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The rhetoric of neo-institutionalism and the quality of formal education

Continuity and change, national and global quality cultures

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1. Introduction

A large amount of the economic literature has been written out of the desire to provide clear and adequate answers to a crucial question: Why is the world divided between the rich and the poor? Why are some economic players unable to reach high performance standards? Which are the rules to govern the economic game? Are we all subjected to the same rules? Who imposes such rules?

Out of the variety of theoretical paradigms approached by those who intent on identifying the mechanisms to ensure the achieving of high economic performance, we shall consider the one functioning under the terms imposed by social, economic and political institutions. Institutions are essential in setting up structures of incentives under which people interact within society; they are a product of the overall society or a social segment. Considering their endogen nature (as they are the result of a collective desire) we can infer that the act of establishing institutions requires the harmonization of otherwise heterogeneous interests. Within a society, there is no guarantee that all individuals and social groups should make similar institutional choices due to their potential impact on the future sharing of resources. Who will prevail in such a confrontation? Although the efficiency of a certain set of institution is important during the selection stage, political power is the supreme decision making power. The politically stronger group will determine the rule of the game according to its interests (Acemoglu et al. 2005). Consequently, political institutions determine the pattern of economic institutions and in their turn, such institutions will impact a nation's economic performances.

The neo-institutional discourse on continual and systematic institutional change has a considerable influence over long-term economic performance and it lends itself to a topic of general interest - the quality of education. This chapter emphasizes that individual choices in the realm of education are considerably influenced by personal values and beliefs; they derive from the process of learning materialized in the culture passed on from one generation to another. Time is the framework in which the learning process shapes

institutional evolution and institutions are the social constructs which create social knowledge and progress (Bundă, 2008). The mutual interdependence between the two processes is a challenge for political decision making factors. The educational reform aiming at developing a “quality culture” for the educational system needs to start, in our opinion, from national values and beliefs.

2. The teachings of a Nobel Prize winner

Douglass North, a Nobel Prize winner for his contribution to neo-institutional thinking, ironically hinted at a provocative idea: efficiency is more important for theory than for practice. Institutions are not necessarily created to be socially effective; formal rules most often serve the interests of those who are able to abide by such rules. According to such reasoning, economic efficiency is an exception rather than the rule (North, 1993, p.7). Such a warning coming from a heterodox is without doubt against mainstream economics hypothesis, yet extremely useful for those who are keen on watching the things around them realistically.

While narrowing such debates to the process of acquiring theoretical knowledge (a vital element meant to boost economic performance on long term) the adepts of neo-institutionalism consider that this is influenced by financial rewards and positive social attitudes to science.

The overall social approach to the benefits of expanding knowledge (in various stages of historical development) is the major source of long term change. Likewise, educational improvements are dependent on the features of social institutions and the institutions are variables strictly influenced by the level of education. Therefore, fostering the progress in the theory of social change involves (in North’s opinion), doing away with the hypothesis of rationality (as in traditional economic principles) and constructively explore the nature of the learning process (North, 1990).

The accumulation of knowledge requires the development of a structure meant to interpret various signals received by senses from the environment. The provisional architecture of such a structure is genetic and it gradually undergoes the process of metamorphosis, as a result of personal experiences. Such a structure is made up of categories and taxonomies gradually developing, which reflect the way in which individuals organize their own perceptions, record and classify their memorized experiences. Using such taxonomies, individuals construct mental models meant to interpret reality. Both the categories and the mental models develop throughout time, either emphasizing or altering previous positions. On the other hand, beliefs are transformed into social and economic structures by institutions (which can be seen both as formal and informal behavioural constraints). The following quotation is illustrative for the stage of our research: “There is a close relation between mental models and institutions. Mental models are internal representations created by individual cognitive systems in order to interpret the environment. Institutions are external mechanisms created by individuals to structure and order the environment” (translation mine, North, 1993, p.12-13).

Consequently, knowledge develops and determines our perception of the environment and in their turn, such perceptions inscribe the need to improve our knowledge. The learning process depends on the way in which values filter experience-derived information and on the various experiences lived by individuals and societies throughout time.

Under such circumstances, it is essential to understand the “path dependence” phenomenon; once a national economy is on the upward / downward trend or stagnates, it is very difficult to reverse such trends on the long term. Knowledge acquisition is underlain by perceptions derived from the process of collective learning across generations. The act of learning is a cumulative process subject to social and cultural filtration. As learning incentives are also influenced by culture, there is nothing to guarantee that the amount of experience gathered by society can adjust the rewards / incentives so as to support the solution identification process.

When the social and economic development is on a set path, the network of externalities, the learning process within organizations and the subjective interpretation of the problems encountered by society will strengthen the path. It is difficult to reverse a downward trend mainly because of political institutions and the values taken on by social actors. History has given evidence that it is not enough for statesmen to be aware of economic problems and to come up with “reasonable” solutions. The mere transfer of formal political and economic regulations from a successful market economy to underdeveloped economies does not automatically ensure high economic performance, as economic results are also influenced by informal /and gradually changing rules and by the enforcement of formal regulation.

3. Placing the education issue on the ground of sustainable development

Education has the potential to induce behavioural changes toward the gradual adoption of new formal/informal rules properly adapted to achieve/reinforce sustainable development. It should contribute to all three axes of sustainable development, namely:

- The Social perspective – education strengthen social cohesion by investment in human capital;
- The Economic perspective – education contribute to building a knowledge society based on sustainable economic growth; and,
- The Ecological perspective – education are crucial for changes in citizens’ behaviour on issues such as: consumption, transport, use of sustainable energies, etc.

Nevertheless for all the three axes the economic logic is prevalent. In the light of this chapter success in revising unsustainable trends will, to a large extent, depend on the human accent and the flexibility in understanding the type of education needed for sustainable human development.

3.1. A national perspective

Political discourses, curricula and plans related to Romania’s sustainable development are generously filled with sentences capitalizing on education. At first glance, one may argue that the Romanian society acknowledges that education is a strategic factor in the national development, given its vital contribution to the multi-faceted and anticipative shaping of the human capital. Yet, this is all, of course, wishful thinking.

The educational policies aiming at including minority group into the educational system are closely intertwined with the efforts made on the line of sustainable development. They should become the vector of the educational reform. Development should start from long forgotten areas by this phenomenon; extending and improving the educational network, increasing teaching career opportunities, improving school transportation in rural, poverty-stricken areas are formal measures, yet meant to rekindle long forgotten feelings: respect for

school and learning. To this end, the passage from economic to human sustainability becomes shorter and obstacle-free, as high-quality education is likely to develop responsible attitudes toward community and environment.

For a deeper understanding of the matter, one should pay specific attention to the distinctiveness of the types of learning: formal, non-formal and informal education.

- Formal education: learning that occurs within an organized and structured context (i.e. formal education institutions such as schools, colleges, vocational training institutes and universities), and follows a particular structured design. It typically leads to a formal recognition (diploma, certificate). In those cases, the issue of sustainable development tend to be inserted in the curriculum of the institution;
- Non-formal education: learning which is embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as formal learning, but which contain an important learning element, such as vocational skills acquired on the workplace;
- Informal education: learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, leisure, free-time, etc. This type of learning is sometimes referred as experiential learning.

Early education is one area to cover especially for the case of Romania. "The seven year education at home" is the period to delineate the process of individual becoming, the period in which parents teach their children to tell apart the good from the evil. This parental responsibility is both natural yet difficult in a society whose social values are continually perverted and social hierarchies undermined. People with doubtful behaviour reach the top of the ladder. Unfortunately, in the Romanian society, the setting of example has undesirable results. The achievements and the efforts of the authentic elite are too often discarded. Consequently, consistent efforts to self improvement do not attract large numbers of supporters. We are still charmed by the myth of the "overnight success". Everything is analyzed from a money-oriented perspective and in a short time span.

Such considerations urge us to recommend in-depth educational reforms, aiming at restructuring learning incentives and informal educational institutions (Askling, 1997). We strongly consider that formal education should be built on the solid foundation of informal education. In real life, however, reforms aim to restructure the higher levels of education to perfection as they consider that the foundation will inevitably be laid anyway. It goes without saying that a technical solution to this edifice is difficult to find.

The act of renewing social institutions takes time and asks for extensive reforms. Still remains the dilemma: Has indeed the formal education the potential to bring about welfare? If yes, for sure it implies a gradual and time consuming process.

As it was shown above the economic theory has developed mental models to understand the mechanism of producing welfare. This is a legitimate field of knowledge to the extent in which it serves for improving the quality of life for all human beings.

3.2. Notes on the European discourse on education and sustainable development

The European discourse on the relation between education and sustainable development has a pragmatic and programmatic character. In turn, the Education for Sustainable Development Strategy stated by the UN Economic Commission for Europe in 2005, recognizes that:

"Education for Sustainable Development is a lifelong process from early childhood to higher and adult education and goes beyond formal education. As values, lifestyles and attitudes are established from an early age, the role of education is of particular importance for

children. Since learning takes place as we take on different roles in our lives, Education for Sustainable Development has to be considered as a "life-wide" process. It should permeate learning programmes at all levels, including vocational education, training for educators, and continuing education for professionals and decision makers."

Education has intrinsic value and is a key field to enable individuals realising their full potential and achieve personal fulfilment in all aspects of their lives. It plays a crucial role in their intellectual, moral, social, creative and physical development and, by promoting essential social and civic values such as equality, tolerance, respect and active citizenship; it makes a significant contribution to strengthening social cohesion.

Whilst acknowledging the wide range of roles which education fulfil, an important part of education's role in fostering social cohesion lies in its ability to equip people with the knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes needed to enter and remain in the labour market. Integration into the world of work gives individuals an opportunity to have a full stake in society, thus contributing to their social inclusion, active citizenship and personal fulfilment.

In terms of enhancing employability, the capacity of Europe's education and training systems to ensure a supply of highly qualified people mastering the requirements of today's working world and contributing to innovation both as employees and entrepreneurs will be decisive, if Europe is to maintain and improve its competitive position in the global economy.

3.3. Changing the rhetoric for a global perspective

So far the economic logic was preponderant. At national and regional levels the education is important for its promises for future economic growth and development. Even the neo-institutional theories depart from the human intrinsic cognitive systems and follow all the way to the same end point: economic performance.

This is not the only way, but it is one of the most sophisticated economic demonstrations for the role played by education in the contemporary world.

Yet there is a growing awareness that we all are lost if continue to follow the economic way. Some global approaches to world education change the direction toward a global intelligence. That is: "the ability to understand, respond to, and work toward what is in the best interest of and will benefit all human beings and all other life on our planet. This kind of responsive understanding and action can only emerge from continuing intercultural research, dialogue, negotiation, and mutual cooperation; in other words, it is interactive, and no single national or supranational instance or authority can predetermine its outcome. Thus, global intelligence, or intercultural responsive understanding and action, is what contemporary nonlinear science calls an emergent phenomenon, involving lifelong learning processes". (Spariosu, 2005, p.3)

How can global intelligence be acquired?

It involves remapping traditional knowledge, accumulated and transmitted by various educational disciplines, and finally dropping out the disciplinary mentality. The global intelligence presupposes a holistic mode of thinking, a trans-disciplinary or integrative one, and also new kinds of knowledge from an intercultural perspective.

Yet, a global mode of thinking will emerge from "local" knowledge with its own historicity. Knowledge is always bound to a specific time and place, to a specific culture or system of

values and beliefs or, indeed, to a specific lifestyle. A global approach attempts to identify the cultural specificities of knowledge, explore commonalities and differences among them, and negotiate, if need be, among such specificities. It also presupposes that, in the process of exploration of cultural commonalities and differences in the way in which we acquire and utilize knowledge, new kinds of cross-cultural knowledge emerge through intercultural research, dialogue, and cooperation, and new kinds of integrative cognitive and learning processes become possible. (Spariosu, 2005, p.8)

Then there is a need for designing educational models to foster the kind of local-global learning environments and intercultural, intellectual climate that are needed for sustainable human development in the next few decades.

The current educational system privileges imitation students, not creative, critical, and analytic professionals with a broad and disciplinary free understanding of society at large. The core challenge for educational institutions is to turn away from conventional lecturing to learning situations based on the search for solutions to real-life, open-ended problems. (Denzin et al., 2003, p.134)

Innovative education practices for sustainable human development covering all three types of education (formal, informal, and non-formal) must be encouraged. These practices will be configured to provide a good spread of activities focussing on all three pillars of sustainable development: environmental, economic and social. Their innovative character should come from mission and objectives assumed, the delivery method of educational services and the institutional frameworks.

There is a large scope for systematic and trans-national educational reform to change the current situation of powerful constellation of forces through cooperative and innovative practices.

Paradoxically, the ongoing economic determinism of development process can be counterproductive. All the demonstrations of the economic development theories formalized or not, are very interesting intellectual exercises that unfortunately bring just little long termed benefices for human beings. Even more these benefices are not shared equally and equitable to all the people of the world. It is high time for return to natural and simple things. People always had the inclinations to struggle for survive or to cooperate for surviving. The economic institution – market is probably the most populated field of battle throughout history. Are we prepared to imagine a world in which competition is totally replaced by cooperation? And yet we wonder the project of global economy undertake only the disappearance of many types of frontiers? In market terms this means that finally we'll have a larger battle field.

This is the call for mentality and paradigmatic shifts. It should be abandoned the mentality of confrontation and look for other ways of organizing human relations, as well as our cognitive and learning processes. The shift will take place gradually, much impeded by the tendency of path dependence. This shift enhances a learning process that changes the national cultural filter and prepares the emergence of a global culture. Once such conditions installed, it will enable proliferate of global intelligence. From the paradigmatic perspective, in our opinion the neo-institutional approaches still find a place in this landscape of scientific inquire based on mutually, intercultural cooperation. A new set of economic, social and politic institutions should be crafted to guide all of our future interactions on this planet. This new rules of game borne from cooperative actions, but not confrontational selection process will naturally lead ourselves to the achievement of the final goal – that of the sustainability of human development.

4. Toward a quality culture in formal education

Within the economic, social and ecological axes of human sustainable development, quality has a significant importance and represents a challenge since quality assurance in formal education has more and more come to the fore in recent years.

Quality is a multi-faceted concept, difficult to render operational in educational terms. In general, there are a number of quality concepts as regards formal education programmes. All of these are seen as relevant and competing. In fact, there is a strong belief that a 'one-fits-all' concept of quality is not desirable. Instead, differentiation is much welcome in view of differences of needs and in order to match a broad spectrum of individual and economic demands.

Among the quality concepts of formal education are – just to mention only the most common ones here –, according to broadly accepted typology: quality as (a) perfection or consistency, which is linked to notion of reliability and to conformity through compliance with set standards; (b) the exceptional or excellence, which bears an element of elitism; (c) fitness for purpose, often linked to the need to address to a required reference point; (d) value for money, which is sometimes linked to the notion of value for time invested, both of which relate more closely than other definitions of quality to the quality concept of – partly rational and partly emotional – customer satisfaction; (e) transformation, considering the individual gain accrued in the course of a learning experience.

Positive definition of quality approaches are necessarily paralleled by negating or abandoning others. Here the slogans 'from input factors to learning outcomes defined in terms of competences' and, which is partly related when seen from the viewpoint of process and approach, 'from teaching to learning' and 'student-centred learning' come to mind. Despite profound and serious difficulties in defining the content of learning outcomes and relevant competences, in validating them, in making them operational, in installing fit-for-purpose learning devices and environments, and in measuring their accomplishment, the shift to learning outcomes and to student-centred learning rather than focussing on input and teacher perspectives has been one of the key mantras in the quality debate. However, there is still no denying of the relevance of input factors, such as qualification and numbers of staff, of equipment, or of student intake. So in practice, from case to case, there seems to be considerable ambivalence between rhetoric and traditional reality in defining and measuring quality features.

The likely key to consolidating all these approaches is that all factors need to be linked in a methodically correct manner. This is done by not taking input factors as isolated starting points for developing and judging quality. Instead, input factors should rather be seen as elements to be considered incidentally when addressing the question as to whether or not the envisaged educational purposes could, in terms of underpinning both at the level of concept and of its subsequent implementation, feasibly be accomplished.

It clearly results that quality cannot be solely evaluated by calculating quantitative indicators, such as: the number of students per member in the teaching staff, educational spaces etc. Other specific indicators are even more important: the professional and methodological competence of the teaching staff, the cultural, ethical and social accountability of education, student satisfaction. Consequently, a quality education depends, to a large extent, by the synergic harmonization of three elements: institutional capacity, educational efficiency and quality management.

To this end, a functional emerging educational system should capitalize on the following aspects:

- educational goals, curricula, teacher competence and the efficiency of educational practices;
- educational spaces, equipment, libraries and reading rooms;
- performance criteria, standards and indicators, internal and external evaluation pertaining to such standards and causes of dysfunction;
- the amount of financial resources.

The success in setting up a “quality culture” is influenced by objective and subjective factors, by national and global trends. Some countries have set the trend and the others need to follow in their footsteps. This is about the assertion that the majority of countries have understood the expectations of the minority of leading countries in the world economic hierarchy. Each of them is just a piece in a puzzle called the Global Economy, which needs to adjust to fit in. Very much like a diligent student who learnt his/her lesson well, the governments set priority action plans which will directly impact upon the future development of the national education system.

How can such plans be accomplished? How can we achieve a global quality culture? The necessary steps are easy to set, hard to achieve and impossible to quantify, as tangible results become visible in many years. Firstly, one should improve the quality assurance system at pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary levels, by assisting schools to improve their management and supply relevant jobs for the labor market. Secondly, improving teaching competences and the competences of the people involved in the educational system by supporting them in their life long learning process. Thirdly, one needs to extend the life long learning framework by assisting the agents/suppliers of life learning education to reach the standards of quality management assurance. Fourthly, young researchers should be encouraged to develop their competence by increasing their doctoral and post-doctoral educational opportunities. This enumeration can continue indefinitely. It will be interesting to note, however, whether such desires, expectations and actions pertaining to a “quality culture” will ever take effect in a national culture. In retrospect, forthcoming generations will easily solve this problem.

For the time being, the majority of countries are currently importing patterns and solutions created by developed countries. Although quality assurance activities have not had a long tradition worldwide, some countries or groups of countries have obtained worthwhile results. Therefore, the mission lies in promoting “compatible quality assurance systems” meant to render national education internationally recognized. In more concrete terms, we need to set in motion a mechanism meant to ensure that educational establishments observe national and international quality assurance standards. To this end, quality assurance strategies mirror the ability of an educational supplier to be accountable to internal clients (pupils, students, teaching staff) and external agents (employers, society) and ensure that standards are met. This quality assurance becomes an important factor in the invisible competition between nations in terms of culture and education.

Consequently, judging by the promise of progress it delivers, we consider that the implementation of a quality assurance system is necessary, yet far from being accessible, due to certain specificities: the school is not a factory, students are not goods/commodities, there are multiple clients (students, parents, employers, the society) and so one cannot identify precisely all the elements of a manufacturing process. Despite such specificities,

quality management can be functional in education as well. The educational process can be improved, teaching efficiency can enhance and teacher/student satisfaction can increase. Quality management stands for a different way to organize and harmonize efforts so as to ensure that people fulfill their tasks enthusiastically and actively contribute to improving their techniques. It might look rather impossible, yet practice provides us with plenty success stories for this type of management. To increase the chances of success, one needs to observe a simple principle - the process should prevail over the product. Such management will capitalize on the learning process as such, rather than on the results evinced by tests and examinations. From this perspective, the human factor is in the foreground again, and we consider that the weak spot which management should address is individual attitude towards the educational process. We need to consider that both the student and the teacher act and interact under complex incentive structures. We need to identify those mechanisms to induce perceptions and values meant to ensure the quality of the teaching activity. Quality culture derives from this; it stands for cooperation and responsibility.

5. The necessary steps for enabling the emergence of a global quality culture in formal education

Quality culture encompasses a more implicit consensus on what quality is and how it should be maintained and promoted. Nonetheless, this chapter is based on the conviction that quality culture can be consciously promoted. The procedure of promotion described here after is based on the agreement of common goals from which indicators of success and quality measures are derived. By a conscious promotion of a common quality culture in international cooperation, potential failure of the partnership can be diminished because contradictions with existing quality cultures at partner institutions are avoided and the partnership is firmly based on common goals as the focus of cooperation.

Therefore a common quality culture or, more broadly, a global quality culture may emerge if the mentality of confrontation is abandoned. The single suitable rule is the cooperation. Applying this rule each step towards a global quality culture should be taken cautiously. There is need of an entire process based on intercultural dialogue. The agents of each culture should interact until the harmonization of their values, believes, standards etc.. As a result, a new culture will take form which is not a mere sum of the former ones.

5.1. The case of a joint programme in formal education

For envisaging the mechanism through which the third culture, the integrator one emerges, we will discuss in more details about the three phases crossed for the establishment of a joint programme in formal education.

The first phase - *set-up phase* - concentrates on the promotion of a common quality culture between the partners involved in the development of a joint programme. *The consolidation phase* focuses on the implementation of quality assurance procedures which form the basis of the emergence of a common quality culture shared by partners. *The maintenance phase* builds up the routine of quality assurance procedures which are constantly tested and re-adjusted by evaluation procedures and thereby form the backbone to the promotion and maintenance of the common quality culture across partner institutions. The most challenging aspect in regard to a common quality culture in international cooperation is that quality

culture is always more than a mere set of rules and procedures which can be 'mechanically' negotiated, agreed upon and implemented.

Phase 1: Set-up. Considerations of quality must precede and guide the set-up and implementation of a joint programme. Defining the goals and the contents of the programme and choosing suitable partners and target groups as well as developing financial concepts are at the heart of a successful joint programme.

Understanding the quality of joint programmes – and their different ways of certification – has to be put in relation with the different expectations of the various partners of a joint programme. Stakeholders, such as parents and financiers, want to obtain properly educated and successfully graduated pupils/students. In their turn, pupils/students expect, besides education, additional services, such as tutoring or assistance in finding accommodation. Finally, students expect a better preparation for an international labour market (increased employability).

Joint programmes enable departments and universities to establish programmes which they might not be able to set up by themselves, to find new sources of funding and to get an international reputation and higher rankings. Industry expects internationally trained students with adequate knowledge and competences. The expectations of the target groups clarify the parameters according to which they define quality.

Accordingly, quality assurance measures have to be implemented in order to observe the following: (1) high standard of educational offers, (2) high level of knowledge and skills of graduates, (3) relevance of qualification for the labour market, (4) services adapted to the needs of the culture of pupils/students in joint programmes, (5) innovation capacity of joint programme in respect to educational add-on and funding, and (6) growing reputation of the departments and education institutions involved.

The decision to develop a joint programme should be based on clear ideas about the goals and special benefits. Main goals related to joint programmes can be listed as follows: (1) increased intake of pupils/students, (2) increased reputation, (3) higher attractiveness of graduates for a global labour market. General add-ons of joint programmes are mobility as well as cultural and linguistic competences of graduates.

The difference of joint programmes, compared to the classical local degree programmes, is that partners have to agree on procedures for quality assurance that are acceptable to all participants, both externally and internally. The highest interlocking between partners in the field of academic education is a joint degree. To understand the quality aspects of joint programmes, the interaction between the partners has to be analyzed.

Within this cooperation, the problem of achieving a quality system for joint programmes is that a unilateral adoption or merger of the quality systems of two or more partners is, in most cases, impossible for political or legal reasons.

A more realistic approach towards quality of joint programmes is that partners in joint programmes agree upon and mutually accept the systems of quality assurance instead of taking only the local requirements or try to find a partner with identical quality culture. A prerequisite for this is that all partners have a similar overall level of quality standards. If the partners agree that the procedures of the partner are different, but lead to the same level of quality in the framework of the common goals, accreditation is reduced to a local activity of each partner. The latter proposal is the most likely to find application in the set-up and running of joint programmes.

Accordingly, it is up to each partner to recognize the partners' quality culture as equal or fully acceptable. That also means that no single definition of quality can be given. Another issue is to promote a common quality culture for the running of the joint programme. The promotion of the common quality culture builds on the goals of the joint programmes commonly agreed on by the partners. The goals lead to the definition of indicators and quality measures. Therefore, quality culture can be seen as common goals leading to indicators of success which verify the achievements of the goals. The definition of indicators, in turn, leads to the identification of quality measures which can ensure that the goals of the joint programme are met. The process has to be combined with mechanisms that guarantee the regular quality check.

As a first step, partners have to develop an understanding of the quality strategies applied by partners. As a second step, partners have to negotiate their varying quality perspectives. This is a process which combines quality strategies, accepts characteristics of the partner and finally agrees on a common strategy to be applied to the common project of a joint programme. On the one hand, the outcome of this process is a set of joint quality assurance processes which does not contradict the procedures existent at respective institutions. On the other hand, though, the output of the process as well as the process itself is more than a set of rules and procedures. The process of combination, acceptance and agreement in itself is witness of an emergent cooperative quality culture which can be subsequently promoted by following the outcomes of that negotiation process.

Phase 2: Consolidation - Establishment of routine procedures for quality assurance. The consolidation phase goes hand-in-hand with the set-up and concrete implementation of quality assurance procedures best suited for each programme. Basically, the issue at stake during the consolidation phase is the monitoring of the implementation of procedures and understandings that were agreed upon in the set-up phase. A routine should be established regarding following issues:

- Application and pupil/student selection

Information on actual practice has to be communicated between the partners. Procedures also have to be established on how to act in respect of problematic cases. Likewise, transparent information has to be available to prospective pupils/students who want to apply for the joint programme. Regular feedback on deficits of the pupils/students has to be collected and discussed between the partners. Based on this feedback, the process of application and pupil/student selection has to be improved continuously.

- Recognition

Comparison of courses is the basis of mutual recognition of pupil/student performance and, as such, is one of the key issues to be established in the set-up phase. The actual procedures and regulation in relation to recognition have to be established and implemented in the consolidation phase. This refers, for example, to regulations of how to agree on study plans and workload for pupils/students.

- Mobility

Agreement has to be established about the study periods to be spent at a partner institution and how the pupils/students are selected for a stay with respective partner institutions (assuming that not all pupils/students can go to the partner institution of their choice). This issue includes monitoring direction of mobility: partners should strive for a balanced number of mobile pupils/students coming from and going to respective partner institutions. Crucial for the successful performance of the pupils/students during the mobility phase is

the establishment of adequate counselling services. These should be comparable at the respective partner institutions and pupils/students have to receive clear information on where to turn in case problems arise.

- Responsibilities

Responsibilities have to be clearly defined. This refers to tasks in the organisation of the joint programme on inter-institutional level, but also on internal organisation at each institution. The consolidation phase shows how well the distribution of responsibilities works and where it needs adjusting.

- Evaluation

Even though quality cultures of the partners might be different, evaluation of teaching and procedures should be going on at all partner institutions. The results of these evaluations have to be communicated and discussed between the partners. By cooperating in this mutual comparison quality will be improved in the fields of teaching as well as organisation and procedures.

Key factors for assuring the high quality of a joint programme are transparency and effective communication. Therefore, guidelines for procedures and organisation should be defined and should include regulations on regular up-dates on the current practice at the partner institutions.

Phase 3: Maintenance state - Routine of a common quality culture. During third phase the partner institutions summarise the quality measures and indicators for quality according to the goals set for a joint programme. The quality measures described then have to be established as routine for a successful joint programme since the relationship between goals – indicators – measures form the core of the common quality culture of a joint programme.

The implementation of quality measures and their monitoring through indicators have to go hand-in-hand with a method of quality assurance that provides for regular evaluation and review. It is important that the review procedures are formalised and have a clear reporting line within the partner institutions.

5.2. The quality assurance system

Quality culture is an overarching notion which encompasses managerial competence that can avail itself of practical techniques and technical know-how while complementing this facet by quality culture in the narrow sense of the word, signifying communicative integration of all concerned and thus leading to ownership, true insight and enthusiasm. Again, there is reason to believe that even these 'spiritual' components are at least in part subject to managerialism in that there are tools to foster 'quality culture'. This can be done by active inclusion in and full information on purposes, devices, and effects of quality assurance, by creating and demonstrating win-win opportunities for those concerned. It is on this account that there are different situations across the whole world, though not primarily across state border lines but rather from institution to institution. Admittedly, rather bureaucratic requirements of quality management and of evidence-based, criteria-oriented quality assurance processes present some permanent challenge to developing and maintaining such understanding and live practice of quality culture in matters of educational quality.

Deconstructing quality: from 'formal meanings' to 'situated meanings' – unravelling the politics of quality. Different studies reveal that quality was taking on particular contextualized meanings. This contrast between the 'formal meanings' and the 'situated

meanings’ points ‘the politics of quality’ (Newton, 2000; 2002). Table 1 below, which encapsulates the contrast between the dominant formal meanings of ‘quality’ which emerged in the early 1990s, and the situated perceptions of ‘quality’ which were becoming apparent later in that decade, quality was becoming associated with ‘ritualism’ and ‘tokenism’, and ‘impression management’.

Dominant formal meanings of ‘quality’ in the early 1990s	Situated perceptions of ‘quality’ of front-line academics: post-1990s
Quality as ‘perfection’ or ‘consistency’ Quality as ‘value for money’ Quality as ‘total quality’ Quality as ‘management commitment’ Quality as ‘culture change’ Quality as ‘peer review’ Quality as ‘transforming the learner’ Quality as ‘fitness for purpose’ Quality as ‘exceptional’ or ‘excellence’ Quality as ‘customer satisfaction’	Quality as ‘failure to close the loop’ Quality as ‘burden’ Quality as ‘lack of mutual trust’ Quality as ‘suspicion of management motives’ Quality as ‘culture of getting by’ Quality as ‘impression management’ and ‘game playing’ Quality as ‘constraints on teamwork’ Quality as ‘discipline and technology’ Quality as ‘ritualism and tokenism’ Quality as ‘front-line resistance’

Table 1. (Source: Newton, 2002)

As is evident from these contrasting meanings, whereas a formal definition of quality might be in terms of ‘value for money’, quality might be perceived by system users as a ‘burden’, as an ‘add-on’, or as a part of a compliance culture. Or, in contrast to ‘quality’ defined formally as ‘peer review’, quality was being experienced by many in terms of ‘impression management’ and ‘game playing’, with preparations for external assessment being carefully scripted or ‘stage-managed’. Further, while ‘quality’ for some means ‘fitness for purpose’, for others those purposes are brought into question where quality is seen in terms of ‘discipline’, with an emphasis on improvements in quality assurance as distinct from improvements in quality. And while quality may mean ‘excellence’ in formal terms, experience may point to the ‘ritualistic’ nature of quality, with quality procedures being used to satisfy external requirements rather than internal enhancement purposes.

The messages and common themes which were apparent in studies of academics’ day-to-day experiences of quality indicated:

- I. the importance of ‘users’ views of quality policy;
- II. that staff develop ‘coping mechanisms’ and ‘strategies’;
- III. that front-line academics are makers and shapers of quality policy;
- IV. that the emergent properties of quality systems are important;
- V. that transformative concepts of quality may in practice be undermined by situational constraints and contextual factors.

So, as was argued at the end of the 1990s:

Any quality assurance model, method or system, will always be affected by situational factors and context. This leads to the view that the success of a system may be less dependent on the rigour of application, ...and more on its contingent use by actors and protagonists, and on how the system is viewed and interpreted by them'. (Newton, 1999) This in itself provides an important message regarding how quality is defined, in practice, by system users.

Demystifying quality - lessons learned since the 1990s

What have been the principal lessons learned during the 1990s and the early part of this present decade?

Lessons learned...from 'close up' study and 'impact studies'

Lessons learned from 'close up' study and 'impact studies' include valuable insights into education organisations' responses to 'quality', and to a changing work context, a portrayal of the impact on education organisations identities (Henkel, 2004), and thirdly alternative perspectives and meanings to the 'formal' definitions and meanings of the early 1990s.

Lessons learned... about quality policy

Of the lessons learned about quality policy six are identified here: (1) quality is 'essentially contested', there are competing voices and discourses; (2) there is no 'blueprint' for a quality assurance system: 'close up study' reveals that the constraints of context may undermine a 'blueprint-driven' approach to the operationalisation, or definition of 'quality'; (3) quality is not a 'blank sheet': context and circumstance impact on our intentions; (4) there is a difference between the planned outcomes of policy and those which emerge through implementation; in other words, there is an 'implementation gap' between what we design into or expect of a quality system and what actually happens - education organisations are 'makers' and 'shapers' of quality policy and not passive recipients; (5) the notion of 'situatedness' suggests that any given quality assurance definition or system will always be affected by 'situational factors' and context; (6) in other words in the process of development and implementation quality policy becomes changed, even subverted; at the operational level, quality is relative to how front-line actors construe and construct 'quality' or 'the quality system'.

Lessons learned... about quality management and the management of change

Finally, lessons learned about quality management. Here, a further four lessons are identified: (1) Managers must learn to deal with ambiguity. We work on the edge of chaos, and achieving success in improvement initiatives is riven with difficulties. Often, things simply don't work out as we intended; (2) Are accountability and improvement reconcilable? Again a pragmatic approach is taken. While this tension may not be fully resolvable, acknowledging such tensions can be a basis for intervening with purpose, since it provides a basis for understanding prior to the design and implementation stages; (3) Are education organisations rational, manageable entities, and are quality managers 'change heroes' or 'passive victims'? The view is taken here that managers are neither one, nor the other, and that even where turbulence and uncertainty predominate education organisations are not beyond purposeful intervention by managers; (4) Finally, to manage quality or to manage change effectively, institutional managers must assess the current and emerging climate of operation, and respond meaningfully and purposefully on the basis of such an assessment. Arguably, self-evaluation - the hallmark of a mature approach to quality - provides an appropriate basis for achieving this.

6. Conclusions

Educational discourse is replete with references to the process of building a quality culture inside the educational system. In particular, the issue of educational quality has become an area of great interest and concern due to the conviction that education plays a pivotal role in global economy sustainable development. In choosing to investigate continuity and change surrounding learning process, the questions rely on the contextual and evolving character of the process. The ideas elaborated in this chapter point to the fact that education is a “path dependence” phenomenon. Knowledge acquisition is underlain by perceptions derived from the process of collective learning across generations. The act of learning is a cumulative process subject to social and cultural filtration. The overall social approach to the benefits of expanding knowledge (in various stages of historical development) is the major source of long term change. Likewise, educational improvements are dependent on the features of social institutions and the institutions are variables strictly influenced by the level of education. Hence social institutions are likely to become inertial to change. How can one overcome this obstacle? Economics can provide at least one solution: joining the efforts of researchers coming from different economic areas can lead to worthwhile progress with respect to unveiling the causes and mechanisms of change. Thus, progressing onto a continual ladder of discovery and learning, horizons will broaden, and the prevailing patterns of thinking and perception will become more flexible.

The distinctiveness between formal, non-formal and informal education determines a shift in focus. Learning is a culturally –filtered and cumulative process. Most reforms should be targeted at informal education. The pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education form a complex edifice which needs to be built in gradual stages.

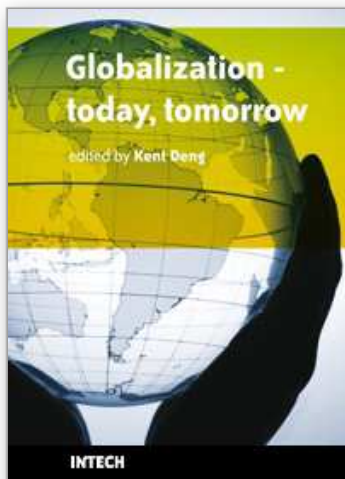
Meeting international quality assurance standards is not against this principle; on the contrary, it is quite compatible. It will make us aware that we are in competition with other participants/players worldwide and only quality players win. According to the guidelines developed by this chapter, the authentic and enduring progress in the quality formal education is only triggered by reforms targeted at informal aspects pertaining to the national institutional paradigm. This is the unique way to create a real global quality culture: the continuity of national specific reforms and the gradual change towards “universal” values imposed by the winners of global competition.

The global quality culture is fully compatible with the global intelligence. One emerges as a result of the other. This is the supreme stage, but we haven’t reached that point yet. For the moment we could speak mainly about different national quality cultures and common quality cultures of joint educational programmes. Some steps are made toward the global quality culture, but in the light of neo-institutionalism, they are illusory because even the international standardization of education is just a formal initiative. Merging standards and processes doubled by the promotion of intercultural inquiry especially through non-formal/informal education will conduct us to a global culture, in general, and a global educational culture, in particular.

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