Danish University Colleges

A third way for QA systems? Navigating external quality demands and meaningfulness for teachers and students
A case study of practice from VIA University College in Denmark

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Publication date: 2019

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record with the publisher's layout.

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
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Paper presented in Track 3: “Quality Management for Responsible Higher Education” at the

EAIR 41st Annual Forum in Leiden, The Netherlands

25 till 28 August 2019

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Key words
Quality, assessment/evaluation, strategic planning, higher education policy/development, institutional performance measures
Abstract

A third way for QA systems? Navigating external quality demands and meaningfulness for teachers and students. A case study of practice from VIA University College in Denmark

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to account for and measure quality for external stakeholders while providing meaningful tools for quality improvement to their own members. We apply Dreyfus’ model of skill acquisition in a case study of VIA University College (Denmark) to analyze HEIs’ quality assurance (QA) capacity and development and the challenges HEIs face when navigating between demands of external accountability, societal responsibility and internal meaningfulness whilst trying to meet competing quality conceptualizations. Furthermore, we discuss challenges in improving HEIs’ QA systems and how HEIs can tackle these challenges in pursuing a third way for QA systems.
A third way for QA systems? Navigating external quality demands and meaningfulness for teachers and students. A case study of practice from VIA University College in Denmark

1. Introduction

As institutions of research and education, higher education institutions (HEIs) play an important societal role. In a Danish context, they are also heavily publicly subsidized. This implies a legitimate demand to hold HEIs accountable for their activities. For example, HEIs must comply with demands of transparency and centrally defined accreditation processes, and when it comes to program content, both processes and results are monitored. Institutional quality assurance (QA) systems are responsible for documenting a solid, research-based knowledge foundation, a satisfactory level and progression. The quality of the educations offered is also assessed with reference to graduates’ immediate labor market value and programs’ perceived work place relevance.

Furthermore, QA systems can be used as internal steering devices from a top management perspective and at program level reflecting an ascendancy of managerialism in higher education (i.e. Anderson 2008; Frølich et al. 2013; Manatos, Sarrico, and Rosa 2017; Williams 2012). At the same time, HEIs have a responsibility towards their own members to provide a QA system that is both meaningful and manageable in the context of the professional practice of all users, not least in order to avoid resistance against QA (Deneen and Boud 2014; Reith and Seyfried 2019; Yorke 2000).

In this paper, we address a central dilemma for HEIs and their QA systems:

> How can HEIs navigate between accounting for and measuring quality for external stakeholders (e.g. accreditation agencies) on one side and providing tools for quality improvement that members of the organization (i.e. teachers, students, management and administrative staff) perceive as meaningful on the other side?

Recent research has uncovered various ways in which staff at HEIs, first and foremost teachers and academics, attempt to reject and resist QA, as well as how QA managers can react to those forms of resistance (Anderson 2008; Deneen and Boud 2014; Lucas 2014; Reith and Seyfried 2019; Seyfried 2019). Some argue therefore for a quality culture at HEIs, meaning a widespread commitment to quality throughout the organization, a sustained engagement of the ‘hearts and minds’ of its staff with the meaning of quality as well the embedding of quality thinking in practice (Yorke 2000:24). Elken and Stensaker (2018) in turn propose the concept of quality work as an alternative to quality management and quality culture. The quality work concept covers the “mundane day-to-day activities that are undertaken to enhance and also maintain educational quality” (p. 189), the “set of activities and practices within higher education institutions that address the quality of its educational provision” (p. 190).

Using the case of VIA University College (VIA) in Denmark, we discuss how HEIs can navigate between external demands for accountability and rising managerialism on one side and the need for a quality culture and QA-related practices, systems and tools perceived as meaningful by the HEIs own members on the other side. We propose that HEIs can do so by incorporating and internalizing QA into their mindset, organizational culture and members’ everyday practices instead of creating QA systems as administrative attachments to the organization’s ongoing activities. We acknowledge that these are ambitious goals and discuss whether (and how) HEIs realistically can reach them. If successful, we argue that HEIs will be able to find a third way in QA and live up to their responsibilities both towards society (creating transparent, knowledge-based QA systems supporting the development and relevance of

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study programs) as well as towards their own members (by creating meaningful and manageable QA systems).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical background in higher education management literature and the analytical framework applied in the case study. Chapters 3 and 4 present the empirical background and the methods and data used in the case study. Chapter 5 presents the results of our analysis. Chapter 6 offers concluding reflections on our case study.

2. Theoretical background and analytical approach
Resistance to QA in HEIs is a likely response to rising QA-related managerialism in higher education. As Anderson (2008:252) highlights, academics are

"...trained in analytical thinking and inured to critique [...and] unlikely to passively accept changes they regard as detrimental. Academics are also intrinsically motivated by the nature of academic work. They identify—often passionately—with the tasks and goals that comprise the academic endeavour, and are therefore likely to resist erosion of valued aspects of their work."

Since resistance is not a unitary concept, HEIs face a substantial challenge when trying to respond to different forms of resistance, to overcome or embrace them and continue developing and improving their QA systems. Generally, resistance can be understood as an “attempt to push back against a change or tendency that is perceived as restrictive, unduly formalising operations or promoting rigidity of behaviour or perspective” (Deneen and Boud 2014:580). Deneen and Boud (2014) distinguish between three types of resistance against QA in HEIs: Epistemic resistance is characterized by a “push back against the implicit and explicit knowledge structures underlying the assessment change” (p. 584). Procedural resistance describes the use of existing procedural rules and regulations to avoid QA-related work tasks. Lastly, pragmatic resistance draws on issues like time and workload to highlight logistical difficulties in QA implementation.

Reasons for resistance can e.g. lie in teaching staff’s perception of changes in assessment procedures as limiting academic freedom or disempowering them, in particular since “assessment results are increasingly being promoted as providing concrete, public evidence for accountability purposes of learner achievement” (2014:578). Deneen and Boud therefore conclude that resistance is not only likely, but “may be expected and, if concerns are valid, appropriate. It is no surprise then that achieving assessment change in a higher education context can prove elusive and unpredictable” (p. 578).

This research does not come at a surprise to the quality managers among the authors of this paper. We have frequently experienced resistance to QA and the challenges in implementing legal requirements made by external stakeholders (e.g. the Danish Accreditation Institution) within our own organization, because externally defined QA standards are understood as overly uniform, abstract and accountability-oriented - at least by a group of teachers and researchers. In our daily work supporting the implementation of QA standards and criteria and their translation into local practices, and in our conversations with program leaders and teachers, we frequently see staff express deep concerns and frustrations with QA and QA-related management methods and standards in their daily work. Furthermore, we can observe different forms of resistance to QA resembling resistance types described in the literature (Deneen and Boud 2014; Reith and Seyfried 2019; Seyfried 2019).

To understand how our own institution and HEIs in general can approach resistance to QA and how they can navigate between external demands for accountability and rising managerialism on one side and the need for a meaningful QA for their own members on the other side, we apply a five-stage model of skill acquisition going from novice to expert, originally developed by Dreyfus as a taxonomy of skill acquisition for individuals (Dreyfus 2004; cf. Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1980). Table 2.1, below, shows
Dreyfus’ original five stages of skill development and associated commitment types. In our analysis in chapter 5, we transfer the model from the level of individuals to the organizational level to understand, characterize and illustrate the development and capacity of our own institutions QA system since 2012/13. Generally, we find the model suitable for analyzing HEIs’ QA systems in several respects:

i) it provides a framework for analyzing HEIs’ QA systems, their capacity and maturity in a developmental perspective;

ii) it helps identify and describe factors that are crucial for maintaining a developmental level or moving up to the next level; and

iii) it helps identify fingerprints of QA developmental levels and understand why some study programs may be more successful at QA than others.

Table 2.1: A five-step-model of skill development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill level and commitment</th>
<th>Novice</th>
<th>Advanced beginner</th>
<th>Competent</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>Expert</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detached commitment</td>
<td>Detached commitment</td>
<td>Detached understanding</td>
<td>Involved understanding; detached deciding</td>
<td>Involved commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and deciding; involved outcome</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* based on Dreyfus 2004, cf. also Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1980

According to Dreyfus’ original model, commitment and detached/involved understanding are key indicators of the individual’s skill possession at the different stages. At level 1, the novice learns to recognize domain-independent features and is given basic rules to act on, but possesses only a non-situational and context-free knowledge and therefore feels no commitment to the matter. At level 2, the advanced beginner starts to obtain a preliminary understanding of the relevant context based on examples and can relate to these when given instructions. Recognition and a certain degree of experience enter here, but the advanced beginner only feels detached commitment as experience still is limited.

Level 3 is the crucial level, because competence starts to evolve. First, the performer has to go through a rather frustrating process, where he/she is aware of a huge number of procedures for possible situations and that basic rules given to him/her at lower levels not always apply. Instead, the performer has to come up with an appropriate answer/reaction based on his/her own experience and growing knowledge of the context. When it turns out right, competence evolves. In case of failure, frustration dominates. Over time, the performer will learn to act according to the situation and choose the right solution even though risk of failure exists. At level 4, the proficient performer immediately understands the context and is aware of the many aspects and possible solutions. Involved understanding exists, the performer still needs to rely on the given rules in decision making. The emotional aspect, key trigger at level 3, has diminished and emotional detachment becomes natural at levels 4 and 5. What distinguishes the expert at level 5 from the proficient performer is the ability to feel an immediate intuitive response to situations. At this final stage, involved commitment characterizes the expert.

Translating the model from the individual level to the organizational level of QA in HEIs, we replace the notion of commitment (understood psychologically as emotional involvement) with the notion of motivation and meaningfulness of QA within an HEI. Hence, instead of focusing on the individual’s commitment in skill acquisition, we focus on the perceived meaningfulness of QA systems in HEIs as complex organizations with manifold internal stakeholders and on organizational capacity.

According to the adapted model, real meaningfulness or meaningful QA cannot begin to develop before a HEI reaches level 3, where the organization has accumulated the necessary level of experience in working with QA, and can only be fully implemented at level 5, the expert level (cf. ch. 5.1). Beginning
at level 3, follow-up processes and continuous dialogue with stakeholders over evaluation results and recommendations are important for developing real competence in QA and need to be drawn into the planning of educational programs and the ongoing adjustment of teaching (cf. Dahler-Larsen 2006). This will create a sense of meaning to the HEIs members (a lack of motivation in the opposite case). In order to reach levels 4 and 5, HEIs QA capacity needs to be developed even further. According to Dahler-Lahrsen (2006:88), who discusses the implementation of a “quality culture” in Danish primary schools, the following dimensions are conditional for capacity building regarding evaluation and quality assurance: members’ skills and attitudes, organizational structures and processes, a common terminology, resources and engagement and support from the top management (ibid.). In chapter 6, we will discuss in more detail what being an expert at QA means, which challenges HEIs face moving towards level 5 and how these challenges might be tackled.

3. Empirical background
VIA University College is Denmark’s second largest university college, a profession-oriented HEI, offering research-based teaching combined with practical training in ca. 40 full degree programs within the fields of health, education, business and technology and ca. 30 further education programs at diploma, academy profession and master degree level.

VIA was established in 2008/9 through a merger of six individual institutions. In the process of preparing the merger, a common framework for a quality system was developed. The original framework focused primarily on the establishment of a quality system at program level and less on quality assurance and control, because the Danish accreditation system at that time was based on accreditation at program level (cf. VIA’s quality model, 2011). In 2011, the QA system was evaluated in a pilot audit conducted by the Danish Evaluation Institute (Pilot Audit of VIA University College, The Danish Evaluation Institute / EVA, 2011). The panel's overall recommendations for the further development of VIA’s QA system were to:

- strengthen the connection between VIA’s two quality circles,
- introduce common process standards for local quality work,
- strengthen the framework for knowledge sharing and common solutions across the organization and
- put greater emphasis on aggregated key figures and information on the local quality work processes.

Based on the panel's recommendations and in preparation for the coming changes to the accreditation system from program to institutional accreditation (cf. Act no. 601 of 12 June 2013, implemented 2014), VIA prepared a major revision of its QA system in 2012/13. Amongst others, common process standards, joint quarterly statistics on key indicators and a joint quality report focusing on both quality and quality work in the education programs were added to the QA system.

Quality reports are until today central to VIA’s revised QA system and prepared in spring for the previous year. The quality reports’ themes and questions are developed based on current political focus areas (e.g. study intensity), VIA’s strategy and strategic framework contract with the national ministry of science (e.g. digitization), issues identified in previous quality reports and, importantly, external requirements for quality assurance, in particular the given accreditation criteria (the programs’

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2 Cf. VIA’s homepage: en.via.dk
knowledge base, the level and content of the programs, the programs’ relevance). VIA’s revised QA system was implemented in 2014 (VIA’s Quality System, 2015).

Two years later, VIA received its first institutional accreditation based on a well-developed and well-documented QA system (Positive institutional Accreditation of VIA University College, Letter of decision and Accreditation Report from The Danish Accreditation Council, 2016). That means VIA itself is responsible for defining, maintaining and measuring the quality of its programs in a standardized, transparent and accountable way that lives up to externally set accreditation criteria, but that is developed “in-house”. Cornerstones of VIA’s revised QA system are:

- quality and process standards that are centrally defined, but implemented decentrally at program level,
- annual quality reports at program level (biennial since 2016) and
- follow-up activities and dialogues based on systematic self-evaluation and peer review at program level.

Since the successful institutional accreditation, VIA has developed its QA system further and shifted focus from procedures and processes to results and effects in order to strengthen the dialogue on quality and quality development in the organization. This has resulted in a new framework for quality reporting with a focus on reflection, efforts and expected effects for students. Besides the traditional follow-up on quality reports on different organizational levels, educational programs now carry out internal self-evaluation workshops or a cross-organizational peer review to strengthen dialogue on quality (cf. VIA’s Quality Reporting, 2018; cf. also ch. 5)

Despite attempts to develop a QA system that is locally based and focused on reflection and dialogue, several programs experience the QA as an add-on to the development of their program. VIA has observed, e.g., that work with action plans becomes ritual rather than an active tool for developing the education. Therefore, a development plan has recently been initiated in order to move from working with action plans linked to evaluation to working with an overall strategic development plan for individual programs (cf. ch. 6).

Generally, demands of institutional accreditation ensured the involvement and engagement of the top management and its responsibility for education quality in particular towards external stakeholders, but this also implied a strong centralization and bureaucratization of the QA system, which to some extent led teachers and students to experience a loss of commitment, co-responsibility and meaning of the QA system. Hence, as other HEIs, VIA faces the challenge of developing a QA system that fulfills externally set quality criteria and that is simultaneously perceived as meaningful by teachers and students. In chapter 6, we discuss in more detail how such a system and a third way in QA could be achieved.

4. Methods and data
We conduct a preliminary case study of VIA’s QA system from 2012/13 until today in order to analyze how HEIs can navigate the conflict between accounting for and measuring quality for external stakeholders and providing meaningful tools for quality improvement for the organization’s own members. We begin our analysis with VIA’s preparations for institutional accreditation in 2012/13, since the prior QA system had a substantially different setup and rationale due to its focus on program accreditation.

Our preliminary case study is based on material related to VIA’s QA system since 2013 (e.g. quality reports, centrally defined quality and process standards, quality development plans; cf. appendix) and experiences of the QA managers among the authors with developing VIA’s QA system. In future iterations of our article, we plan to analyze materials related to VIA’s QA system systematically in order
to identify more reliably key factors that helped VIA as a whole, as well as individual programs to improve their QA capacity and move up on the five QA levels described above. Furthermore, we hope to conduct interviews with VIA’s management, teachers, program leaders and QA managers at different levels of the organization in order triangulate the findings from our document analysis.

The goal of our analysis is to investigate the development of VIA’s QA system and comparatively analyze the varying success in QA implementation at program level. In particular, our analysis wants to:

- identify which factors are important for HEIs when moving from one QA developmental level to the next,
- present VIA as a successful case of QA development from level 1 to level 3, and
- demonstrate how one can categorize the varying capacities of HEIs’ QA systems systematically and thereby support further improvement of QA systems.

Furthermore, we use the insights provided by our case study to discuss the challenges HEIs face when moving up to levels 4 and 5 in chapter 6.

5. Analysis and results

In the following analysis, we translate Dreyfus’ model to the context of QA in HEIs to distinguish analytically between different institutional QA capacities and developmental levels (5.1) as well as to identify critical factors that facilitate (or hinder) movement to upper levels (5.2).\(^4\)

5.1 The development of VIAs QA system since 2012

Starting with the preparations for VIA’s revised QA system in 2012/13, we highlight a number of internal and external circumstances that facilitated the development of VIA’s QA system since 2012 and discuss which developmental stages the QA system has gone through. We use VIA’s quality reports as primary indicator for the development of VIA’s QA system, since they illustrate the focus of VIA’s QA work well. Table 5.1, below, gives an overview of the development of VIA’s QA system. It summarizes Dreyfus’ original five stages (first column), the respective characteristics of the developmental stages of VIA’s QA system (second column), the focus of quality work at the different levels (third column) and a timeline with internal and external circumstances facilitating the development of VIA’s QA system (fourth column).

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\(^4\) Our analysis necessarily simplifies complex QA realities, where developmental stages are not always clear-cut, but rather fluent continuums, and where not all educational programs at VIA necessarily are at the same QA development stage in all areas of QA at the same time.
Table 5.1: A five-step-model of QA development at HEIs exemplified by VIA University College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill level and commitment*</th>
<th>Characteristics of QA development levels in VIA</th>
<th>Focus of VIAs quality work and decision-making</th>
<th>QA results/assessment outcome at program level</th>
<th>Timeline and circumstances for QA development at VIA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Novice Detached commitment</td>
<td>Development and early implementation of QA system</td>
<td>- Development of central process standards and locally adapted procedures; - Annual quality report (2013) focusing on: -- plans and procedures -- results, conclusions &amp; implemented initiatives - Green-yellow-red indicators to categorize programs’ performance</td>
<td>“A program is in the process of developing systematics in quality work. Efforts should be on further developing and implementing the QA system.”</td>
<td>2012/13: First preparations for new institutional accreditation system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced beginner Detached commitment</td>
<td>Implementation of QA system with small adjustments</td>
<td>- Annual quality report (2014) as above, but higher expectations/requirements for programs’ QA work - Additional focus on “field-proven practice”</td>
<td>“A program is in the process of implementing the QA system. Efforts should be made to use QA tools actively in the ongoing development of the QA system and program.”</td>
<td>2014-15: Preparations for first institutional accreditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent Detached understanding and deciding; involved outcome</td>
<td>Strengthening of dialogue on quality, development of common principles and documentation of QA work</td>
<td>Annual quality report (2015) with focus on - internal coherence of different elements of the QA system (e.g. centrally defined process standards, local procedures and action plans)</td>
<td>“A program has implemented a well-functioning QA system. Efforts should be on integrating the QA system.”</td>
<td>2016: Successful institutional accreditation of VIA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient Involved understanding; detached deciding</td>
<td>Development of a holistic, meaningful approach to quality work</td>
<td>Annual quality report (2017) with focus on: - dialogue and reflection on challenges and improvement potentials at program level and centrally - Green-yellow-red indicators only for quantitative indicators of the QA system</td>
<td>“A program has a fully implemented, well-integrated and well-functioning QA system. Efforts should be on fully integrating the QA system.”</td>
<td>2017-18: Major revision of the QA system and new strategic development plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert Involved commitment (cf. chapter 6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* first column based on Dreyfus 2004, cf. also Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1980

NOVICE LEVEL 1 – Developing and implementing the revised QA system (ca. 2012-14)

The novice level 1 is characterized by lacking practical experience with the revised QA system. In 2012/13, VIA had only just started to prepare the revised QA system, meaning the organization developed new basic rules and a new framework for its QA system and quality work, which had yet to be tested in practice. Compared to the previous QA system, VIA shifted focus to a more centralized QA system and implemented a number of new QA measures (e.g. standardized annual quality reports at program level) to ensure better coherence between the different levels of the QA system and a better...
entrenchment in VIA’s management structure. The revised QA system was implemented in 2014 and the first quality reports of the individual programs (for the previous year 2013) focused on:

- **plans and procedures** in areas for which VIAs central QA unit had developed so-called process standards (to ensure that all programs had a local QA system that included compulsory processes),
- **results, conclusions and implemented initiatives** on the basis of the information collected in the QA system (to ensure that the procedure functioned in practice, i.e. that information was collected systematically and contributed to developing and improving programs).

The revised QA system was meant to ensure the involvement, engagement and responsibility of the top management for educational quality. Quality reports made knowledge about the quality of education accessible to the top management with results from programs’ individual reports being aggregated and distributed to the upper management levels.

However, quality reports used a green-yellow-red indicator system to indicate programs’ performance regarding QA processes and results (cf. appendix), which was not always perceived as meaningful or adding value by teachers, but as out of touch with daily teaching activities. Furthermore, green-yellow-red indicators led to resentment towards QA in general, since they contributed to an unhealthy internal competition between programs and symbolized an abstract, detached QA language.

**ADVANCED BEGINNER LEVEL 2 – Implementing the revised QA system and translating central rules into local procedures (ca. 2014-15)**

The advanced beginner level comes in natural prolongation of novice level 1, where the organization is starting to gain experience with the QA system, but still has a stronger focus on its implementation, possibly with small adjustments. Annual quality reports for each program still focused on plans and procedures, but adjustments were made, e.g. regarding higher expectations/requirements for programs (e.g. regarding the coherence of QA results, conclusions drawn and actions initiated). Overall, the QA system focused on ensuring that all programs had implemented QA procedures and developed actions plans and were able to demonstrate “field-proven practice”.

**COMPETENT LEVEL 3 – Improving meaningfulness through dialogue and common principles (ca. 2016)**

The in part critical response of the staff towards VIA’s QA system facilitated further improvements and allowed VIA to reach competent level 3, where meaningfulness starts to develop. QA at level 3 is characterized by a new, increased focus on dialogue and the development of common principles while holding on to a solid documentation of QA-related work at program level.

In reaction to the staffs’ dissatisfaction with QA, VIA formulated three principles that were to form the basis of its QA system (Quality-assurance and quality-development policy for education programs at VIA, 1 June 2015): 1) dialogue & transparency, 2) meaning & involvement and 3) coherence & local adaption/implementation. These principles were to support meaningfulness and ownership among teachers and study chairs and to minimize resistance to the centralization of VIAs QA system implemented due to the shift to institutional accreditation. Furthermore, the common principles were to help the young organization to bring together a variety of traditions, backgrounds and cultures related to teaching, education and quality work, and to create transparency regarding quality standards and evaluation procedures.

In the process of formulating the common principles, a number of dialogue meetings between
VIA’s staff and management were held, facilitating an important dialogue on QA, quality work and quality culture. This process helped VIA to begin developing a more meaningful QA system for (more of) its staff and to reach level 3 around 2016. However, as mentioned in chapter 2, creating a truly and wholly meaningful QA system is an ongoing process that only starts at level 3 and continues throughout levels 4 and 5, where QA work becomes truly meaningful (cf. ch. 6).

**PROFICIENT LEVEL 4 - Developing a more holistic and meaningful QA system with focus on future improvements (2017-today)**

The proficient level 4 is characterized by attempts to create a more holistic and more meaningful QA system that focusses on reflection, dialogue, context understanding and future improvements of the QA system.

The successful institutional accreditation of VIA in 2016, which proved the organization’s well-developed and well-documented QA system, gave the VIA the opportunity to reconsider, rethink and further improve its QA system another time. Overall, and in reaction to previous critique, dissatisfaction and resistance from its staff, VIA wanted to promote and facilitate a more holistic and meaningful perspective on quality and has therefore shifted focus from procedures and processes to results and effects in order to strengthen an inclusive dialogue on quality and future quality development.

The latest of the now biennial quality reports of educational programs for 2017 therefore focused on reflection and context understanding, aiming for and supporting a more holistic perspective on quality. The holistic perspective on quality was reflected both in the questions programs were expected to answer in the quality report, but also in the assessment of the reports. While previous quality reports were evaluated “in pieces” (by thematic areas, e.g. study intensity or drop-out), the 2017 reports were evaluated as a whole (cf. appendix). Furthermore, documentation requirements were loosened, in that programs now only have to deliver a quality report every second year, giving more time for reflection, dialogue and follow-up processes.

The questions included in the 2017 quality report illustrate the focus on dialogue, reflection and future improvements well. Amongst others, programs were expected to 1) reflect on opportunities and challenges based on information from the quality system, 2) take a stand on the coherence between acquired knowledge on education quality and actions taken, and 3) reflect upon expected effects for the students. Furthermore, each program was asked to reflect upon 4) educational context (education-related issues that concerns the program), 5) staff involvement in QA processes and 6) the further development of the quality system locally and centrally. Following up on quality reports, all of VIA’s programs are now expected to carry out internal self-evaluation workshops or a cross-organizational peer review to strengthen dialogue on quality.

With this latest revision of the QA system, VIA has now reached a proficient level of QA, from which the organization is continuously trying to improve further. Before discussing how improvement towards expert level 5 is possible and what it would mean to reach this level (cf. ch. 6), the following chapter first discusses the development of QA capacities at program level and critical factors that facilitate or hinder movement to upper levels.

**5.2 Factors facilitating or hindering QA development**

**5.2.1 Prior experience with QA and professional culture**

*Prior experience with QA facilitates QA development, but can also be a barrier to movement to upper levels.*
VIA’s health educations have a professional culture that emphasizes systematics, procedures and documentation and therefore rich experience with key elements of QA. Compared to other programs like social studies, business or technology, health educations therefore seem to be most successful at meeting the requirements of VIA’s QA system, at least up to the beginning of competence level 3. From level 3 and onwards, however, where the focus of QA begins to move towards dialogue and reflection, health educations’ professional culture seems to become an obstacle for further progression, amongst others because the shift towards reflection is perceived as a threat towards established QA routines which creates insecurity.

Thus, the recent development of VIA’s QA system since 2016 has been a difficult maneuver for several health educations. Some have interpreted it as a step away from “good QA” and expressed concerns that quality reports would turn out too diverse, lacking a “rulebook” as to when the reflections were sufficient or good enough. As one program leader expressed this, some programs simply wanted VIA to maintain focus on procedures and documentation, i.e. continuity in the QA system, and therefore tried to hold on to the previous focus on describing procedures and emphasizing documentation. Procedural resistance towards the new focus of VIA’s QA (cf. ch. 2) from professions used to systematics, procedures and documentation presents a barrier to moving to upper levels. However, resistance was not expressed to simply avoid QA-related tasks, but rather to express how health educations meant VIA’s QA system should develop and how new requirements and challenges should be tackled.

This is a typical problem at level 3, where, according to Dreyfus (2004:187), the learner cannot be given a list of all types of possible situations and therefore must decide for him-/herself what to do. The learner therefore feels responsible for his/her choice and potential mistakes, whereas he/she previously could rationalize mistakes in relation to externally given rules and procedures at lower level.

Apparently, some health educations experienced the autonomy to choose for themselves as insecurity. According to Dreyfus, however, hanging on to security prevents the development of true competence. Some health educations therefore lack important preconditions for moving up to levels 4 and 5, namely emotional involvement, taking responsibility for one’s successful and unsuccessful choices and letting mistakes and insights ‘sink in’ (ibid.).

Health educations’ challenges in adapting to VIA’s changed QA system have also been recognized by VIA’s quality committee. The committee recently concluded that for some programs, the shift in perspective towards reflection has been difficult, and that these programs have tried to use the new QA concept “in old ways”. However, the committee acknowledges that challenges in the shift from the old to the new QA concept (as movements from one to the next level in Dreyfus’ model) are natural and that it takes time and experience with new QA concepts before they make sense to everyone (VIA’s Quality Committee, Minutes 2019-09-03).

5.2.2 Adaption over time

*It takes times to move from one QA level to the next and to adapt to a new or revised QA system.*

Other programs than the health programs, e.g. within social sciences and education studies, welcomed the QA systems new focus on reflection and its holistic, contextual approach, stating e.g. that “this quality report has improved lately, especially by reducing the amount of documentation” (Quality reports from the Business, Design and Technology educations, 2018).

Again, professional culture seems to play an important role. In particular, the education studies program illustrates this. Here, reflection is embedded in the professional culture both as a method and as a perspective. Competent teachers are expected to be able to teach and reflect on their teaching, as stated in the Danish Teachers’ Unions description of its professional ideal: “Principle VIII: The
teacher will reflect on and actively develop his practice. [...] Principle X: The teacher will enter into equal and loyal co-operation with colleagues and assume joint responsibility for joint professional and educational reflection and development” (Danmarks Lærerforening n.d.).

Thus, the emphasis on reflection was positively received without giving rise to resistance in education studies programs. However, this did not mean that education studies programs had a head start meeting the QA system’s new requirements in 2017. Instead, we can observe that progress from one QA level to the next is only possible when the former level has been mastered. This is also highlighted by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980:15), who underline that “attaining the sophisticated form of each [level] presuppose[s] the prior attainment of the sophisticated form of all those lower numbered in the ordering”.

Despite their familiarity with reflection, education studies programs were challenged in their recent QA work. Those programs also belonged to the harshest critics of VIA’s QA system at earlier stages, as an open letter from four lecturers highlighted. In the letter, the four lecturers underlined that it was an essential basis HEIs’ work, that teachers strived to promote the best possible and most nuanced recognition with the fields they are educating their students. As teachers, so the lecturers, they were trained and committed to being truth-seeking by nature. They strived for students to acquire knowledge, immerse themselves in knowledge, ask questions, reflect, wonder and dare to put their knowledge and understanding into discussion. Now, however, the lecturers criticized, they were kindly being asked to set aside their professional standards and convictions in order to convince external stakeholders that they were able to master the language of VIA’s central QA department (Open letter to the Executive Board in VIA, 2015).

The letter demonstrates that the accreditation process and VIA’s QA system were seen as a threat to and an attack on some of the basic values embedded in the education system. Generally, the education studies programs’ reaction to VIA’s QA system from 2012 and onwards (with focus on procedure, rules and documentation) exemplified a ‘why should we be doing this’-attitude, or what Deneen and Boud (2014) call epistemic resistance (cf. ch. 2).

Additionally, education programs, like several other programs, showed pragmatic resistance, with programs criticizing e.g. that “the quality report is still time-consuming to prepare” (Quality reports from the Business, Design and Technology educations).5

Due to their resistance to QA at earlier levels, education programs could therefore not simply “jump the line” and become competent QA actors (level 3). The successive nature of QA development means that we can observe a variety of developmental stages at VIA today. While some programs are still in the process of establishing basic structures and developing systematics in QA work (levels 1 & 2) others are way beyond this and committed to further development of the QA system (level 4, possibly moving towards 5; cf. ch. 6).

5.2.3 Leadership commitment and skills

Committed and skilled leadership is crucial in QA development.

Leadership commitment and skills are crucial in making quality systems relevant and meaningful, since leaders can act as translators between quality management and quality culture. Especially, “leaders at the department level influence the development of quality culture through creating a climate of trust and shared understanding” (Bendermacher et al. 2017:47). Studies also indicate that leadership styles
“focusing on creating a culture of collegiality and consultation are preferred over styles addressing quality issues through inspection and control” and that “effective leaders are considered to be those able to fulfil multiple roles, i.e. motivator, vision setter, task masters and analyzer” (ibid).

However, leadership regarding QA does not always attract interest in the day-to-day management and QA-related tasks and responsibilities are often delegated to a single administrative employee in a program. For example, across several education programs in business, design and technology educations, assessment panels have noted weakly described management involvement in the QA system. Our experience shows that programs, where QA tasks and responsibilities are delegated to an administrative employee, are among those that often experience challenges in relation to implementing, incorporating and further developing QA at program level.

In reaction to this, and to strengthen management commitment and involvement in QA, VIA has, first, developed a clearer description of responsibilities and division of labor at program level between QA consultant, program leaders and teachers in QA work (cf. Concluding Report, VIA Business, Design and Technology programs, Sept. 2018). Second, after a comprehensive reorganization, VIA has recently put particular focus on partnership and collaboration throughout the organization, including partnership regarding QA. Overall, these initiatives are based on VIA’s understanding that administrative support in QA is important, but that it cannot replace competent and involved leadership in QA.

5.2.4 Dialogue across all levels of staff with strong leadership involvement

Leadership involvement in comprehensive dialogues on QA help bind the organizations’ QA work together.

Dialogue between all of VIA’s stakeholders is a crucial element of VIA’s QA system and helps prioritize activities and resources and spread learning successes throughout the organization. Again, leadership plays a significant role. Leaders are able to spread messages and communicate specific expectations and instructions regarding QA-related responsibilities both vertically and horizontally in the organization (Bendermacher et al. 2017:47–48). Furthermore, “leadership is essential to give the initial steer and the broad frameworks of quality assurance mechanisms. Leadership should facilitate internal debate – and even tolerate dissent – in order to make sure that QA processes do not end up being imposed and simply bolted on.” (EUA 2011, p. 9)

At VIA, we can confirm the importance of dialogue with strong leadership involvement. Successful programs at VIA are characterized by an open debate culture and by “embedding a quality culture through internal communication, discussions and devolved responsibility while understanding the resistance to change and developing strategies to overcome it” (EUA/European University Association 2011). An example is the debate following the open letter of four lecturers mentioned above. VIA’s response to the open criticism can be described as balancing tactics (Reith and Seyfried 2019), where VIA’s Executive Board engaged in an open dialogue and VIA’s quality managers debated critical views in several fora, amongst others with one of the authors of the open letter, in order to harmonize different interests and balance external formal requirements with internal demands, allowing the organization to move forward jointly.

5.2.5 Benchmarking – a janus-faced QA tool

Benchmarking can motivate programs to become better at QA, but also create resistance that hinders QA development.

VIA’s QA system includes a number of quantitative indicators (e.g. on study intensity or drop-out) that are assessed using green-yellow-red indicators (cf. appendix). These assessments give an indication of
programs’ QA success and can animate improvements and development to upper QA levels. They allow for comparison over time and across programs, both for the top management but also for programs themselves, leading to competition between programs to be better than others, or better than last time.

However, benchmarking is also a highly debated QA tool, since it simplifies and quantifies quality. It can show patterns and help focus on important quality issues, but also mislead the focus. It can be a motivating factor, but also lead to demotivation if what a program strives for cannot be achieved, or if what is measured does not seem meaningful. It can be an instrument for improvement, transparency and debate, but also a barrier to QA development by creating fear and resistance.

Resistance to benchmarking was probably most significant in the early years of VIA’s revised QA system (2012-15), because benchmarking and green-yellow-red indicators were new QA tools that created transparency, opened up a “black box” and showed differences between different programs. As research shows, assessment change in itself can create resistance (Deneen and Boud 2014), e.g. epistemic resistance characterized by a “push back against the implicit and explicit knowledge structures underlying the assessment change” (p. 584).

VIA has successfully reacted to this resistance by downsizing the role benchmarking plays in the recent quality reports for 2017. Resistance has therefore diminished and some actors have even expressed that they miss the green-yellow-red indicators. Again, this example demonstrates the QA development is a continuous process that requires dialogue and openness towards criticism and new challenges, that when correctly reacted upon, can facilitate movement to upper QA development stages.

6. Concluding reflections

In the previous chapter, we have analyzed the development of VIA’s QA system from novice level 1 in 2012 to proficient level 4 in 2019 (ch. 5.1) and discussed important factors that facilitate or hinder movement towards upper QA development stages (5.2). In this final chapter, we discuss how HEIs can find a third way of QA and move towards becoming an expert in QA, which challenges VIA and other HEIs face in this process, and how they can address those challenges.

Our analysis demonstrates that VIA today has a certified, well-functioning QA system. VIAs QA system has gradually improved since 2012 with its focus gradually shifting from establishing and implementing the revised QA system towards documenting implemented practices and, today, reflecting on results and effects. In this process, many of VIAs programs have developed a growing ability and commitment to work within the given QA framework, i.e.:

- to attend to the common procedures,
- to conduct evaluations regularly and systematically,
- to reflect upon both evaluation results and current challenges that the programs may face,
- and, probably most importantly, to depart from the QA system’s given structure and decide on adjustments and future actions.

Yet, the QA system is only partly embedded in the everyday practices and the mindset of the organization and we experience reluctance towards QA. This is true in particular regarding teaching assessment. Here, control- and documentation-oriented QA practices pushed by external stakeholders and formalized in centrally defined quality criteria clash with more reflexive, development-oriented quality practices that should secure meaningfulness and involvement of teaching staff, students and management as well as the improvement of existing practices by learning from evaluation results (Andersen, Ravn, and Colerick 2013).
6.1. A third way of QA towards becoming an expert in QA

We propose that control and documentation on one side and reflection and future-oriented quality development on the other side need not be opposites. Instead of narrowly focusing on the functional purpose and formal focus of QA systems, we propose that QA systems should open up and embrace the skills and attitudes of HEIs’ members and the engagement of teachers, students and management (Dahler-Larsen 2006; cf. ch. 2). With this third way as our ambition, we expect HEIs’ members to experience more involvement, commitment, motivation and meaningfulness and, hence, a better incorporation of QA into the daily activities and practices of HEIs’ members.

More concretely, becoming an expert at QA means – following our theoretical and analytical approach - that new situations can be recognized and understood intuitively, while lower QA development levels offer rules and guidelines that help develop specific actions from general situations. At the expert level, though, the “repertoire of experienced situations is so vast that normally each specific situation immediately dictates an intuitively appropriate action” (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1980:12). In daily QA practice, this means programs will be able to select or develop relevant tools for quality improvement that they perceive as meaningful for students, teachers and management. Furthermore, it means that quality understandings will be profession/program-sensitive and, yet, applicable to the central QA system. The QA system’s focus will be on capacity building at program level regarding QA, increased involvement of students and converting fragmented action plans (e.g. following up on teaching evaluation, drop-out and graduate analyses) into overall strategic development plans for each individual program.

If successful, programs would have a fully implemented, fully integrated and well-functioning QA system with self-selected or –developed QA tools both relevant for quality assurance and improvement and meaningful for students, teachers and management (cf. Table 6.1).

Table 6.1: Characteristics of QA development at expert level 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill level and commitment*</th>
<th>Characteristics of QA development levels in VIA</th>
<th>Focus of VIAs quality work</th>
<th>QA results/assessment outcome at program level</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expert involved commitment</td>
<td>- Programs select (or develop) relevant tools for quality improvement meaningful for students, teachers and management - Notions of quality are profession-sensitive, but still applicable to VIAs common QA system</td>
<td>- Capacity building at program level regarding evaluation and QA - Student involvement in QA - Development of overall strategic development plans for each program (i.e. conversion of former, topic-specific action plans [teaching evaluation, drop-out analyses, graduate and stakeholder involvement, development of the knowledge base] at program level into overall strategic development plan)</td>
<td>&quot;The program has a fully implemented, fully integrated and well-functioning QA system and selects (or develops) relevant tools for quality improvement that are meaningful for both students, teachers and management. Notions of quality are profession-sensitive, but still applicable to the common QA system.&quot;</td>
<td>From 2019 onwards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* first column based on Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1980, Dreyfus 2004

6.2. Challenges and possible solutions

Aiming for this third way of QA and trying to create a meaningful and fully-integrated QA system is a challenging process. In part, it may even be unrealistic to expect HEIs to become intuitively reacting actors, since national and international accreditation systems will continue to set external demands...
and limit possible reactions and solutions to QA-related problems and challenges. Yet, aiming to develop QA systems further towards meaningfulness, motivation and commitment is a crucial task if HEIs want to be able to navigate the dilemma of accounting for and measuring quality for external stakeholders while providing meaningful tools for quality improvement to their own members. We highlight four challenges that VIA and other HEIs will meet on this path and propose solutions, some of which VIA is already working on implementing.

First, VIA’s QA system and quality reports do not fully grasp the essence of quality/good education. In the Danish accreditation and HEI funding system, indicators like study intensity, drop-out, graduate employment and satisfaction are key indicators, while good teaching is primarily concerned with learning outcomes and the individual students’ personal and professional development. VIA is therefore working towards new quality indicators that better reflect what students, teachers and external stakeholders understand as quality/good education. VIA’s hope is that a stronger focus on learning outcomes will lead to more perceived meaningfulness of the QA system, more student and teacher involvement and engagement, and generally a better integration of QA work into the daily routines and practices of its members.

Second, VIA wants to link new QA initiatives developed in reaction to the knowledge gathered in the QA system better with the strategic development of programs, so that QA-related activities are not perceived as add-ons to members actual work tasks and programs normal development. To achieve this, VIA’s central QA unit will develop an overall framework for strategic development plans for individual study program, where reflections on QA and quality reports form a natural element. Hence, VIA wants to abolish previous action plans regarding individual assessments (e.g. drop-out analyses) and instead integrate knowledge generated from QA into the general development of programs.

Third, VIA plans to redesign the aggregation of QA results in VIA’s management chain. Today, teachers and students do not always perceive the aggregation of QA results as adding value, even though evaluation panels give feedback to individual programs that these can use to debate results, conclusions and new initiatives. VIA therefore considers working towards a dialogue-based involvement of program leaders into evaluation processes to promote leadership involvement and commitment, which, as research shows, is a crucial factor for QA development (cf. chapter 5.2.3).

Lastly, VIA wants to redesign its central framework for quality reporting, which is perceived as using a distant, unfamiliar language by some programs. The goal is to develop a quality reporting system with program-/profession-sensitive language, which is expected to ease the integration of QA-related processes into daily teaching activities in study programs and to prepare students for the quality culture they will meet in their professional life. This, however, necessitates that programs first reach expert level 5, i.e. that they are capable of finding their own ways of adapting and translating centrally developed QA system independently to their specific needs, while certain minimum requirements will remain in order to ensure a necessary level of leadership insight into the quality and QA work of individual programs.

Overall, we argue that HEIs will achieve the best quality results for both external stakeholders and their own members if they try to embark on this third way of QA, if they not only try to live up to externally set quality criteria, but if their members at the same time perceive QA as meaningful and adding value to the educational practice.
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Appendix: Quality reporting at VIA

(1) The assessment process
Based on educational programs’ quality reports, assessment panels examine quality and QA at the individual program level. Assessment panels are recruited by the central QA unit from the faculties and include teachers, quality consultants and program leaders, thereby aiming to strengthen the entrenchment of the quality system in the organization. Assessment panels follow a guide in their assessment.

Prior to the quality reports for 2017, panels made individual assessments of each indicator (quantitative as well as qualitative) used in the question framework that built the basis for the quality reports. Individual assessments were summarized using green-yellow-red indicators as illustrated in figure 1 below. Each panel focused on one indicator (e.g. knowledge base, teaching evaluation, study intensity, etc.), thus assessing indicators across programs. In the latest quality reports for 2017, only quantitative indicators (key figures) were marked using the green-yellow-red system. Other indicators were assessed using a set of criteria for holistic assessment of QA (see below). Furthermore, education programs were assessed as a whole by one panel instead of the former, more fragmented system with panels focusing on particular indicators across programs.

| Red marking | Indicates that the management is to investigate whether there are problems with quality / QA and implement initiatives as required |
| Yellow marking | Indicates that the management should pay extra attention in the forthcoming period to statistics / processes in order to assess whether inadequate performance is a one-off event or permanent |
| Green marking | Indicates that quality / QA at program level meets VIAs standards |

(2) Assessment criteria
Assessment criteria for VIA’s quality reports are supposed to support an investigative quality and feedback culture. The new concept for quality reporting for 2017 with its emphasis on reflection in the reporting and dialogue and feedback in the follow-up activities (peer review and self-evaluation workshop) is part of this endeavor. Focusing on reflection at program level means that control elements (from the perspective of the central QA unit) such as rigorous criteria for assessing the quality of the programs are softened. Only key figures (quantitative indicators) included in the quality report are assessed using the green-yellow-red indicators (where possible with an emphasis on whether there has been a positive development). Regarding other themes (qualitative indicators) in the quality reports and regarding the quality report as a whole, a holistic assessment is made (see below), whose purpose it is to support the programs’ quality work. The assessment has the form of comments, points of attention and recommendations for further development of the program.

(3) Holistic assessment
Basis for the holistic assessment of programs are the programs’ quality report, action plans and key figures. In addition, local QA procedures are included in the assessment and, where it is relevant, comments from the panel (e.g. Do procedures meet centrally defined QA standards? Are procedures up to date? Do procedures support quality work?) are included. Based on criteria defined in the legal framework for institutional accreditation, the following holistic assessment criteria are used in the overall assessment of programs at VIA:

Is it clear in the education program’s quality report and in action plans that:
- quality work is based on systematic assessments of opportunities and challenges.
- the program continuously involves teachers and students and includes other relevant internal and external stakeholders in the quality assurance and development of the education.
- the program has contact with relevant research environments, development environments and areas of employment and regularly and systematically converts knowledge from this into the teaching.
- the program regularly and systematically obtains knowledge from students, graduates and potential employers.
- the program analyzes and uses this knowledge and follows up on any challenges, including that there is a correlation between the knowledge acquired and the priority of efforts.
- the program continuously assesses the expected effects of the initiatives regarding the quality of the program.
- the quality work is based on ongoing analysis, active use and follow-up on relevant information/key figures about the program (e.g. information on study intensity, completion, drop-out, employment).

(4) Assessment results and QA development stages
Fulfillment of the above criteria indicates that a program has a fully implemented quality system and has reached proficient level 4. The table below shows the assessment outcome in relation to the five stages in Dreyfus' model (cf. ch. 5.1).

Table 2 (appendix): Assessment results and QA development stages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill level and commitment</th>
<th>Assessment outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Novice</strong> Detached commitment</td>
<td>The program is in the process of developing systematics in quality work. Efforts should be on further developing and implementing the QA system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advanced beginner</strong> Detached commitment</td>
<td>The program is in the process of implementing the QA system. Efforts should be made to use QA tools actively in the ongoing development of the QA system and program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competent</strong> Detached understanding and deciding; involved outcome</td>
<td>The program has implemented a well-functioning QA system. Efforts should be on integrating the QA system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proficient</strong> Involved understanding; detached deciding</td>
<td>The program has a fully implemented, well-integrated and well-functioning QA system. Efforts should be on fully integrating the QA system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expert</strong> Involved commitment</td>
<td>The program has a fully implemented, fully integrated and well-functioning QA system and selects (or develops) relevant tools for quality improvement that are meaningful for both students, teachers and management. Notions of quality are profession-sensitive, but still applicable to the common QA system.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* first column based on Dreyfus 2004