (moving people out of their comfort zones and stimulating them with hard facts to adopt changes); to create a guiding coalition (to have an aspiring team with sufficient positive power and influence to lead improvement); to communicate widely and continually (walking the talk does not only boost not only morale's faculty and staff but also creates trust within the team); to develop a shared commitment; and never rest on laurels (to re-examine current successful practices and to strive for better improvement).

Baldrige Excellence Framework in Education

Many public and private sectors have adopted the Baldrige Excellence Framework to steer their organizations towards excellent results. This framework enables leaders to align and engage their team members in the vision, mission, and values of the institutions to achieve the expected educational outcomes. The framework is composed of seven categories (leadership, strategy, students, measurement, analysis and knowledge management, workforce, operations, results). One category weighted more heavily than other process categories is leadership (senior leadership, governance, and societal responsibility.)

Leadership in Higher Education

There are many leadership theories applied in various sectors. The most commonly cited theories when discussing the administration, leadership or management of higher education institutions are shared/distributed leadership, transformational leadership, and engaging leadership, to name a few. These theories suggest positive practices that institutional leaders should follow and apply it to the common goal of educational excellence.

Shared/Distributed Leadership.

Three significant elements emphasized in distributed leadership are decision making, teamwork, and work reallocation. The quality of decisions is based on the quality of interactions-collaboration, critical dialogue, and communication (Scribner, Sawyer, & Watson, 2007). Specific qualities conclusively defined by Cordeiro & Cunningham (2013) are the abilities to try to apply all knowledge and experience, to solve problems productively to create change by encouraging idea sharing, to encourage teams to contribute knowledge to the decision-making process and lead to discovering new approaches.

Transformational Leadership.

Burns (1978) firstly formulated the idea of transformational leadership which defined the key role of leaders as to develop followers, to map new directions, mobilize resources, facilitate and support, and respond to institutional changes. Apart from this concept, other scholars added the fundamental goals of transformational leaders are to help staff members develop and maintain a collaborative, professional culture; to foster teacher development; and to help them solve problems together more effectively (Cordeiro, P.A. & Cunningham, W.G., 2013). Bennis and Nanus (1985) defined clearly that transformational leadership would indeed be a process to shape and elevate institutional goals and abilities of stakeholders to achieve critical improvements through shared interests and collective actions.

Engaging Leadership

Engagement is the responsibility of leadership as leaders have to engage themselves into the teamwork spirit and working environment while they have also to enable their team members to be actively engaged in strategic planning, decision making, implementing and evaluating the whole work processes. Based on the qualitative

research findings by Oehler, K., Stomski, L., and Olszewska, M. K. (2014), engaging leaders are those who are involved at “formative early experiences” and share set of deep “guiding beliefs” about leading with their team members and assist their team to actively engage, “engaging behaviors.” Engaging leaders lead and walk together with their team, observe people in action, hear about recent challenges, and experience obstacles that they have to overcome and seek solutions. As a result, with this engaging leadership, the team is to be highly engaged that could reach certain levels of innovation, quality, and productivity.

Methodology

The selected data were from 100 scholarly published articles directly related to leadership influencing quality culture in higher education and quality assurance systems from the year 2000 onwards. The data analysis was through qualitative content analysis with the aim to determine the roles and functions of institutional leadership that could drive HEIs to a better performance.

Findings

From all the selected scholarly articles, the researcher extracted leadership roles and functions of HEIs and found out the highest level of occurrences and consensus drawn from the data. The findings demonstrated that the crucial functional roles of leadership to establish a quality culture in HEIs are incorporated into five themes under the GEESE concept: Governance (aspire for results), Engaging (walk the talk), Enlightening (learn together), Sharing (experience together), and Enlivening (grow together).

Governance aspiring for results

HEIs are expected to operate and deliver sound results in line with stakeholders’ expectations and standards specified by internal and external quality assurance agencies as well as its unique positioning and mission. It will be beneficial if institutional leaders determine clear strategic directions and guidelines that are also aligned with expected attributes of a quality culture. Having integrated quality culture into university governance as an institutional agenda could convey the strong message as to what results are for the institution to aspire. At this stage, HEIs have to make it clear the direction of what systems and ideal practices the institution would adopt for their quality assurance systems.

Engaging leadership

In HEIs administrators at a department, a faculty or a university are considered academic leaders. Whatever they demand their academic or non-academic staff to adopt and aim to achieve, those followers at this stage need their leaders to walk alongside and go through the process with them. To establish a quality culture, leaders are the right role models to demonstrate the commitment to their goals, what and how they have to do their work, and leaders are coaches walking around ready to assist them whenever they come across difficulties or confusion arisen during the implementation phases. In any quality assurance system, working people face frustration, confusion, and discouragement during an implementation phase regardless

of their years of experience. That moment is when the engaging leaders play a vital role in guiding and working alongside with them and lead them the right path to reach the final destination. It means that engaging leaders themselves must be sufficiently knowledgeable and gain considerable experience in managing *for* and *of* quality through whatever quality assurance systems the institution implements. Such quality assurance expertise could create trust among faculty and staff which will inspire them to become better and to support the development of a quality culture.

Enlightening the team

HEIs are a complex ecosystem where demand complicated leadership competencies and styles to make it healthy. Therefore, leaders cannot be gurus in all aspects of educational institution administration and management, particularly, quality culture development. The HEI leaders then need to learn how to learn and enable others to learn to become better. Getting the right people on board is the starting point of building a positive culture where all are ready to explore to unknown territory and dare to walk out of their comfort zone. Such a team will bring in new practices and methods how to achieve target goals. Quality assurance systems depend on the continuous development of practices and processes, which means that they require a continually constructive PDCA system.

Sharing community

To nurture the quality culture in HEIs, the leaders have to support teamwork and promote a positive learning environment where faculty and staff share their practical knowledge, expertise and active quality systems among themselves. Some selected articles brought up cases where administrators became stumbling blocks in cultivating quality culture by not allowing their team to share their knowledge across disciplines or within an institution. Therefore, leaders at all levels of HEIs have to ensure that the knowledge management system is set up and facilitate the sharing and exchanging of useful information.

Enlivening minds

One of the essential factors posited by the scholars of the selected articles is to enhance the professional capabilities of individual faculty members and staff as well as to enrich their personal well-being. Quality culture could only flourish when each member is fulfilled which will further result in a holistic yet sustainable success through a mixed application of distributed, transformational and engaging leadership.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to illuminate the powerful influence of institutional leaders that does not only affect the achievement of an HEI's mission but also actively shape the culture within the institution. As a result, the leadership directly has an impact towards the successful implement and development of quality assurance standards. The overall findings demonstrated that effective leaders of HEIs must play roles resembling the GEESE model. Firstly, *Governance* is developed and shared by involving administrators, faculty members, and staff to aspire for sustainable expected outcomes. Another functional role is *Engaging* to walk the talk together with the

quality team and also *enlightening* is to learn how to learn together as a team and with a team how to tackle challenges. Besides that, *sharing* is to experience together by paving the paths to improve performances in alignment with expected outcomes and goals of institutions while achieving national or international quality assurance standards. Lastly, *enlivening* is to assure the professional and personal interests of stakeholders be fulfilled. Through synergistic collaboration under the GESE model of leadership, higher education institutions can improve and sustain quality culture enabling authentic quality development of education responding to society's future needs.

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