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**Quality Assurance to Quality Culture:
Collaboration, Reflective Practice,
and Collective Responsibility
as Strategic Assets**



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Abstract

As higher education institutions (HEIs) face increased scrutiny and demands for accountability, relevance, innovation, and sustainability, the concept of “quality culture” has emerged as a central measure of institutional effectiveness. In Jamaica there are different types of higher education institutions with different types of quality assurance systems. There are mature quality assurance systems which possess longstanding traditions, cohesive procedures and systems that support continuous improvement, while newer and changing HEIs have emerging quality assurance systems which often struggle to establish coherent structures, shared values, and sustainable practices that move beyond the illusion of quality culture. This piece explores the foundations for developing a quality culture within the context of an emerging quality assurance system. Drawing on the theories of Total Quality Management, organizational culture, transformational leadership, and organizational learning, the discussion demonstrates that quality culture extends beyond a mechanism for compliance. Rather, it is a shared institutional mindset that must be intentionally cultivated through collaboration, reflective practice, and collective responsibility among all members of the institution.

Introduction

The landscape of higher education has changed dramatically over the last three decades. All over the world institutions are now expected to demonstrate accountability, maintain accreditation standards, respond to labour market demands, integrate technology, support student success, and remain financially viable. The same holds true in Jamaica with the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Youth, Skills and Information calling for HEI leaders in Jamaica to “examine strategies for strengthening institutional leadership, enhancing governance, improving student success, advancing quality assurance, and positioning the higher education sector to respond to emerging national and global priorities” (Jamaica Observer, 2026). (Poruțiu, Merce, & Poruțiu (2015) posited that this can be done by offering products or services of superior quality at lower prices as compared to competitors. Within this context the notion of “quality” has evolved beyond periodic evaluation, or external accreditation exercises but these expectations can be particularly challenging for emerging HEIs that are still developing their governance structures, operational systems and institutional identity. Community colleges in Jamaica have increasingly grappled with defining their institutional identity. Speaking at the Higher Education Leadership Conference, Permanent Secretary Dr. Kasan Troupe emphasized that community colleges should focus on “creating access to tertiary learning at an affordable rate in partnership with the universities in the local spaces where the young people are” (Lewis, 2026), rather than competing directly with universities through the expansion of four-year degree programmes. Unlike institutions with established or mature quality assurance systems, emerging HEIs must intentionally shape their governance structures, operational systems and institutional identity while simultaneously responding to external accountability requirements. Yorke (2000) posits that “although quality and quality assurance have become embedded into the discourse of higher education, the development of a quality culture within higher education has (paradoxically) lagged behind the implementation of quality assurance practices”.

This paper examines the required foundations for the development of quality culture within emerging higher education institutions. Specifically, it explores the following questions:

What is meant by “quality culture” in higher education institutions?

What theoretical perspectives inform the development of quality culture?

What organizational conditions support quality culture?

This paper contributes to ongoing discussions of institutional development, organizational learning, and quality enhancement in higher education.



Defining Quality Culture

Article 11 of World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action published by the United Nations (UNESCO) in 1998 states that quality in education should be viewed as being a multidimensional concept, which should embrace all its functions, and activities; teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, facilities, services to the community and the academic environment.

Additionally, the British Standard Institution defines quality as determined in education as being "fit for purpose". In simpler or maybe more complex terms, it begs the question, "does this service do what is asked or expected of it?" According to the text Total Quality Management in Education "fit for purpose" as used for the definition of quality in education is not to be imagined as impossible or unattainable. Quality as used in relation to education is to be viewed as being procedural in nature. And this procedural concept of quality is demonstrated in turn by the development of a system of quality assurance. That is, there are systems and procedures in place which seek to guarantee the efficiency and effectiveness of the programmes implemented and awards issued by the institution.

According to The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education [ENQA], (2015) quality assurance should be viewed as a necessary part of the culture of higher education institutions and there are some basic principles which the quality assurance systems should consider and safeguard. These include:

The interests of society in the quality of programmes implemented and the awards issued.

The quality of academic programmes developed and improved to benefit students and ultimately society.

Processes to demonstrate accountability of the institution.

Processes to foster diversity and innovation among staff and students.

According to the European University Association (EUA) (2006), quality culture in organizations consists of two interrelated dimensions:

A structural or managerial dimension involving policies, procedures, assessment mechanisms, and quality assurance systems.

A cultural or psychological dimension involving commitment, trust, shared values, and collective responsibility.

However, creating a culture of quality in an institution is more than procedural in nature Rahnuma (2020). This perspective suggests that quality culture should not be reduced to compliance measures, audits, or accreditation activities. Rather, it extends to encompass the ways in which institutional members collectively understand, value, and complete their daily work. In tertiary institutions with more mature quality assurance systems quality is proposed to be every one's business. These institutions have established quality assurance frameworks as well as policies attendant to the demonstration of quality across the campuses of the institution. Primarily the institutions tend to have a specialized office "Quality Assurance Unit" with more than one member. Additionally, dedicated quality management committees comprising representatives from across the institution—including members of the executive leadership team, academic staff, and students—have been established to oversee the implementation and continuous improvement of the quality management system within departments. However, some emerging higher education institutions (HEIs) in Jamaica continue to face staffing constraints imposed by the Ministry of Education. These limitations have created challenges in embedding quality assurance personnel within institutional structures. For example, some publicly funded institutions are authorized to employ only one officially designated Quality Assurance Officer, placing significant demands on a single individual to coordinate institution-wide quality assurance activities.



Conceptual Frameworks of Quality Culture

Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) defined the conceptual framework as being the specifics of who and what will (and will not) be studied. This theoretical paper draws on the theories of Total Quality Management, Organizational Culture, Transformational Leadership, and Organizational Learning. These theories help to define quality culture and outline how quality culture can be measured. They further create the framework for establishing coherent structures, shared values, and sustainable practices.

Total Quality Management (TQM)

Although originally developed within industrial settings, Total Quality Management (TQM) principles have significantly influenced quality assurance and quality enhancement practices in higher education. The principles from TQM which support institutional effectiveness include encouraging ongoing evaluation, collaboration among stakeholders, evidence-based planning, and a holistic approach to organizational performance (Sallis, 2014). Harvey & Green (1993) emphasised that TQM principles continuous improvement, through customer, or stakeholder satisfaction has positively contributed to the development of quality cultures within universities and colleges seeking to enhance teaching, learning, and

institutional outcomes. Several other TQM principles remain highly relevant to higher education institutions, including shared responsibility, data-informed decision-making, and systems thinking. In most HEIs in Jamaica it not unusual to encounter aspects of TQM in day-to-day activities. It is not unusual to have stakeholder consultation meetings or even focus group discussions as a part of the process for continuous improvement or programme review. Feedback from customer service surveys and stakeholder satisfaction surveys also tend to play an integral part of annual reviews. Additionally, student experience surveys as well as employer perception surveys are important data gathering tools used by HEIs as they seek to remain responsive and relevant to the industry. The use of the findings of these surveys in the decision making process tend to separate the more mature systems from the less mature and emerging systems.

Organizational Culture Theory

Organizational culture theory provides another important foundation for understanding quality culture in higher education. Developed by MIT professor Edgar Schein, organizational culture is defined as a pattern of shared culture groups learn to solve problems (Schein, 2010). Schein identifies three levels of culture: (1) artifacts and observable practices, (2) espoused values, and (3) underlying assumptions. Within educational institutions, artifacts include strategic plans, assessment reports, policies, and established institutional rituals such as graduation ceremonies and faculty recognition events. Espoused values are reflected in mission and vision statements, commitments to excellence, educational philosophies, and the implementation of instructional strategies. Underlying assumptions represent deeply held beliefs about teaching, learning, leadership, and institutional purpose.

According to Fundin et al. (2025), measuring culture involves evaluating the alignment of organisational values with processes and procedures. This perspective suggests that quality culture emerges when institutional values are consistently reflected across all three levels of culture. In other words, quality culture becomes visible when stated commitments to excellence are reinforced by organisational practices and supported by underlying beliefs. Harvey and Stensaker (2008) outline that quality culture requires both structural processes and shared cultural values that promote continuous improvement. Problems arise when institutions publicly advocate values which organizational practices fail to support.

Emerging higher education institutions are particularly vulnerable to such misalignment because their institutional systems, traditions, and governance structures are still evolving. Consequently, leadership must intentionally shape organizational culture through communication, role modeling, policy development, and the creation of shared experiences that reinforce desired values and quality-oriented behaviours (Schein, 2010). One publicly funded institution in Jamaica, specializing in the performing and creative arts has continued to fulfil its vision as “the premier tertiary arts institution in the English-speaking Caribbean” by intentionally celebrating and publicising its Caribbean creativity over conformity. For example, for its graduation it has replaced traditional academic processions with dynamic, and its graduation is marked by multidisciplinary showcases, and powerful performances that embody the institution’s role and identity.



Transformational Leadership Theory

In emerging higher education institutions transformational leadership can be particularly valuable because they tend to create environments where quality becomes everyone's responsibility rather than the sole concern of a specific office. Developed James MacGregor Burns and later expanded by Bernard M. Bass, Transformational Leadership Theory posits that effective leaders inspire and motivate followers to achieve higher levels of performance by creating a compelling vision, fostering commitment to organizational goals, and encouraging personal and professional growth. The theory emphasizes four key dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. In higher education settings, transformational leaders are particularly valuable because they tend to promote innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement while fostering a culture of excellence and shared responsibility. In emerging institutions where quality assurance is usually visible during accreditation visits or as the institution prepares for accreditation it takes a transformational leader to move towards the creation of a sustained “visible quality culture”.

One emerging HEI in Jamaica, undergoing a significant institutional transition, had an established quality assurance system; however, its processes were fragmented and operated in silos, with limited collaboration across departments. Recognizing the need for a more integrated approach, the institutional leadership intentionally fostered collaboration, inclusion, and shared ownership through a series of staff engagement initiatives designed to cultivate a visible quality culture. The purpose of these engagements is to move quality assurance towards shared responsibility and transparency. As well as build a shared understanding and direction and create opportunities for staff involvement in decision making. Types of engagement include cross departmental meetings to foster awareness and “ownership” of policies and procedures, townhall meetings to augur feedback to policies and procedures as well as focussed group meetings to review policies and other regulatory documents. Early engagement sessions occasionally attracted little or no participation, reflecting the difficulty of changing long-established organizational practices. Nevertheless, through sustained conversation and collaboration the culture of shared responsibility is taking shape.

Organizational Learning Theory

Organizational Learning Theory provides a valuable foundation for understanding the development of quality culture within higher education institutions. The relationship between organizational learning and the development of quality culture is particularly significant because sustainable quality improvement depends on an institution’s members’ ability to critically examine their performance and use evidence to inform decision-making. Argyris & Schön (1996) propose that organizations improve their effectiveness by continuously acquiring, creating, and applying knowledge gained through routinized and systematic reflection, feedback, and inquiry. Senge (2006) also proposes that key characteristics of a learning-oriented quality culture include ongoing reflection on institutional effectiveness, data-driven planning, open communication, cross-departmental collaboration, and a willingness to experiment with innovative practices.

Another key marker of a maturing quality assurance culture is the extent to which the institution is willing to collect and use evidence to inform decisions and drive meaningful change. It is not unusual for all HEIs in Jamaica to collect student course evaluation data. In institutions with more mature quality assurance systems create procedures to ensure the utilisation of the findings. The findings from the data is used as a catalyst for review, reflection and improvement in the departments and faculties. The findings stimulate faculty discussions, programme reviews, and professional development sessions initiated to strengthen assessment practices, clarify course expectations, and enhance feedback mechanisms. However, institutions with emerging quality assurance system tend to collect the data but not use the data. Rather they view these findings as isolated complaints which should not be interpreted for action. Over time, this process reinforces the understanding that student voice is merely a data collection exercise and not a valuable resource for improving teaching, learning, and the overall student experience.

As a result, emerging higher education institutions that do not establish effective mechanisms for reflection, feedback, and knowledge sharing may inadvertently perpetuate ineffective practices or create fragmented approaches to quality assurance. Consequently, reflection/assessment activities should not be viewed merely as accountability requirements but as opportunities for institutional learning and improvement so that results can be used strengthen organizational capacity.



Discussion

This paper examined foundations of developing quality culture within emerging higher education institutions while providing apt examples. Drawing on Total Quality Management, Organizational Culture Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Organizational Learning Theory, the literature revealed the multidimensional nature of quality culture. The principles of TQM reinforce the importance of institutional quality as an ongoing process rather than a periodic outcome. Literature on Organizational Culture Theory supplies an interpretation of how shared assumptions,

values, and practices shape institutional behaviour. While the literature on transformational leaders suggests that transformational leaders are particularly important in emerging institutions because they help create coherence during periods of organizational growth and change. Finally, Organizational Learning Theory complements these perspectives by emphasizing the importance of reflection, knowledge sharing, and evidence-informed decision-making. Collectively, these theories propose that quality culture is concurrently structural, cultural, relational, and developmental. This was seen in an institution with a well-established quality assurance system but an HEI with emerging visible quality culture. The institution quality assurance office embarked on the review of its programmes after the interruption of systems as a result of COVID 19. Findings from the student course evaluation surveys, graduate tracer data, external examiner reports as well as employers identified concerns. Additionally, students reported inconsistent assessment practices across departments while employers indicated that graduates needed stronger digital competencies, and faculty recognised that some course content had not kept pace with changes in the school system.



The response of the institution demonstrated the use of structural, cultural, relational and developmental qualities for building quality culture:

Structural Dimension. The quality assurance office coordinated and collaborated with the Curriculum Department and the Vice President Academics to review the programmes using established institutional policies and procedures. A multidisciplinary review committee was formed, programme data were analysed, stakeholder consultations were conducted, and recommendations aligned with established quality assurance standards established by the nation's accrediting organisation. Clear timelines, reporting mechanisms, and accountability measures ensured that the review process was systematic and evidence-based and the findings shared with the institutional leaders.

Cultural Dimension. Through the multidisciplinary committee institutional leaders emphasised in communication that the review was an opportunity for learning rather than fault-finding and finger pointing. This openness fostered and reinforced the institution's commitment to excellence. Faculty members were encouraged to openly discuss challenges in delivery. Students were encouraged to share honest feedback viewed as a resource for improvement.

Relational Dimension. Although the quality assurance office co-ordinated the review diverse perspectives were included to foster inclusivity and to build relationships and involvement in the decision-making process. The process brought together academic staff, students, alumni, employers, librarians, instructional designers, assessment specialists and administrative personnel. These diverse perspectives strengthened decision-making and created shared ownership of the recommendations. Faculty members who had previously worked independently or in small groups specific to their courses began collaborating to align use the feedback to improve learning across courses.

Developmental Dimension. The review resulted in improved learning across courses, but it also promoted reflection of faculty strength and weaknesses. As a result, professional developments were scheduled on authentic assessment and educational technology, while annual monitoring of student outcomes was introduced to evaluate the effectiveness of the changes. Subsequent student surveys showed increased satisfaction with feedback and assessment practices, and employer feedback reflected improved graduate preparedness. Building an effective quality culture necessitates attention to systems, people, leadership, and learning processes.

In conclusion, while external accountability frameworks provide important benchmarks/standards, visible quality one of the most enduring lessons I have learned is that quality is not created by policies, audits, or accreditation visits alone. A genuine and sustainable quality culture emerges when individuals at every level of the institution understands and plays his or her role and shares responsibility of making quality everybody's business rather than the work of a single office or committee.

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