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ABSTRACT

Organizational culture has an incredible function and is an incredible function, as it is both product and process, and effect and cause. Within an investigation of tertiary students' perceptions of the fairness of educational assessment using grounded theory methodology, it became apparent that it was important to consider the influence of course culture. This paper consists of a literature review on organizational culture. The paper gives some insight into what culture is, what the components of culture are, and how the culture of schools and universities are viewed (various researchers describe academic culture as possibly having four types of culture--discipline, profession, enterprise, and system, with additional campus subcultures identified as student culture and administrative culture). It also considers some of the qualitative methods used by researchers in studying the culture of an organization. The paper will be of some interest to those seeking to increase ways of understanding the organization to which they belong or would like to belong. (Contains 27 references.) (NKA)

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Culture Club: An Investigation of Organisational Culture.

by Nerilee Flint

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Culture Club. An Investigation of Organisational Culture.

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The importance of culture

The statement by Evans (1996, p44) that 'Organizational culture is both product and process, effect and cause' gives a sense of the power and importance of culture. Once a culture is established

> it not only shapes people's behavior, perception, and understanding of events, it provides a template for learning. Culture exerts a profound impact on the induction and orientation of organizational members and on the way an organization responds to changes in its environment (p44).

Culture is usually regarded as an asset because it has an important role in fostering social cohesion and reducing uncertainty, particularly for people new to the group. Culture facilitates organisational processes of co-ordination and control and can be an important source of motivation for members. As stated by Brown (1995) some commentators on culture suggest that 'with the decline in the role of the Church, work organisations have become increasingly influential in their impact on people's thinking and behaviour' (p59).

Some authors have argued that an organisation's culture can also be a problem. According to Evans (1996) a very strong culture will resist change and new influences and tends to grow more conservative with age. Interestingly weak, negative cultures also resist change and even though this may seem paradoxical it is understandable when the anxiety-reducing function of culture is considered. People will rarely question their basic assumptions, and even if the culture is dysfunctional they will cling to what makes them feel secure.

Background to this paper

Within an investigation of tertiary students' perceptions of the fairness of educational assessment using grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998), it became apparent that it was important to consider the influence of course culture. This was due to the fact that there were many similarities but also a number of differences between students' comments from two different undergraduate courses that may be attributable to the similarities and differences between the cultures of the two courses. An ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner 1979) has been adopted as it offers a new perspective on the complex issue of students' perceptions and it allows for a linked examination of the elements that surface in the interviews with students. Ecological frameworks allow issues to be viewed in context and in a non-linear way. It is important the students' talk is viewed in context as all students operate in multiple contexts at any one time and are not simply exposed to the single context of the university campus. A non-linear framework is necessary to attempt to adequately represent the complexity of the subject.

To date a total of twenty students from two undergraduate courses within the same school of a university have been interviewed using a semi-structured interview procedure for between forty-five and seventy minutes. Interviews have been transcribed and themes and concepts have been analysed. Interviewing ceased at this point to allow for the consideration of the influence of course culture on the perceptions of the students.

The contribution of this paper is in the findings of a literature review conducted on organisational culture. It will give some insight into what culture is, what the components of culture are, and how the culture of schools and universities are viewed. The paper also considers some of the qualitative methods used by researchers in studying the culture of an organisation. This paper will be of interest to those seeking to increase ways of understanding the organisation to which they belong or would like to belong.

Defining culture

'Definitions of organizational culture range from the simple to the complex. Many people use it to describe an organization's traditional practices and modes of operating or its climate and general ambience' (Evans 1996, p41). There are many definitions of culture and within them there are a number of similarities and differences which in part depends on the field of study from which the definitions arise: anthropology, sociology, psychology or education.

Schein (1992, p12) describes the culture of a group as:

> A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

The assumptions and beliefs of the group come to be taken for granted and invisible as they become automatic and ingrained in the routine practices of the organisation. Schein distinguishes between an organisation's culture and the closely related phenomena of climate, norms, formal philosophy, customs, and symbols, which he sees as emanating in part from culture and reflecting it but not being the same as culture (Evans 1996).

The concept of analysing organisations through the lens of culture began in the late twentieth century in American management circles (Evans 1996), although earlier work on management styles in the 1930's made links to the culture of organisations even if they did not use the term culture in their explanations (Owens 1995). Over the last few decades terms used in studies, which now would quite likely be referred to as studies of culture, or elements of culture, had many different names, including 'institution', 'organisational climate', 'organisational saga' and 'ethos'. The analysis of organisations through their culture has become widespread and relatively commonplace in areas other than management, including education. It is within the literature on change in schools, effective schools, and alternative schools that culture is often mentioned in an educational context.

'Organisational culture' and 'organisational climate' are two terms that are often used without specific consideration of the difference in meaning. An observer or visitor to an educational institution will quite quickly get a 'feel' for the place and be able to state that it has a strong culture or perhaps that the climate is positive. Owens (1995) suggests, based on the work of Renato Tagiuri in the 1960's, that in a school the culture is one dimension of the climate which has three other dimensions: ecology – the physical/material factors; organisation – the organisational and administrative structure; and milieu – the characteristics of the individual. This viewpoint defines climate as 'the characteristics of the total environment of an educational institution'; with culture being 'the psycho-social characteristics'. Owens points out that contemporary thought has culture being the prime dimension in defining the climate of an organisation. He states that 'culture refers to the behavioral norms, assumptions, and beliefs of an organization, whereas climate refers to the perceptions of persons in the organization that reflect those norms, assumptions, and beliefs' (p82). Schein (1992, p9) describes the climate as 'the feeling that is conveyed in a group by the physical layout and the way in which members of the organization interact with each other, with customers, or with outsiders'.

Groups without a culture

Groups do not automatically have a culture. A group has to get to the stage of having shared assumptions for it to have a culture. According to Schein (1992), for a culture to be present it would usually require the group to have been together long enough to have shared significant problems; to have had opportunities to solve these problems and observe the effects of their problem solving; and to have taken in new members. Some groups will not develop integrated cultures and this will lead to situations full of conflict and ambiguity. Schein reasons that this may be the result of a number of factors including unstable membership, the presence of many subgroups with varied shared experiences, or simply a lack of shared experiences of the main group. According to Pedersen and Sorensen (1989) when they studied a group that had not taken in new members it was a study more of cultural founders and an emerging culture.

Components of culture

Schein describes three levels of culture: artefacts and creations, values, and basic assumptions. Most visible and tangible is the first level, the artefacts and creations. This is the physical and social environment. It includes the myths and stories about the organisation, the architecture, published lists of values, the norms of behaviour, the technology, the style of dress, rituals, ceremonies, customs and language. 'For purposes of cultural analysis this level also includes the visible behavior of the group and the organizational processes into which such behavior is made routine' (Schein 1992, p17). Whilst this level of culture is the most easily observed and readily visible it is often difficult to interpret as artefacts are symbolic of the culture itself and things may not mean what a viewer may think they mean. They often cannot be understood until the organisation is known quite well and an understanding of the deepest level of culture, the assumptions, is necessary for many of the artefacts and behaviour to make sense.

Slightly less visible than artefacts and very complex is Schein's second level of culture, an organisation's values. 'Espoused values are those which are developed within a group when decisions are made by the groups and found to succeed' (Frew 1997, p178). If the solution is seen as reliable for that problem the group takes it on board as the way it is to be done, so whereas originally it was a hypothesis it ultimately becomes accepted as a reality and is transformed into a shared value or belief that is no longer questioned (Schein 1992). Values of this type can operate at varying levels of awareness. Members of many organisations, which could include a university course, can often describe the values that guide their work and their collegial behaviour. As Evans (1996, p43) writes, there are also some values 'that members of the organisation are not usually aware of that affect decisions and behaviour'. There are also values that are described by people as being relevant to their organisation that are actually ignored in reality. The discussion of values will continue further in the paper.

At the deepest level of culture are the organisation's basic assumptions. The work of Schein differs from previous work on culture. Previous work did not emphasise assumptions, albeit getting close to the concept of assumptions with the concepts of values and norms (Pedersen and Sorensen 1989). Assumptions are those unconscious, taken for granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, underlying shared convictions that guide behaviour and are the ultimate source of values and action (Schein 1992; Evans 1996; Frew 1997). Schein believes this is the essence of culture and that in the study of culture one must search for the pattern among the different underlying assumptions of the group so that one can attempt to identify the paradigm which drives the way the people think, perceive and judge situations. An example of a basic assumption held by staff in a university course may be that students want to pass assessment items. To those staff it is inconceivable that a student would attend university with no intention of being successful in assessment. Students might hold assumptions that there is a relationship between the amount of time that they spend on an assignment and the mark that they receive for it.

Whilst people studying culture place varying emphases on artefacts and behaviour, Owens (1995) states that the literature consistently claims that there are two themes, those of norms and assumptions, which 'are widely regarded as key components of organizational culture' (p83). The difficulty with understanding both of these is that they are unwritten and in reference to assumptions, unconsciously taken for granted. Norms express the shared beliefs of most group members about how it is one should act and behave and it is the assumptions underneath this that drive the norms.

The culture of a school

Culture is complex and layered and resists an easy description. This is also true for attempting to define what a school's culture is. Dalin and Rolff (1993) suggest that what we can see is how people are behaving and that one way to understand the culture of a school is to study the characteristics of schools as organisations. They present a model which shows a 'school as an organisation where there is a mutual interdependency among

the five variables: environment, values, structure, human relations and strategies' (Dalin and Rolff 1993, p6).

Dalin and Rolff concur with Hodgkinson (1983) that school culture is a complex phenomenon and that it appears at three levels:

> 1 The transrational level: where values are conceived as metaphysical, based on beliefs, ethical code and moral insights.
>
> 2 The rational level: where values are seen and grounded within a social context of norms, customs, expectations and standards, and depend on collective justification.
>
> 3 The subrational level: where values are experienced as personal preferences and feelings; they are rooted in emotion, are basic, direct, affective and behaviouristic in character. They are basically asocial and amoral. (Dalin and Rolff 1993, p97)

'Values' are the focus in Dalin and Rolff and Hodgkinson's concept of culture. Hodgkinson (1983) further divides the above three value 'levels' into four value 'types' which in essence separates the second level, the rational level, into two sections, one based on consequence and the other on consensus. Consequence is reasoned to be closer to the transrational level that is based on principles, and consensus to be closer to the subrational level which is based on preference. Hodgkinson (p41) insists that any study of values must distinguish it's level or type as he believes that values that come from a different level or type can create 'confusion, argument and the breakdown of communication and understanding'. The concept of fairness can be used to illustrate the difference between values: Within the transrational level, type one fairness would be grounded on principle, 'Australia is a fair country and everyone deserves a 'fair go''. Within the rational level, type two fairness would be valued because it is the norm of the group (consensus) or because the result of not being fair could be unpleasant (consequence). Within the subrational level, type three fairness would be desirable simply because it is preferred to being unfair.

Whilst Dalin and Rolff focus their discussion on schools it seems much can be applied to a university course. They find that schools are rarely clear about their values at a transrational level, usually show clear values at the rational level, and that the subrational level plays a very important role. They claim that the latter is so partly because schools are not used to expressing themselves at a rational level and that individual teachers have a high degree of autonomy therefore power. This allows personal preferences to play an important role, which is in keeping with the way university lecturers perceive themselves. Viewing culture from this perspective makes it very clear that 'individuals and their relations are a very important determinant of what constitutes a 'school culture" (Dalin and Rolff 1993, p98).

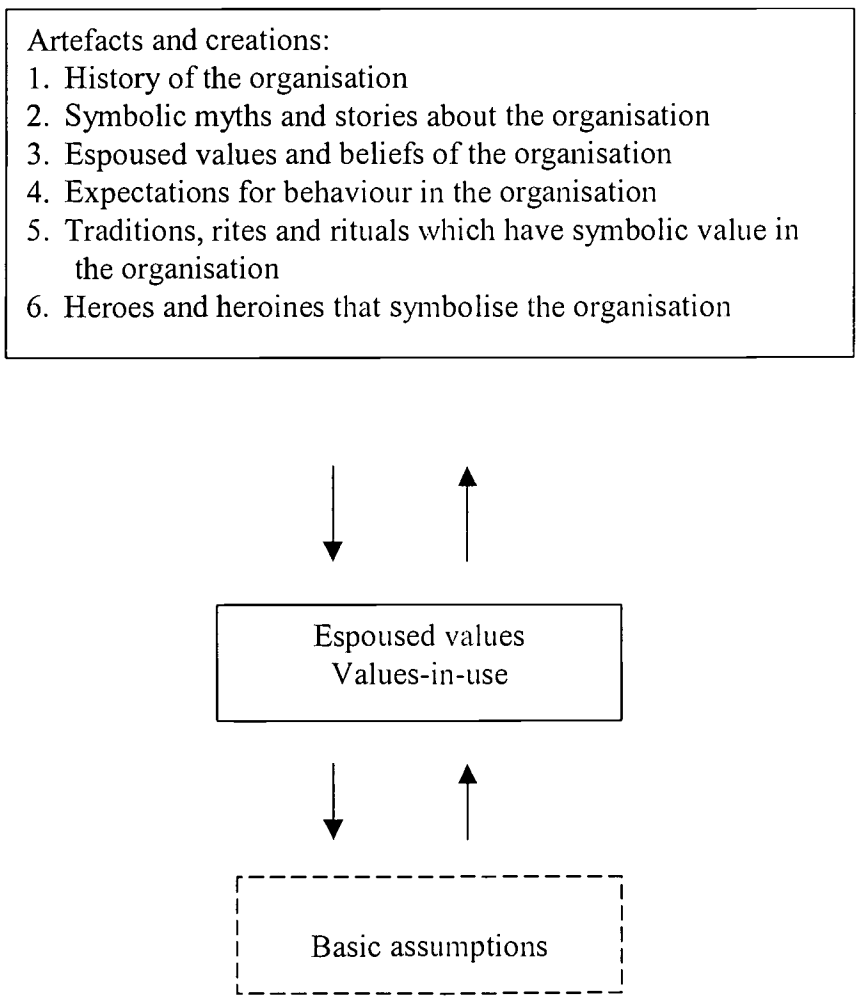
It is also possible to have values but not act upon them. A student might believe it is desirable to review lecture notes at the end of each day whilst never actually doing it. Staff might believe it is desirable to acknowledge each student as an individual whilst setting assignments that are to be done by all. Staff might believe it is desirable to hand back assignments within two weeks of receiving them whilst rarely meeting this desire. A student might believe it is desirable to do the allocated weekly readings throughout the semester whilst leaving them until studying for an exam or immediately before a paper is due, or not doing them at all.

Pedersen and Sorensen (1989) consider values in a different way to both Hodgkinson and Schein. Schein asserts that 'values' are transformed into 'basic assumptions' when a solution to a problem seems to work repeatedly. Pedersen and Sorensen believe that it is more complicated than this and values are 'not as homogeneous and consistent a category as the majority of the culture literature tends to present it to be' (p21). They suggest that values need to be viewed as being either 'values-in-use' or 'espoused values', and as being primarily for internal use or primarily for external use. 'Values-in-use' function as guidelines of behaviour, they remain conscious and are explicitly articulated whereas 'espoused values' are primarily normative statements which tell you what people say they will do, they reflect attitudes, hopes or beliefs about how you would like things to be. In

addition to this Pedersen and Sorensen discuss their experience of values not addressing the same audience and therefore serving different purposes. They point out that some values are 'primarily for external use, they are highly articulated and everyone agrees with them, but they do not necessarily have any impact on the behavior of the members in the organisation' (p22).

Schein's model of culture

There are difficulties in studying culture as 'important elements of culture are subtle, unseen, and so familiar to persons inside the organization as to be considered self-evident and in effect, invisible' (Owens 1995, p93). Culture cannot be studied directly; it has to be inferred. The framework provided by Schein (1992) of three levels of culture: artefacts and creations, values, and basic assumptions with adaptations inspired by Owens and Steinhoff (1989) and Pedersen and Sorensen (1989) presented as a model assists in visualising how the inference works:



As Pedersen and Sorensen suggest, 'Basic assumptions' has been surrounded with a non-continuous line to indicate that they cannot be observed, only deduced from the observations and answers to questions related to observations of elements from the previous two levels.

Owens and Steinhoff (1989) use Schein's three level model of organisational culture in conceptualising their enquiry that uses a metaphorical analysis to understand the culture of schools. They suggest there are six elements that are frequently encountered in the literature through which 'the symbolism of organisational culture is preserved, expressed and conveyed' (p13). They describe these elements as intersecting and overlapping in their description of the culture of a school:

1 history of the organisation
2 symbolic myths and stories about the organisation
3 espoused values and beliefs of the organisation
4 expectations for behaviour in the organisation
5 rites and rituals which have symbolic value in the organisation
6 heroes and heroines that symbolise the organisation (pp 13-14)

Owens and Steinhoff's elements are virtually a replica of Schein's first level of culture, artifacts and creations, with the exception being that 'physical symbols' and 'language' are not included.

Pedersen and Sorensen (1989) in operationalising Schein's model and it's varying levels in their study of the culture of three different companies in the information technology industry in Denmark place more emphasis on artefacts than do Owens and Steinhoff and Schein. Their basis for this is that Schein differs from the mainstream of cultural theory by giving artefacts a relatively low priority. Schein is adamant that observable artefacts can easily be misinterpreted in an analysis of culture because one cannot decipher what underlying assumptions there are. Pedersen and Sorensen agree with Schein that all artefacts are equally important but they do not consider them to be

equally informative. Pedersen and Sorensen (p29) present four clusters of artefacts that they consider to be important for the understanding of a particular culture:

1 Physical symbols (architecture, dress codes, décor, office layout, etc)
Various symbols of physical appearance
The degree of symbolic content and instrumental content are likely to vary
Easy to observe but difficult to interpret

2 Language (jargon, scripts, metaphors, nicknames etc)
Special words or phrases, apparently known only to organisational 'insiders'
Technical as well as interpersonal issues
Frequently used and widely shared
Not generated by fashion

3 Traditions (rites, rituals, ceremonies, routines etc)
A predictable pattern of behaviour enacted repeatedly
Starring two or more organisational members
Well demarcated beginnings and endings
Well defines [sic] roles for the participants

4 Stories (legends, sagas, anecdotes, jokes etc)
Well-known and shared by several organisational members
The actors are associated with the organisation
No 'news' value but only symbolic value
Not a first person anecdote but drawn from the organisation's past

Operationalising Schein's model

Using the above clusters of artefacts along with espoused values and values-in-use, Pedersen and Sorensen (1989) use a ten-step approach suggested by Schein (Schein 1992) to study culture. They refer to the artefacts and values as indicators and the basic assumptions as deductions. Pedersen and Sorensen set 'myths' outside the framework of

the hierarchical model because they believe that myths often serve as mediator between the levels, they perceive of 'myths as manifestations of beliefs, that are used as explanations and legitimization of action taken (or not taken), and myths are used as contexts for communicating beliefs and convictions to others' (p31).

Pedersen and Sorensen (1989, p32) refer to their study as 'using a hybrid methodology based on a qualitative approach'. They claim their study has more of an ethnographic perspective than Schein who defines himself as a 'clinician'.

A brief description of the steps used by Pedersen and Sorensen is useful in understanding how Schein's model has been operationalised: Preliminary field notes were recorded after the first contact and initial meeting with the contact person of the company, these notes focussed on surprises. Systematic observation followed, using an observation guide where the researchers looked for repeated patterns rather than single event happenings. Systematic open-ended interviews were conducted with members of the companies and in this process five of Schein's steps were absorbed: they located 'motivated insiders' who assisted them with their interpretations of cultural issues, 'surprises, puzzlements and hunches' were revealed, there was joint exploration to find explanations, and hypotheses were formalized whilst all the time systematically checking and consolidating what was being discovered about the culture of the organisations.
In the next two analytical stages Pedersen and Sorensen, without offering an explanation, digressed from Schein's suggestion of using insiders. By themselves they conducted the steps of pushing the discoveries to the 'level of assumptions' and, penultimately, that of perpetual re-calibration. The final step was an attempt to provide a description of the cultures of the three computer companies in the form of case studies.

The concluding comments of Pedersen and Sorensen (1989) are sobering to people wishing to study the culture of an organisation, in that whilst they obtained an overview of the cultures they studied they do not believe it is possible to get to the 'essence of culture'. They felt their studies showed that, whereas it might seem logical that a set of

basic assumptions will lead to a cultural paradigm, in fact what you end up with is a variety of 'seemingly contradictory and inconsistent assumptions' (p116). They comment 'we do not think there is any reason to believe or assume in advance that humans or social systems operate on a consistent base of assumptions. We may possess and operate from some kind of base, but why should we think of it as coherent, consistent and rational?' (p118). Despite this seemingly pessimistic, or perhaps realistic, conclusion they felt Schein's model provides a prosperous base for analysing culture.

Assessing culture by means of individual and group interviews

Schein's recent work (1999) promotes assessing culture by means of individual and group interviews 'with group interviews being by far the better method both in terms of validity and efficiency' (p86). He suggests that it is best done with a facilitator who is not a member of the group or department doing the cultural assessment as they can keep the group moving forward 'until some important shared tacit assumptions of the culture are brought to consciousness' (p68). This form of culture self-study clearly requires the cooperation of the members of the organisation and is usually tied to an organisational problem or issue. There are seven steps to the exercise which Schein claims would take four hours:

1 Define the 'Business Problem'

2 Review the Concept of Culture

3 Identify Artifacts

4 Identify Your Organization's Values

5 Compare Values with Artifacts

6 Repeat the Process with Other Groups (this step is only necessary if the picture formed from the earlier steps is incomplete or muddy or if there are subgroups in the organisation with their own shared assumptions)

7 Assess the Shared Assumptions

(Schein 1999, pp65-68)

This culture self-study exercise is presented in his recent book 'The Corporate Culture Survival Guide' as having progressed from his earlier work (Schein 1992), after having spent years working as a 'process consultant' and conducting culture audits of large companies, corporations and organisations.

Studying the culture of a course in a university

Many studies of an organisation's culture will have an ethnomethodological perspective as this 'gets at the norms, understandings, and assumptions that are taken for granted by people in a setting because they are so deeply understood that people don't even think about why they do what they do' (Patton 1990, p74).

Utilising the framework proposed by Schein, one method of studying the culture of a course in a university would be through observation, analysis of documents and conversations with staff members and students. The researcher would keep a comprehensive journal of field notes recording as much detail as possible as soon after any observations are made. As the work of many researchers of culture demonstrate (Geertz 1973; Pedersen and Sorensen 1989; Schein 1992; Deal and Peterson 1999) it would be necessary to spend time with the staff and students of the course, observing the people, talking with them, finding out what they think is important, listening to their language, asking questions that reveal their values, beliefs and assumptions, trying to make sense of the symbols and artefacts and behaviours. The researcher would need to collect data on the significant historical events of the course, the impact of the heroes on current thinking and the ways in which crises have been dealt with in the past. After much analysis and data collection the result could be a thick description of the culture of the course in the form of a case study (Robson 1993; Cohen and Manion 1994; Mertens 1998).

Sub-cultures in universities

The concept of culture is even more complicated when we consider that although an organisation may display a dominant culture they consist of subcultures. As one example, Frew (1997) citing the work of Burton Clarke describes academic culture as possibly

having four types of culture: discipline, profession, enterprise, and system with additional campus subcultures identified by Kuh and Whitt (Frew 1997) of student culture and administrative culture. Frew also states that Bergquist proposed four types of culture in higher education in the United States of America (collegiate, managerial, development and negotiating) where 'most faculty and administrative staff tend to embrace one of the four cultures, while the other three are always present and tend to interact with the dominant culture' (p178).

McNay (1995) suggests there are four cultures of universities that co-exist in most universities but with different balances among them. He names them collegium, bureaucracy, corporation, and enterprise, with key words of freedom, regulation, power and client respectively giving some indication as to their meaning. He claims universities tend to change over time and shift from one quadrant to another but not necessarily in a set order.

These latter examples are university wide models of culture, culture examined at an institutional level. Becher and Kogan (1992) propose a fourfold categorisation for higher education systems: central authority, institution, basic unit, and individual. The former refers to the various authorities that are responsible for resource allocation, overall planning and standard monitoring, often this is the government of the country or state. The basic unit means the smallest component that has a corporate life of their own. Becher and Kogan declare the basic unit as having certain characteristics, the main ones being 'that they have academic responsibility for an identifiable course or group of courses, that they have their own operating budgets (and some discretion in disposing of them) and that they exercise some element of choice in the recruitment of professional colleagues (and often also of students)' (p9). In many Australian universities this is aligned somewhere between 'school's' and 'course teams' with most 'school's' delivering more than one 'course'. In Becher and Kogan's terms the 'course' would be viewed as sub-units of the 'school', thereby confirming the 'course' as being the most pure 'basic unit'.

A course team is defined by Becher and Kogan as 'an interdisciplinary group of teachers who collectively provide a major component of the undergraduate curriculum' (p9). Trow (cited in Becher, 1992) states that basic units are especially important in the determination of professional values. Becher (1987) emphasises how the knowledge base of a discipline shapes the thought and behaviour within, that the disciplines will develop different ways of training and initiating new members, that they will in fact develop different cultures. Becher and Kogan (1992) suggest that the 'subcultural styles and epistemological traditions to which particular teaching units subscribe are a powerful determinant of their relationships within and outside the institution, of the curricular patterns which they adopt in their undergraduate programmes, and of the nature of their day-to-day processes of teaching and learning' (p88).

Conclusion

Organisational culture has an incredible function and is an incredible function as it is both product and process, it is both effect and cause. Evans (1996, p44) citing Bolman and Deal claims it 'represents the collective knowledge of our predecessors, and it is perpetually renewed as we initiate new members, who eventually initiate others, and so on'. Once a culture is established it provides the template for organisational learning as well as shaping people's behaviour, perception and understanding of events.

It is for these reasons that it is important in the investigation of tertiary students' perceptions of the fairness of educational assessment to include an examination of the cultural influence of the course that the students are studying. Further reading in the area of institutional ethnography (Smith 1987; Leavitt 1994; Henderson and Vesperi 1995; Smith 1999) has been conducted to extend the understanding of the researcher on the influence of culture on organisations. This suggests a different approach to understanding the influence of the culture of the course on the students' perceptions. Institutional ethnography is more 'in keeping' with grounded theory methodology, which aims to stay

'true' to the data, the words of the students, than the methods outlined in this paper. Institutional ethnography will be utilised in this study and a future paper is planned which will explain the method and methodology.

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