

Article

# Trust-Based Quality Culture Conceptual Model for Higher Education Institutions

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**Abstract:** Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a crucial role in societies as they enhance the sustainable development of nations. In a context of increasing competition and financial difficulties in higher education institutions, the loyalty of students, faculty and administration staff as well as institutional reputation are key factors for survival and success. They are built upon trust and high quality of services rendered by HEIs. The intentional development of trust serves the purpose of enhancing the quality culture in higher education. The concept of quality culture has become a natural successor of quality management and quality assurance in universities presenting a new perspective for viewing quality at HEIs—as a combination of structural and managerial with cultural and psychological components. This paper provides an elaboration of a novel Trust-Based Quality Culture Conceptual Model for Higher Education Institutions which presents the perceived interconnections between trust and quality culture at HEIs. It can form a source for an inquiry process at HEIs, thus contributing to better contextual diagnosis of the stage where HEI is in the process of building the quality culture based on trust. The findings of this study are important in better understanding the quality culture development in HEIs that is based on trust, loyalty and reputation. It may have an impact on the decision-making processes concerning HEIs' management. The proposed model contributes to the need for greater clarity, ordering and systematization of the role of trust in the processes of quality culture development.

**Keywords:** trust; quality culture; universities; higher education institutions; conceptual model

## 1. Introduction

The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play an important role in the society: They are essential partners of the knowledge creation and knowledge exchange networks, catalysts of innovation, suppliers of tangible outputs of research results, and institutions providing consulting and advisory services. Universities are supposed to foster progress, build social capital, prepare students for outside realities, provide access to knowledge, extend the bounds of justice and, therefore, contribute to the creation of a democratic and sustainable society. However, the increasingly competitive and dynamic educational environments bring up numerous challenges, such as declining enrolments and growing competition [1]. Today, universities are involved in in-depth changes with the aim of increasing their effectiveness, efficiency and transparency [2]. Universities in Europe are faced with numerous challenges embracing both opportunities and threats [3]. These include [4,5]:

— The increasing level of internationalization of education and research;

- Implementations of new research modes;
- The extended competition with other organisations such as the new public and private universities, the education given by companies through what they call “corporate universities” to contribute to the lifelong learning process of their own employees;
- Pressure to harmonise the different national university systems (e.g., Bologna Process);
- The claims and aspirations of various stakeholders (including industry and society in general);
- Increased demand for transparency and accountability about the “results” and “benefits” derived from the public funds.

Universities have been charged with key roles in promoting and implementing sustainable development (SD) [6]. Due to their high importance for humanity and civilization, many scholars see the impact of universities on SD as vastly greater than any other single sector of society [7–9]. HEIs are seen as multipliers for disseminating SD principles with the ethical obligation to systematically integrate SD into their institutions [6–8,10–12]. At the same time, it should be noticed that trust management [13–15] is the key focus of the sustainability concept [16–20], closely referring to sustainable organizations [21–23] and to sustainable business models [24–29]. In the context of HEIs, there is an ongoing change from traditional universities, relying upon Newtonian and Cartesian [30] reductionist and mechanistic paradigms, to the more SD focused institutions and the factors/initiatives boosting this change [31,32]. Lozano et al. [32] underline that the more sustainable development presents “a daring challenge to higher education institutions (HEIs) and society in general, in order to achieve a sensible future for those not yet born generations, especially if the rate of change in universities is taken into consideration”. They continue that “for universities to become sustainability leaders and change drivers, they must ensure that the needs of present and future generations be better understood and built upon, so that professionals who are well versed in SD can effectively educate students of ‘all ages’ to help make the transition to ‘sustainable societal patterns’, as indicated in the declarations, charters, partnerships and conferences” [32]. However, despite the progress made and some signs of transition in parts of the academic community, there is still a long way to go to mainstream sustainability in higher education, and a paradigm shift from unsustainability to sustainability is still difficult to identify [33].

The environment that universities operate under is getting more similar to the private companies market conditions; universities need to compete not only for grants and funds, but also for students and faculty members. Therefore, HEIs become more aware of the importance of student and faculty satisfaction. In order to gain and maintain satisfied students and academia members, HEIs focus on building trust that is aligned with developing a high reputation for the institution and loyalty among students and faculty. Reputation and related constructs, such as prestige, brand personality and identity attractiveness, have been well-established as predictors of consumer-organisation identification [34], but fewer researchers have considered the influence of trust [35]. Although the literature on the topic of customer satisfaction and loyalty is very rich, there are not many studies on trust as a basis of satisfaction, and loyalty from students’ perspective in higher education. In the context of higher education, the focus has often been on investigating the link between teaching quality/learning outcomes and student satisfaction/loyalty or other relationships separately [36].

In this paper, we propose that an important step towards the sustainable development of HEIs’ is the focus of these institutions in the application of a quality culture approach that would be based on trust. Quality in higher education is declining, and colleges and universities are not adequately preparing students for life in a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive world [37]. Colleges and universities need to ensure that the quality of their service, education, and research produces well-educated graduates [38]. Only in that way is it possible to move forward towards greater sustainability. These statements fall in line with the conclusions of Shriberg [39], underlining that one of the critical parameters to achieving sustainability in higher education is pursuing incremental and systemic change simultaneously. Basing such a transformation on a trust-building approach and quality culture development might be one of the answers to this need.

The development of reputation of HEIs and trust requires proper quality culture enhancement. Achieving quality is an imperative goal of higher education universities, colleges or institutions nowadays [36]. Successful quality improvement practices require both the formal side (i.e., tools and mechanisms to measure, evaluate, assure and enhance quality) and a quality-conducive organisational culture in terms of attitudes and practices of participants [40]. In regard to the formal side, “instruments are in place” [41]; however, there is a “lack of quality culture” [41].

The majority of the existing research on sustainable aspects of organisations do not make the explicit connection to trust factor, neither paying much attention to its role or its importance in the sustainable business models. This research tries to fill this gap underlining the role of trust in the development of the sustainable quality culture model that can lead to generally more sustainable HEIs. In our paper, we formulate a thesis that trust is a vital determinant of a quality culture in HEIs. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to propose a novel, Trust-Based Quality Culture Conceptual Model for Higher Education Institutions. We base our research on Nørreklit et al. [42], pointing out that “Business processes require on-going reflection in which concepts and conceptual structures are developed and reshaped to observe, control and re-formulate the construct causality on which successful management action can be executed”. The proposed model offers a framework for showing the importance of trust for building the quality culture which can fill a gap in the literature on HEIs, trust, loyalty, reputation and quality culture.

The model was built based on the systematic critical analysis of scientific literature, and theoretical and empirical findings. It has been developed as a result of an inductive process aiming at the synthesis of the existing views in the literature concerning trust and quality culture. In our study, we applied a systematic literature review approach, following the four stages indicated by Sulisto and Rino [43]. The model represents an “integrated” way of looking at the concepts and their perceived relations and permits cognitive evaluations and attitudinal associations analysis, emerging as a result of interactions between students, faculty and higher education institutions.

The paper is structured as follows: After the introductory part, the second section provides the main findings concerning trust as a general concept crucial for the development of the reputation of the organization and loyalty of its clients. The third section of this paper gives more insights into trust-related aspects in higher education institutions. The fourth section describes the quality culture concept, its importance in HEIs, as well as supporting and hindering factors for its development. In the fifth part of this paper, the research methodology for the study is presented, and in the sixth section the proposed conceptual model is described. The last section offers the conclusions and suggestions for further research.

The findings described in this paper are important for a better understanding of the quality culture development in HEIs that is based on trust, loyalty and reputation. It may have an impact on the decision-making processes concerning HEIs’ management. The proposed model contributes to the need for greater clarity, ordering and systematization of the role of trust in the processes of developing quality culture.

## 2. Trust as an Antecedent of Loyalty and Reputation

No organization can endure without trust. Trust is a complex construct that comprises of a cognitive element, which is based on the consumer’s knowledge of the organisation and its capabilities, and an affective component, which is the emotional bond between the individual and the organisation that develops over time [44].

Trust is studied and used in a number of disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, economics and computer science. As a result, there are many definitions of trust and no general consensus has been achieved so far on one common statement of meaning [45]. Trust may be understood as a relationship existing between two participants where a trustee is the participant being evaluated by the truster [46]. Trust is the willingness of the trustor (evaluator) to take risks based on a subjective belief that a trustee (evaluatee) will exhibit reliable behavior to maximize the trustor’s interest under uncertainty

(e.g., ambiguity due to conflicting evidence and/or ignorance caused by complete lack of evidence) of a given situation based on the cognitive assessment of past experience with the trustee [47]. Morgan and Hunt [48] specify trust as associated with partners' qualities, such as consistency, competence, honesty, responsibility, benevolence and integrity. Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpande [49] relate trust to variables such as beliefs, feelings and expectations. Flores and Solomons [50] suggest that since trust is created through social interaction, it can, and should, be learned as a social skill "...essential to our emotional well-being." Brenkert [51] makes a distinction between trust and trustworthiness, namely that whereas trust is an attitude, trustworthiness is an evaluative appraisal. Soule [52] proposes that trust is deeper than confidence, co-operation and reliance and that it implies vulnerability. Bews [53] defines trust as "a voluntary action of one party, flowing from an evaluation, based on the social skills of that party, concerning the potential of another, or others, not to take advantage of the vulnerability of the first party." This leads to a consideration of the dynamics of trust. In the broadest sense, trust may be understood as confidence in one's expectations [54]. In our study, concerning the relation between quality culture and trust we adopt a definition of trust stating that this concept is a positive belief, attitude, or expectation of a party that the action or outcomes of another will be satisfactory [55]. We see the following attributes of trust as crucial for our study:

- Trust can only be earned, not sold, bought or transferred [56];
- Trust as a relation is very fragile, it takes a long time to build and is destroyed very easily [57];
- Trust includes the expectation that an organisation will not behave in an opportunistic manner and that it will deliver its products at the quality expected by the consumer [58];
- Trust involves the belief of the engaged parties that the organisation will act with integrity and that it will be reliable [48].

The concept of trust is related to loyalty and reputation and is considered to be their antecedent. Trust plays a central role in fostering successful relational exchanges and has been demonstrated to be positively and directly related to customer loyalty [48,59–61]. The relation between trust and loyalty has been also researched by e.g., de Madariaga and Valor, 2007 and Sarwar, Abbasi, and Pervaiz, 2012 [62,63]. Ladhari et al. [64] defined loyalty as a deeply held commitment. Loyalty may be considered as a multidimensional construct encompassing: (i) a behavioral dimension that includes repeat-buying patterns, recommendation and referral; and (ii) an attitude dimension entailing cognitive and emotional components such as accessibility, reliability, emotions and feelings [65]. Customer loyalty is typically analysed in terms of preferences and intentions, which might be regarded as attitudinal loyalty [66]. In our study, we apply the attitudinal loyalty approach that defines loyalty as the situation in which a consumer holds a favourable view of an organisation and feels an emotional attachment to the organization [35].

Trust also leads to the development of organizational reputation. Reputation can be defined simply as an overall evaluation of the extent to which an organisation is substantially good or bad [67]. According to the resource-based view, a firm's sustainable competitive advantage is derived primarily from its intangible capabilities, such as its reputation [68] and its ability to gain the trust of consumers [69]. It is also empirically proved that organizations that have a favourable reputation are likely to command higher levels of confidence among consumers, which results in increased feelings of trust towards the organisation and reduced perceptions of risk [70]. In our study, we use the definition of reputation which says that it is a collective assessment of an organisation's ability to provide valued outcomes to a representative group of stakeholders [71] and that strong reputations are rare and impossible to imitate in totality, owing to the unique sets of assets, skills and choices made by organisations [72].

According to Rizan, Warokka & Listyawati [73] and Grönroos [74] there is a paradigm shift from transactional marketing to relationship marketing which influences customer satisfaction. Customers will buy or use the same product or service when they are satisfied with the quality [75–77]. Satisfaction is an overall customer attitude towards a service provider or an emotional reaction to the difference

between what customers anticipate and what they receive [78]. Many researchers stated that customers' satisfaction is needed in order to keep the customers from choosing other products [79,80]; therefore, satisfaction creates trust to the product and/or the institutions [76,77] and as a result leads to customer loyalty [48,59–61,76,77,81,82] and organizational reputation [76,77]. Organizational reputation also enhances trust [70]. Customer loyalty enhances organizational reputation and vice-versa; empirical research proves that organizational reputation also increases customer loyalty [83,84].

The above overview of definitions of trust, loyalty, reputation, and satisfaction form the basis for their further considerations in the context of HEIs. The highlighted attributes of the presented concepts are instrumental for the development of the Trust-Based Quality Culture Conceptual Model for HEIs, presented in part 6 of this study.

### 3. Trust in HEIs

One of the most important features of a strong HEI culture is trust. The globalization of educational services and the increasing competition coming from the private sector have forced higher education institutions to market their programs more aggressively and to look at student loyalty [61] and organizational reputation as crucial for future success. Bhattacharya and Sen [85] suggest that the link between consumers' perceptions of an organisation's identity and their reactions to it depend on the extent to which they know and trust the identity. It is expected that this would be the same for students/faculty/administration in HEIs context.

Trust is an important factor that affects commitment to a university [81,86]. In our study, based on the systematic critical review of the literature, we analyse the concept of trust looking at it from the individual and institutional levels, where trust is represented by loyalty and reputation respectively. We also analyse trust using a multidimensional perspective represented by students, faculty and institution understood as administration, management representatives, and also the brand and image of HEI.

#### 3.1. Individual Level and Institutional Level of Trust in HEIs

##### 3.1.1. Individual Trust—Loyalty

Trust is a concept that may be investigated at the "micro-level" psychological dimension. This concerns individual trust of a particular person. The principal definition of loyalty, used in this study, defines this concept as the situation in which a consumer holds a favourable view of an organisation and feels an emotional attachment to the organization [35]. In case of HEIs context, a consumer is understood as students, faculty and administration staff. They expect that the HEI will act with integrity and that it will be reliable [48]. In the case of higher education, Østergaard and Kristensen [1] define student's loyalty as "willingness to recommend the institution and the programmes to others, considerations whether the student would have chosen the same institution and programme today, and willingness to continue education or participate in conferences at the institution in the future". A similar definition concerning students' loyalty is proposed by Temizer and Turkeyilmaz [82] claiming that it is "the tendency of a student to choose the same provider (i.e., HEIs) or service over another for a particular need." Loyalty is the combination between students' willingness to talk positively about the institution and to provide information to new candidates [87]. Webb and Jagun [88] defined the concept of loyalty in the higher education context as student's willingness to recommend the university/institution to others, the wish to say positive things about the university/institution and their returning willingness to the university/institution in order to continue their studies [88]. Loyalty is positively related to student satisfaction, which increases performance and profitability in the long run [89,90]. Therefore, having satisfied students will lead to loyalty behavior [91,92] through the process of trust creation that is a link between satisfaction and loyalty. Loyalty can lead to a sustainable competitive advantage in the increasingly demanding higher education market [93]. The efficiencies that result from the increased student loyalty cause not only increased lifetime tuition revenues from students but also provide some synergy for enrolment

through low-cost word-of-mouth recommendation activities [94]. The positive relationship between satisfaction and loyalty reveals that satisfied students with their overall programme experience and with the quality of university facilities and services, are more probable to be loyal to the university [36]. Shahsavari and Studzian empirically proved that the most effective factor that positively influences students' loyalty is students' satisfaction, meaning that the more satisfied students become, the more loyal they become [36]. As it is underlined by Carvahlo and Mota [61], student loyalty has recently received increasing attention in the fields of marketing [95], service [96,97], and educational management [84,98]. Within the educational literature, student loyalty has been shown to be influenced by student satisfaction [99] and university reputation [84]. As it was mentioned before, satisfaction lays foundations for trust creation that leads to loyalty. Student satisfaction can be understood as a short-term attitude resulting from the evaluation of the student educational experience [36]. What is more, satisfaction is built when perceived performance meets or exceeds the student's expectations [100], which is being shaped continually by repeated experiences in campus life [100]. Providing quality education and a 'feeling of belonging' are key determinants of student satisfaction [101]. It is empirically proved that students' satisfaction has a positive impact on student motivation, student retention, recruiting efforts and fundraising [1,36,102,103], thus creating loyalty.

### 3.1.2. Institutional Trust—Reputation

This other dimension of trust regards "macro-level" institutional arrangements and refers to the reputation of an organization. As it was mentioned before, in our study we adopt the definition that reputation is a collective assessment of an organisation's ability to provide valued outcomes to a representative group of stakeholders [71]. In an educational context characterised by an increasingly marketised system [104], the reputation of the institution—in this case the university—built upon strong brands, has become an important factor in determining institutional competitiveness and positioning [105]. Further, university reputation has been shown to influence (enhance) the individual trust creation—e.g., students' supportive behavioural intentions [83], that lead to greater loyalty. Trust, especially in public institutions, is the belief/faith that they will provide the results asked of them, even in the absence of constant auditing, i.e., that they will act efficiently [106]. This is a specific type of trust relationship where the institution is worthy of the trust and the citizen trusts the institution's rules, roles and regulations, regardless of the people who play those roles [107]. Building a strong reputation requires strategic choices to be made by the institution that align decisions on strategy, culture development and corporate communication [72].

Institutions promote or constrain trust relations [108,109]. Thus micro-level trust relations are constrained and enhanced by macro processes [110].

### 3.2. Multidimensional Trust in HEIs

Trust relations are an integral aspect of the quality of a school's social system [111]. It is clear then that trust relationships in the education context display a multidimensional and dynamic nature [112]. Trust in HEIs may be analysed not only on individual and institutional levels, but also between different actors. In this study, we decided to concentrate on three main dimensions: trust in the relations between students and faculty members, students and the institution, as well as trust of faculty versus institution. The "institution" is understood here in the large sense and it embraces the trust versus the particular university (its brand, image, its perception) as well as trust put in the management and administration that operate within this institution.

#### 1. Student—Faculty

When students perceive that their faculty members support them, students' attachment to school increases [113]. It is indisputable then that academics are key actors regarding students' social integration and experiences in school [114]. A significant level of students' satisfaction with overall programme quality could be attributed to the role of teaching staff in order to keep students satisfied

with their programmes [115]. Academic support and advising are powerful tools for universities to help students to be successful and to improve satisfaction with their experience [115]. Schertzer and Schertzer (2004) [116] proposed a model that addresses the congruence between students' values and faculty, as a significant component of academic fit and student satisfaction and retention. Returning students are those having positive interactions with the faculty [117,118]. It is important that the students develop trust in teacher, as it denotes the quality of school life of both students and teachers [114]. When students do not experience trust from their teachers, they will be less likely to engage in learning processes [119,120]. Positive teacher-student relationships, based on trust, produce favourable outcomes for student learning and teacher functioning (e.g., [121–123]. The importance of trust in students is partly revealed through its influence on the way teachers work and interact with students [121]. Trust in students can be regarded as a form of teacher-based social capital available to students [124,125].

## 2. Student—Institution

Noticing the student as the primary customer of HEIs has already changed the relationship between students and the higher education institutions in several countries. It led also to a paradigm shift in the education sector concerning the creation of new types of student demands and requests for the quality of learning processes and support services. It can be expected that the students' and the graduates' accusations about bad service and fraudulent marketing will become more common if their expectations as paying customers are not met satisfactorily [126]. Student trust in the HEI entails: (a) expertise—the technical competence in its field of education; (b) congeniality—the extent to which a university demonstrates courtesy and goodwill towards the students; (c) openness—in interpreting and disclosing ambiguous higher education issues; (d) sincerity—honesty and promises fulfilment; (e) integrity—unwillingness to sacrifice ethical standards to achieve organizational objectives [127]. Hennig-Thurau, Langer, and Hansen, [96] notice that trust in HEI's personnel is an antecedent of student loyalty that is crucially important. Sirdeshmukh, Singh and Sabol [60] suggest that although a student may trust that the HEI's faculty members are doing their best to aid students in achieving their learning and career goals, that same student may be suspicious of whether the HEI's administrative policies and practices are centered on the students' best interest. They highlight also that such independent evaluations of HEIs might reflect the use of distinct inferential bases for the evaluations. Student trust were found to be significant predictors of student identification with higher education institutions [35]. Carvalho and Mota [61] demonstrated that trust in both the HEI's personnel (faculty and staff members) and in the HEI's management (as reflected in its administrative and process policies and practices) increases students' perception of value of the HEIs, which in turn leads to student loyalty. The empirical research confirms that there is a significant relationship between student trust, behavior and high school outcomes; students who trust have fewer behavioral incidents and better academic outcomes with results suggesting that trust functions through behavior [128]. Therefore, building long-term relationships based on students' trust and commitment is important for university managers in the competitive international education market [129].

## 3. Faculty—Institution

The third pillar of trust creation in the HEI is the trust of faculty versus the institution. It is strictly related to the concept of organizational trust that refers to employees identifying with an organization and willing to establish long-term relationships with the organization [16]. Organizational trust is a type of institutional trust, including trust in supervisors and in an organization as a whole [130]. The nature of the social relations academics have with other school actors is an important aspect of their job and an important output of schooling [131]. It determines the quality management in the organization. In the organizational context, the degree of social exchange between employee and organization reflects the level of employee-organization relationship (EOR) [132]. Yu et al. [16] underlines that EOR is an important predictor of organizational trust. Trust can be an effective predictor

of employees' positive attitudes and behaviours, such as cooperative attitudes [133], organizational commitment [134] and employee loyalty [135]. Previous studies have found that when employees trust in their organization, they will perceive their environment as safe [136] and this will lead them to be more likely to share ideas and knowledge and be more creative in their job [137].

#### 4. The Quality Culture Concept

The development of trust serves the purpose of enhancing quality in higher education. As the quality culture in HEIs cannot be taken for granted, it has become the subject of international scientific research contributing to the deeper understanding of this aspect of university functioning [138–140]. In research conducted under the patronage of the European University Association (EUA) [141–144], quality culture is defined as an organizational culture whose main aim is to constantly improve quality. Two key components of the quality culture have been distinguished: The first concerns the cultural and psychological aspect, relating to common values, beliefs, expectations and commitment to quality improvement, while the second is of structural and managerial character and refers to defined processes supporting the quality enhancements and coordinating the work of those involved in quality improvement [141]. This understanding of the quality culture assumes that educational institutions should take care of this aspect of the university's functioning in such a way that both structural and managerial elements (referring to institutions) as well as cultural and psychological elements (referring to the role of individuals) synergistically support each other and they lead to the constant development of a higher education institution.

In the consciously developed quality culture, there should be a constant interaction between structural/managerial processes, which are top-down, and cultural/psychological factors that follow the bottom-up path. The first ones play the role of drivers of change, because they are introduced as a result of external and internal legal acts or regulations, while the latter ones act as supportive measures in the process of quality culture development. At the same time, the interplay of both sets of factors is a unique feature of each institution.

It should be noted that the quality culture (Quality Culture—QC) and quality management (Quality Management—QM) or quality assurance (Quality Assurance—QA) are terms that are different in meaning. QM is “an aggregate of measures taken regularly at system or institutional level in order to assure the quality of higher education with an emphasis on improving quality as a whole” [145], while QA by the same authors is seen as a component of QM as it offers a set of mechanisms and tools that make QM possible. Currently, the QM and QA mechanisms typically consist of periodically conducted self-studies and evaluations of HEI's units following standard measures for the review, approval and monitoring of an academic programme: They involve gathering student feedback on teaching effectiveness; student and staff satisfaction surveys; student workload assessments and tracking alumni careers; monitoring of adapted indicators and statistical information to analyse student achievements and success; and analysis of the quality of teaching and learning resources [144].

The term quality culture emerged later than quality management or quality assurance and became the answer for growing concerns of academicians sceptical about introducing processes, procedures and tools typical of quality management and quality assurance, often considered as burdensome and bureaucratic, used for accountability purposes and usually accompanied by the establishment of national quality agencies focusing on compliance verification rather than supporting HEIs. This situation was interpreted by many academicians as the withdrawal from trust [146] and following the managerialism approach [147], which obviously did not contribute positively to quality perceptions. In this context, the concept of quality culture offered a very comprehensive statement of meaning, because apart from the focus on structural and managerial aspects, it proposed a reference to cultural and psychological elements taking into account the values shared at the university, employee involvement, convictions, history and academic tradition. The term of quality culture pointed to the importance of co-existence of both components (structural/managerial and cultural/psychological), thus showing a new, wider perspective on perceiving quality at the university. The complementarity



of both aspects was further emphasized by noting that the university may have highly developed quality management and assurance processes, but its quality culture without a well-developed cultural and psychological component will be incomplete [148]. The situation was perceived similarly in the opposite case. The academic ethos without accompanying mechanisms of quality management and its provisioning will be an isolated and impermanent element in the process of building a comprehensive university's quality culture [141]. A strong and sustainable quality culture no longer requires just a quality assurance system, it is also based on mutual trust between all parties of the educational process, it is not enforced and it is built step by step, action by action, until it becomes a reality [149].

The results of EUA's work [141] informed that a mature quality culture was present in institutions that had a high level of autonomy. It was also developing well in such organizational structures where institutional responsibility was emphasized, with very mindful and reflexive implementation of quality improvement projects. It was also pointed out that the quality culture should be regularly monitored and evaluated; however, entangling it in excessive bureaucracy, often represented by various accountability systems, can harm its development.

Recognition of the value of the quality culture promotion at the university entails constant financial expenditures and investing in human resources. Undoubtedly, financing the development of quality culture is a significant expense for the university, but these costs should be treated as a long-term investment. Additionally, the development of quality culture should not be at the expense of the basic tasks of university staff, but be a kind of approach and attitude in which employees constantly ask themselves: *what can be done better?* instead of *what else should be done?* [141]. In addition, the cost of investment in building the quality culture is outweighed by the cost that the university would incur if it gave up a structured quality culture development, especially in the context of growing competitiveness on the HEIs market, demographic decline and changing expectations of the recipients of higher education services.

A critical review of current international empirical research on the quality culture [150] resulted in the establishment of a list of factors supporting and hindering the development of quality culture in universities; a set of mechanisms accompanying the creation of a quality culture; and a list of effects related to the functioning of quality culture in higher education institutions.

The structural and managerial elements that positively influence the development of quality culture include creating a strategy for continuous development of the university; well-operating and useful quality management and quality assurance systems; the practice of including students and academic staff in decision making; taking into account, in the process of management, the constantly changing needs and expectations of students, or the transparency of decisions, procedures and responsibilities. This list of supportive measures is complemented by cultural/psychological elements such as recognition of common values or creating empowering academic environments favouring the coexistence of various quality subcultures [150].

On the other hand, the inhibitors to quality culture development are related to the lack of empowerment of students and academic staff represented by not involving them in decision-making processes which additionally lack transparency [2,151]. Ignoring the evolving needs of students, academic staff and administrators, as well as the lack of sufficient financial, material and human resources also constitute serious barriers to QC improvement. A similar effect is brought by a top-down approach to the implementation of quality management structures. The presence of an overly bureaucratic system of permanent quality control although intended to make processes more transparent can evoke discouragement by showing distrust in competences and commitment of academic staff, thus hindering the development of loyalty for the HEI [152]. In addition to that, the existence of strict discipline, rigid, control-oriented patterns of action, or low prestige and progressive devaluation of teaching also belongs to serious cultural/psychological types of barriers in quality culture development [150].

Leadership and communication are perceived as the key elements connecting cultural and psychological with structural and managerial aspects of the university's functioning. Leaders are

perceived as the main adversaries of the quality culture development due to their competences related to influencing employees' activities, delegation skills, ability to create working teams, building a climate of mutual trust and understanding, playing various academic roles, or focusing on the optimization of management processes serving the development of the university's quality culture. The lack of a committed leader or his/her weak leadership competences, concentration on control and actions hindering the smooth flow of information and making it a hard-to-reach value, are factors definitely hampering the development of quality culture [153]. Additionally, the lack of a tradition of sharing good practices in the organization, or the failure to use various communication channels to effectively reach the stakeholders with the relevant information about quality culture can also impede the QC development. Proper communication is seen as an indispensable tool for identifying values and beliefs of stakeholders in the process of building the quality culture, promoting quality strategies and policies, or discussing the results of ongoing evaluations [150]. It is important also to view communication in a broader sense than only the proper exchange of information. It should be perceived in the meaning of "reciprocal reconciliation", thus underlying a need for the presence of continued dialogue leading to an agreement or a compromise between the discussion participants that constitute key stakeholders and beneficiaries of the quality-oriented actions [152].

The review of literature points also to the list of mechanisms identified as key in the context of creating quality culture. They include a list of actions strengthening the practices of collaborative development and widespread sharing of knowledge. For the QC to blossom, the HEI should also put emphasis on the promotion of processes favouring the distribution of ownership, sharing responsibility and awarding employee involvement in HEI initiatives. In summary, the presence of supporting factors, limiting the barriers, and introducing supportive mechanisms should lead to developing the HEI quality culture resulting in intensified learning and the development of students and academic staff, and an increase in the level of student and staff satisfaction [150].

In summary, the concept of quality culture has become a natural successor of QM and QA, thus presenting a new perspective for viewing quality at HEIs as a combination of structural and managerial with cultural and psychological components. By doing that it has also offered an opportunity to emphasize the role of trust within the HEI context as an empowering element of the academic environment that has an enabling effect on all HEI actors discussed in this publication: students, academic faculty and institution with its administration and management representatives [152].

## 5. Research Methodology

This study aims at developing a Conceptual Model of Trust-Based Quality Culture in HEIs. As the terms such as "conceptual" and "theoretical" models are often used interchangeably there is a need for clarification what exactly is meant by the conceptual model used in this study and what the characteristics and differences between conceptual and theoretical models are.

In general, a theoretical model is derived from a theory and a conceptual model is derived from concepts. Starting with a broader term, a theory has four components: (a) definition of terms, concepts or variables, (b) a domain to which the theory is applicable, (c) a set of relationships amongst the variables, and (d) specific predictive claims. A theory is therefore a careful outline of "the precise definitions in a specific domain to explain why and how the relationships are logically tied so that the theory gives specific predictions" [154]. Therefore, a theoretical model is built upon a theory and refers to the theory that a researcher chooses as a guideline for his/her research. It usually involves deductive processes related to theory testing and verifying its power and is located mainly in the quantitative research paradigm. Data are collected mostly through experimental designs, empirical surveys and tests. Researchers make an effort to standardize context, or ignore it, so that wider application beyond the current research problem and context is possible.

However, in a situation when there are no theories in a given domain (especially in the areas of social sciences, contrary to natural sciences), or research problems cannot ordinarily be explained

by one theoretical perspective, the researcher may have to “synthesize” the existing views in the literature concerning given phenomena from both theoretical and empirical findings. The synthesis may be called a conceptual model, which essentially represents an “integrated” way of looking at the concept [155]. The term “concept” refers to a mental image or abstraction of a phenomena [156]. Miles and Huberman [157] defined a conceptual model as a visual or written product, one that “explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, concepts, or variables—and the presumed relationships among them” (p. 18). The process of arriving at a conceptual model is usually through an inductive process where different concepts are researched and put together to form an integrated bigger map of the phenomena and their possible relationships. A conceptual model may be defined as an end result of bringing together a number of related concepts to explain or predict a given event, or give a broader understanding of the phenomenon of interest, or of a research problem. The most innovative conceptual models are often those that link various fields of study, or that integrate different approaches, lines of investigation, or theories that no one had previously connected. A conceptual model is something that is constructed, not found. It incorporates pieces that are borrowed from elsewhere, but the structure and overall coherence is something that is built, not something that exists ready-made.

The proposed Conceptual Model of Trust-Based Quality Culture in HEIs was built based on the critical analysis of scientific literature, theoretical and empirical findings, which provided an input to form a bigger map of the abstract concepts such as quality culture and trust and their perceived interplay. In our study, we applied a systematic literature review approach, following the four stages indicated by Sulisto and Rino [43]. Researchers of organisational culture [158,159] point to the fact that culture-related concepts are a very complex phenomena that are not that easy to decipher. There is also a variety of terms used to refer to manifestations of concepts which very often are not visible. For example, Hofstede writes about “practices” and “values”, Schein refers to “artefacts”, “basic underlying assumptions” or “espoused values”. In the area of trust, concepts can be inferred from behavior, but trust encompasses also expressions such as faith, confidence and hope [160]. The concepts of quality culture and trust are complex ones and the conceptual model cannot offer its full representation, but rather a simplified representation of the phenomena, however useful for further exploration and understanding of the concepts and their interplay. Conceptual models developed inductively obviously have their limitations and so does the Conceptual Model of Trust-Based Quality Culture in HEIs that has been built as a result of this study. A conceptual model does not have the power of a theoretical framework as it is highly dependent on context. However, it does offer a structured basis for designing qualitative or mixed-methods approaches with data mostly collected through both empirical and descriptive survey instruments, interviews and direct observations, where contextual data are of major importance. It can form the basis for follow-up studies that will test the model, but the interpretation of the findings will be limited to the specific research problem and its application or context [161].

## 6. The Proposal of a Novel Trust-Based Quality Culture Conceptual Model at HEIs

In order to clarify the interplay of trust and quality culture in HEIs based on the research findings, the following model of Trust-Based Quality Culture has been conceptualized. The proposed model involves the assumption that if trust-based relationships at HEI are promoted and properly nurtured, and if the structural/managerial as well as cultural/psychological conditions for the quality culture development are adequately accounted for, and the actions are focused on the areas of the university’s educational mission favouring partnership, empowerment and commitment of stakeholders, such a situation will lead to the development of trust-based quality culture. It is important to note that trust is a concept that while being the key input for the process of developing the trust-based quality culture that is strong and sustainable, it also generates output at the organizational level represented by reputation. The whole process of trust-based quality culture development requires support in

the form of professional and responsible leadership and effective communication which are the key elements supporting integrity and compatibility of the quality culture improvement actions.

The presented assumptions have been derived from a systematic critical literature review presented in Sections 2–4 of this paper and gives groundings to the model creation. They provide conceptual indications on how people relate to the reality in which they exist and they provide frameworks for the conceptualizing of how the practitioners can construct themselves successfully in relation to the environment and for the conduct of empirical qualitative research [42]. Figure 1 presents the proposed novel Trust-Based Quality Culture Conceptual Model for HEIs.

The following description summarizes the key elements of the model with a focus on the best practices as indicated by the literature review:

#### a. Trust as the foundation for quality culture development

The model assumes that trust is the phenomenon that is built between:

- students and faculty,
- students and institution,
- faculty and institution.

Best practice examples indicate that the development of such relationships should be facilitated and supported, i.e., through establishing appropriate channels of communication for each type of relation and a common goal that unites various stakeholders in joint efforts. Intentional development of trust among the key university stakeholders seems to also constitute a strategic approach that HEIs can take. It can be regarded as an investment that if addressed professionally can pay off in loyalty and reputation that adds to quality culture enhancement [162].

#### b. Drivers of change: structural/managerial components of quality culture

The presence of the structural/managerial component in the proposed model presumes that there should be assured adequate drivers for the quality culture to develop. The following list of structural and managerial elements derived from the literature review [150,162] offers best practices in supporting trust-building among the university's main stakeholders:

- quality management system avoiding excessive bureaucracy;
- users-friendly quality assurance mechanisms;
- collegially developed university's strategy and goals;
- transparency in making decisions and taking actions;
- availability of resources: time, place, people, budget to support the quality culture improvement initiatives and actions.

The listed elements of structural/managerial character that largely contribute to building the university's quality culture belong to the most important ones in the context of building trust between the key university stakeholders (students, academic teachers, institution with its administration and authorities). However, their presence is not an end in itself, but the necessary foundation for improvement actions to take place.

#### c. Supportive measures of change: cultural/psychological components of quality culture

The model assumes there is a need for a strong presence of the cultural/psychological components of quality culture. The most forceful ones, as indicated by the literature review, include [141–144,150,162]:

- common value system developed and adopted collaboratively and then respected by the academic community;
- understanding and acceptance of the fact that quality improvement is a continuous process;
- commitment and an openness attitude to change;

- cooperation in teams for improvement projects.

Trust can constitute one of the elements of the university's value system and the mechanisms of its generating, progressive building and strengthening should be incorporated into the system of supporting the development of cultural/psychological elements of quality culture at HEIs.

#### d. Areas of actions

For the quality culture to blossom in the areas of teaching and learning the actions should favour a partnership approach of the involved parties, empowerment of the participants of the educational process and their ownership of teaching and learning processes [150]. A partnership approach requires conviction that all the educational process participants are equal contributors, especially in the times when a further paradigm shift—the transition from teaching to learning—is expected [162]. Over recent years, higher education policy initiatives across many countries have highlighted the importance of students' active engagement in their learning, and the benefits to be gained when students play an active role in shaping and enhancing their learning experiences. "Student engagement" has become a core aim for the sector and, increasingly, is being linked to ideas about students' roles as partners in their higher education communities [163]. Engaging students and staff effectively as partners in learning and teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century [163]. Example actions favouring the development of partnership involve emphasising the benefits of collaboration or forming interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder teams. An interesting example of the latter is the publication edited by Nygaard [164], which required each chapter to be co-authored by a student as a concrete example of the teacher-student partnership. Other example is the pedagogical framework for learning developed at Laurea University of Applied Sciences in Finland, called Learning by Developing (LbD). The main goal in LbD is to produce new knowledge for all partners of the collaborative learning process i.e. students, teachers and working life partners and in some cases the customers. In this approach the teacher's position and role is changing towards a transformative leader in an expert organization and its multidimensional-networked activities – a long way from traditional lecturing and course delivery. According to Laurea's pedagogical strategy, students are treated as junior colleagues, and the competence development happens in authentic, networked collaboration. [165]. Similarly, in the DEEP project (Documenting Effective Educational Practice) run by a number of US higher education institutions the emphasis was put on stimulation of student engagement and strong community-building around shared experiences, values and norms.

For the educational processes to contribute to the development of quality culture their participants need to develop a strong sense of ownership for the processes and effects of teaching and learning and to feel empowered to shape the academic environment in a way which makes it more enabling to address their educational goals and needs [162]. Manifestations of owning the quality enhancement process by the academic staff is visible for instance in their willingness to professionalize their teaching skills [166] or perceive teaching and learning as a shared responsibility [167]. Empowerment is essential for changes to occur; therefore, the employees need to develop their readiness to make decisions and to solve problems appropriate to their levels in the organisation [168]. This can be built for example by granting the faculty sufficient autonomy over choices which are within their area of expertise. For the teaching faculty, this means autonomy over the choice of teaching methods, developing and implementing teaching innovations or initiating educational improvement projects.

Providing incentives and structured, focused support to enhancing empowerment, partnership and ownership over teaching and learning processes can form strategies aiming at the increase of the level of trust between key players of HEIs and thus contribute to the enhanced sustainability of the developed quality culture. Strategic support of these three aspects is an example of a top-down approach, but manifestations of empowerment, partnership and ownership should be visible in bottom-up quality culture-enhancement initiatives and projects. Therefore, it is important to remember the risk of over-formalizing the support structures, because as EUA's Quality Culture Project has shown [141], "centralised strategies ensure the uniformity of efforts and their compatibility with the

institutional mission, yet are less inclined to generate ownership for quality processes on any other level than the management's" [152]. Therefore, in order not to share the fate of accreditation-related processes which often turned out to be too bureaucratic and did not lead to developing ownership among academic staff [162], it is important to develop strategies which assure a balanced approach, thus avoiding excessive formality. It is not enough to "involve" stakeholders or "let them participate", they need to see themselves as a part of the HEI's quality culture [152].

#### e. Communication and leadership

The proper application of the proposed novel model will trigger the need for increased communication in universities and engaged, professional leadership in the process of introducing quality-oriented changes. Professional leadership and effective communication contribute not only to the creation, but also to maintaining an appropriate level of quality culture [162]. The effects of reforms and changes aimed at improving the quality culture will depend then on the professionalism of university leaders in the process of change, their leadership style and commitment. The implementation of thorough quality-oriented changes requires constant communication, which is designed to soothe everyday fears of people affected by changes, explain reasons and justify decisions. The bigger transparency of these decisions, the greater the understanding of the recipients and the opportunity to gradually build trust. Therefore, the need for wise leadership and intensive, professional communication accompanying the introduction of quality culture improvement projects seems to be crucial in building awareness about new opportunities and attitudes that can constructively support the quality-oriented changes. Leest et al. found out that in the good practice programmes, it was leadership that was able to create a feeling of ownership of the quality care among teachers achieved through recognition of teachers as professionals and making teaching and learning a shared responsibility [167]. The most successful leaders in enhancing the quality culture were those individuals who were able to provide convincing narratives on the purpose and effects of the intended changes, unite potential opponents, or establish a professional discourse on teaching and learning [162]. Also "leading by example" had the power of boosting the leader's credibility and acceptance of change [162]. The good practices also included low thresholds for communication and informal communication. Open communication including students, teachers and management should be prevailing. It should also favour respect and collegial feedback, and it should leave room for making mistakes. Formal as well as informal communication should be focused on the quality of teaching and learning and be based on a shared vision of high quality teaching and learning [167].

In summary, given all the listed elements of the model are present and implemented with care, commitment and strategic edge, the efforts performed by students, academic faculty and institutional administration representatives including authorities should result in the development of a university's trust-based quality culture that not only uses trust as its foundation, but also transforms it into loyalty of the university's key stakeholders and the reputation of the HEI.

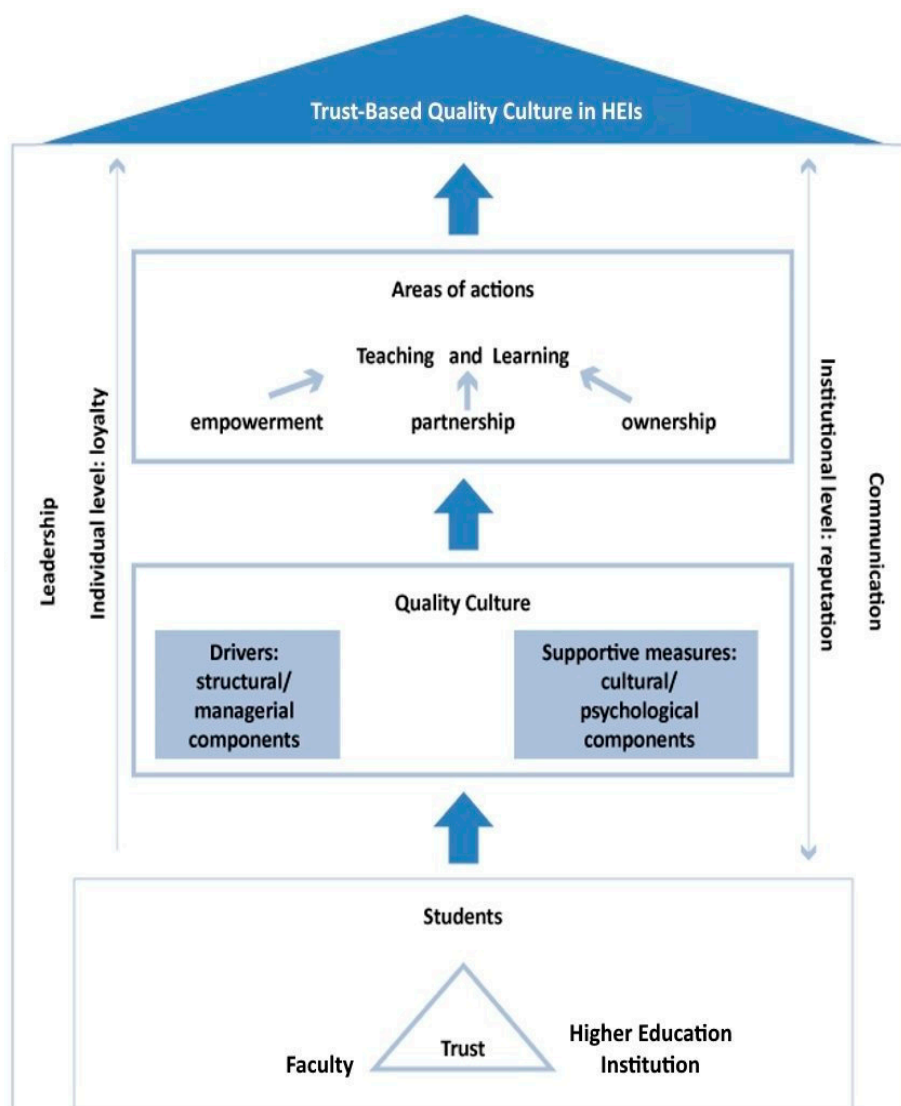


Figure 1. Trust-Based Quality Culture Conceptual Model for HEIs. Source: authors' own work.

## 7. Conclusions

Wals [33] underlines that higher education institutions are beginning to make more systemic changes towards sustainability by re-orienting their education, research, operations and community outreach activities all simultaneously or, which is more often the case, a subset thereof. They are doing so amidst educational reforms towards efficiency, accountability, privatization, management and control that are not always conducive for such a re-orientation. The Authors of this paper believe that all these above-mentioned movements, in order to be successful and effectively lead to more sustainable organization development, need to be based on trust that gives an important foundation to the quality culture development. Trust could lower the resistance to change, create more loyalty and improve reputation of HEIs and through the quality culture development prepare the HEIs for the further engagement in organizational changes leading to more sustainable development. It could give the basis for the changes of traditional attitudes of many universities relying on Newtonian and Cartesian mental models and make them more open to the management approaches focusing on human factors.

Higher education institutions are in the process of constant change and need to grow their readiness for ongoing reforming. The proposed Trust-Based Quality Culture Conceptual Model might

be used as an instrument guiding the change process. It presents the interplay of trust and quality culture elements in HEIs. It identifies the interrelations of their key representations and can also constitute a reference point for any HEI to conduct an in-depth inquiry process or reflection allowing for a better contextual diagnosis of the stage where their HEI is in the process of building the quality culture based on trust. Nowadays, quality culture is seen as the most holistic approach to perceiving quality in a higher education context [102]. It builds upon the achievements of QM, QA, academic ethos, traditions and convictions present at HEIs, thus showing its uniting role for the structural and managerial as well as the cultural and psychological components of a university [141]. The presented model recognizes the growing role of trust in the process of QC development and assumes that when trust is properly nurtured and developed between key stakeholders, the quality culture is more sustainable. As a result, it may contribute to the creation of an empowering academic environment that supports the pursuit of goals such as increased student and faculty loyalty and improvement of HEI's reputation. A systemic approach to developing a quality culture based on trust seems to be an option for getting better prepared for the organizational and mentality changes that are continuously on demand [169]. Therefore, a better understanding and use of the knowledge about the interplay of QC and trust can bring additional valuable input for the process of defining the vision of HEIs in the XXI century.

Stemming from the systematic critical literature review, the conducted inductive scientific process of building the conceptual model has allowed us to identify the critical elements of the new Trust-Based Quality Culture Conceptual Model. However, a detailed research into the interplay of its various elements, the analysis of the directions and strengths of relations of the identified variables, as well as an elaboration on the ways of nurturing and maintaining the various elements of QC based on trust are required for continuing the scientific exploration of this complex phenomenon.

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