



Research Article

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Beyond Isomorphism in Social Organisations: Quality in Universities Through the Case of the Sapienza Service Charter

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Abstract

In recent decades, social organisations seem to be moving against the dominant representation of the 'isomorphism' in literature. In practice, they contemplate several paths simultaneously and on the cognitive level this is reflected in the presence of several intertwining theories. In this article we address the issue of quality as effectively representative of the hypothesis that the approach to organisations is never just one type, but instead reveals a combination of different dimensions and orientations, reflecting a pluralistic model. The interpretation of quality through the Service Charter – and, in particular, the case of the Service Charter of the Sapienza University of Rome – seems to clearly exemplify this assumption. Through the analysis of three elements in particular – the role of the external context, organisational learning and communication –, which can be considered as points of a possible strategy to focus on in order to improve the university's quality model, the intertwining of the above-mentioned perspectives will be accounted for, highlighting how organisations tend to move mainly between a cooperative and an institutionalist approach.

Keywords: organisations; isomorphism; quality; service charter

1. Introduction

The issue of quality may appear to exemplify a dynamic that runs counter to the currently dominant hypothesis of the 'isomorphism' of organisations. As is well known, this concept was proposed by Meyer and Rowan (1977) to indicate the processes through which organisations are driven to increasingly resemble one other (Bonazzi, 2002).

Whatever adjective one intends to attribute to this process – understood as *coercive*, in the case of external pressures that force the organisation to conform; *mimetic*, in the case of the activation of spontaneous imitative processes that are activated to cope with moments of uncertainty; or, finally, *normative*, in the case where similarity derives from the 'proven awareness of the superiority of new practices over old ones' (Bonazzi, 2002, p. 116; Powell and DiMaggio, 2002, p. 116) –, what appears important is that isomorphism can be interpreted according to three fundamental aspects of meaning and significance:

- The first and most immediate aspect is, as mentioned earlier, the *similarity between all organisations*;
- The second is the idea of organisations *adopting the same model*;

- Finally, adding a further meaning, the *univocality* of the model can also be understood as the *uniqueness* of the model adopted.

Therefore, according to the isomorphism hypothesis, organisations resemble each other and mostly adopt the same organisational model, which presents itself as *unique* within the organisation, with no room for the establishment of further models.

Starting from these assumptions, this article addresses the issue of quality, as it is effectively representative of the hypothesis according to which the approach to organisations is never only of one type (Antonella and Del Bene, 2021; Czarniawska, 2000; De Toni and Bastianon, 2019), but instead reveals a combination of different dimensions and orientations, just as the interpretation of quality, through the Service Charter – and, in particular, the case of the Service Charter of the Sapienza University of Rome –, helps to highlight.

The reality of the Sapienza case does indeed seem to exemplify a model of organisation that runs counter to this dominant representation.

2. Quality: Attempts at Definition

As is now well known, literature of various kinds – sociological, organisational, economic, to name but a few areas – has, over the years, questioned a great deal about what ‘quality’ is. Defining quality still does not appear to be a simple matter.

If we take what is probably the most widely used legal definition as a point of reference, i.e. that relating to the ISO 8402 standard, we can see that quality is defined as ‘the set of properties and characteristics of a good or service that give it the capacity to satisfy the expressed or implied needs of the customer/user’. Looking, on the other hand, at the panorama of social science scholars, there are multiple definitions (Rullani, 1992; Compagno, 1999):

- Quality as ‘the degree to which a specific product satisfies the needs of a specific consumer’, i.e. quality as value (Gilmore, 1974);
- Quality as ‘conformity to requirements’, i.e. as a characteristic (Crosby, 1979)
- Quality as a ‘relationship’. A relationship between an achievement and an expectation, as it is able to express the level of correspondence between the expectations of a customer/user and the product/service they buy or use;
- Quality as ‘direction’. Quality can be understood as a direction to the customer/user or to the market, if it is the result of an effort to meet the needs expressed by one’s customers/users or the market for products or services;
- Quality as an ‘expense’. Quality, or rather its pursuit, can be considered a cost if the monetary expenditure to adapt the production or service delivery system is highlighted, or it can be considered an investment where the benefit that its pursuit can bring in terms of both image and monetary returns is considered in perspective (Cecchini, 2015).

Although it is difficult to determine what can be defined as quality, it is, on the other hand, perhaps easier to define whether there is no quality in something (Pirsig, 1991). And whether quality is there or not depends on the role of ‘perception’. It is, therefore, the perception of quality that can lead to different ways of understanding this concept and interpreting its meaning. Therefore, rather than arriving at the definition of an *objectively* definable quality, it is probably easier to arrive at the idea of a *subjectively* definable quality. Somewhat as if, changing Nietzsche’s statement that one does not know facts, but only interpretations of facts, we were to say that one will never know the quality itself, as an objective element, assuming it exists, but always the interpretation of the quality, the subjective perception of the quality.

This multidimensionality in perceiving quality can depend on many factors and be related to elements such as:

- The nature of the product/service (a service offered by the university will have different characteristics from a product sold on the market by a company, not only in terms of its

intrinsic, and technical, characteristics, but above all in terms of the aims and objectives to which the service is addressed);

- The reference context (what is considered quality in one context may be considered poor quality in a different context or by another social actor);
- Expectations (the perception based on specific knowledge of the service, beliefs, values, emotions, information gathered through the media, friends, etc.);
- Needs at the time of assessment (think of the role of the 'social person' in sociology, i.e. the subject who is the bearer of needs – Mongardini, 1983).

David Garvin (1987) identified eight components of quality:

1. Performance, i.e. performance versus use;
2. Distinctive characteristics;
3. Reliability with respect to use or purpose;
4. Compliance with the law;
5. Durability over time;
6. After-sales service or delivery;
7. Appearance;
8. Perceived quality.

According to other perspectives, quality can be divided into five types – expected, designed, delivered, perceived,¹ and compared – depending on the point of view of the analysis.

Beyond the individual definitions, what emerges as relevant is that there appears to be no 'quality paradigm', but there are 'many small fragments of quality applied and described by placing the emphasis now on the process and instrumental aspect, now on the aspect of corporate culture and behavioural change' (Compagno, 1999, p. 3). The concept of quality is, therefore, adapted to the contingencies from time to time.

3. A Few Words about the Service Charter

The reference to quality is strong in many of the policy documents of complex organisations and first and foremost also of universities (think of the Anti-Corruption Plan or the Performance Plan). An element that is considered an indicator of the level of quality present within organisations is the so-called Service Charter. This is a document through which each service provider makes a series of commitments to its users regarding its services, the way in which they are provided and the related quality standards. With the Service Charter, the organisation also informs the user of the protection arrangements provided for.² The introduction of this document is also based on the need to create organisations that are more participatory, in closer contact with the various stakeholders.

The definition of service quality standards implies many different operations, both internally and externally to the organisation. On the one hand, after the top management has established the mission of the service, it must be disseminated, first of all, to those who work within the same organisation and to those who will deal with the same service, also specifically establishing the

¹ The issues of expected and perceived quality are closely linked, as is well known, to the evaluation of the services offered by the university - as well as many other organisations - and customer satisfaction. On these aspects, see, by way of example only: Cronin and Taylor (1992); De Iaco et al. (2018); Franceschini (2001; 2002); Tomei (2004); Mels (1997); Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985; 1991); Schvaneveldt, Enkawa and Miyakawa (1991); Teas (1993); Zeithaml (1988).

² The introduction of the Service Charter as an instrument of protection for citizens came with the Prime Minister's Directive of 27 January 1994 'Principles for the provision of public services' (<http://qualitapa.gov.it/sitoarcheologi-co/relazioni-con-i-cittadini/utilizzare-gli-strumenti/carta-dei-servizi/>). Subsequently, (Italian) Decree Law no. 163 of 12 May 1995, converted into Law no. 273 of 11 July 1995, 'Urgent measures for simplifying administrative procedures and improving the efficiency of public administrations', dictated the procedural framework for improving of the quality of services, entrusting the Prime Minister with the task of establishing, by his own measure, the general reference outlines of the relevant charters.

objectives and results to be achieved. Externally, meanwhile, it is necessary to inform customers/users precisely of the level and characteristics of the service they can expect to receive, and to consolidate its image through promotion. Finally, it is important to offer the possibility of checking the service and complaining/intervening if it does not meet the announced standards.

Far from being simply a policy document, therefore, the Service Charter implies the implementation of real processes that affect the entire organisation, in this case the university.

The Service Charter of the Sapienza University of Rome is addressed to the university's main users: families, future students, current students, graduates, teaching staff (including international staff), TA staff, companies, public and private bodies, the community and the territory. In providing its services, the university is committed to respecting and ensuring the general principles identified in the (Italian) Prime Minister's directive of 27 January 1994: equality, impartiality, continuity, participation, right to choose, efficiency and effectiveness.

A factsheet is drawn up for each service and divided into two sections, with the first containing information of immediate use to the user, and the second containing the service quality standards that the offices undertake to pursue. These factsheets are supplemented, revised and/or updated annually or whenever changes occur that are relevant to users. The second section, in particular, contains the four dimensions considered fundamental for assessing the actual quality of the services provided, in accordance with Civit Resolution 88/2010:

- Accessibility, i.e. the ability to guarantee access to the services provided to all potentially interested users;
- Timeliness, i.e. the time between the user's request for the service (or the administration's promise of the service) and its actual delivery;
- Transparency, i.e. the ease with which the user (and, more generally, all stakeholders) can find, acquire and understand the information needed to be able to make the best use of the service they are interested in;
- Effectiveness, i.e. the ability of the service to achieve its objectives, in terms of meeting the needs and requirements identified by the administration, including the expectations of users and key stakeholders.

Table 1: Public Service Card

Service	Infostud Technical Assistance
Brief description	Technical assistance service for students on the Infostud platform to provide information on the data recorded in the system, support in using the platform, and the resolution of technical problems.
Users	X Families X Future students X Degree course students X Postgraduate students X International students X Graduates X Lecturers X Technical and administrative staff
Department	InfoSapienza centre
Supervisor or contact person	Matteo Righetti (Head of Application Services) https://servizi.uniroma1.it/Curriculum/curricula
Contact details	Email address: infostud@uniroma1.it Telephone: 0649912995 (only for lecturers and technical and administrative staff)
Public opening hours	The service is only accessible online during the following hours: 08:30 - 16:00 (Mon, Wed) 08:30 - 16:30 (Tue, Thu) 08:30 - 14:00 (Fri)
Delivery methods	X Telephone X Online X Email/Certified email
How to lodge a complaint	By email
Useful links	https://web.uniroma1.it/infosapienza/assistenza-tecnica-infostud

Table 2: Quality standards

Dimensions	Sub-dimensions	Indicator description	Indicator formula	Programmed value
Accessibility ³	Physical accessibility	Public opening hours	Number of hours per week	Counter access not provided for
	Multi-channel accessibility	Alternative ways of accessing the service	Number of channels for service enquiries and/or service delivery	3
Timeliness ⁴	Timeliness	Delivery of the service	Maximum time from request to service delivery	72 hours
Transparency ⁵	Publication on the website	Information updates	Number of days needed to update information on the website	2 days
		Presence of information on possible user charges	Yes/No	No (no user charges)
Effectiveness ⁶	Compliance	Presence of predefined forms	Number of procedures for which predefined forms are available/total procedures delivered	Forms not provided for
	Reliability	Ability to maintain level of effectiveness throughout the year	Number of complaints received/year	<10
		Responding to complaints	Maximum time between receipt of complaint and response to user	72 hours

Source: https://web.uniroma1.it/trasparenza/sites/default/files/allegati/CINFO_Infostud.pdf

By benchmarking the various Italian universities it can be seen that the Service Charter model remains more or less the same. Some universities have incorporated the regulations more extensively, adding additional criteria for the evaluation of services, while others have simply conformed to the model proposed by the central level.

Beyond the individual differences, the interesting feature concerns how much and what this tool can reveal in terms of the organisational processes that characterise the life of the organisation being analysed. Quality can enter the organisation episodically, but it can also completely shape its structural, managerial and cultural changes. For example, as will be highlighted later, by entering explicitly into the university's system of objectives, or by entering into the incentive mechanisms; or again, by entering into the common and shared language and codes that facilitate organisational communication. Many different interpretations of quality, therefore, in practice, which correspond, in theory, to different approaches and cognitive paths.

Through the analysis of three elements – the role of the external context, organisational learning and communication – that can be considered as points of a possible strategy to focus on in order to improve the university's quality model, the intertwining of the aforementioned perspectives will be accounted for, highlighting how organisations tend to move, mainly, between a cooperative and an institutionalist approach.

4. Quality and External Context

The pursuit of quality within organisations increasingly implies a new method of relating between the

³Ability to guarantee access to the services provided to all potentially interested users.

⁴Time between the user's request for the service (or the administration's promise of service) and the actual delivery of the service, which can be broken down as maximum service delivery time, response time, frequency of delivery (in the case of a repetitive service).

⁵Ease for the user (and, more generally, for all stakeholders) to find, acquire and understand the information needed to make the best use of the service they are interested in.

⁶Capacity of the service to achieve its objectives, in terms of meeting the needs and requirements identified by the administration, including the expectations of users and key stakeholders.

organisation – the university – and its environment. When the strategy of quality enters organisations, this does not merely translate into a technical choice, limited to defining service or process standards or control methods. Instead, this entry implies a process of evolution of the university organisation, its organisational mechanisms, its technology, and its relations with users.

This confirms that quality is not a static element. Instead, it is based on a real evolutionary path, which also concerns its instruments. A path strongly conditioned by the social, cultural and economic context, in which communication and relational aspects play a decisive role.

Looking at the course of adoption of quality standards by the university organisation, it is possible to note how, at least in some cases, the acquisition of standards would seem to depend not on a rational choice by the organisation, but rather on its institutional adaptation. This adaptation aims at seeking or raising the degree of conformity to a set of widely accepted and shared behavioural rules, in order to consolidate social and institutional consensus. The university thus appears as the result of a process of incremental adaptation to the institutional environment or, in other words, as the result of a process of institutionalisation resulting from the action of the social relations that are activated within the system in which the university is immersed. As is known, the organisation's behaviour is influenced by the regulations, norms and customs of the sector in which it operates and also by the culture, values, ideas and implicit conventions present in the reference environment. These elements also delimit and condition decision-making processes. Many organisational decisions, from this point of view, would therefore not respond so much to the logic of satisfying internal organisational needs or to criteria of efficiency and effectiveness, but rather to the logic of external adaptation, which will lead organisations to increasingly resemble each other in their various aspects. This process also seems to be activated in connection with the introduction of the element of quality within the university organisation, which is driven by this logic of adaptation. In choosing between alternatives of action, therefore, it will prefer the one that most conforms to an already institutionalised norm of behaviour, regardless of its convenience. This does not mean that there is no decision-making autonomy, but simply that it moves within symbolic schemes that serve as guides and points of reference. This praxis, which takes place more or less unconsciously, translates, on the cognitive theoretical level, into that process of isomorphism, which the institutionalist approach highlighted at the end of the 1970s.

Today, quality is sought after by most, if not all organisations, albeit with sometimes significant differences. There seems to be a kind of 'race for quality', which not even the university as an organisation is shying away from. We would probably not find it difficult to see the theme of quality interpreted in this light as a true 'rationalised myth', imaginary beliefs made plausible by a logical discourse (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Of course, this is not the same as claiming that quality is an imaginary belief, but if, as Meyer and Rowan pointed out, the rationalised myth fosters the creation of new fields of activity in which old and new organisations race to satisfy the business fuelled by the myth itself, this can probably also apply to the theme of quality, which increasingly fuels the race to achieve it.

Quality, therefore, takes shape in the practice of organisations through their organisational field. If the characteristics of an organisation are also defined by the environment, then it is appropriate for the university organisation, like other organisations, to be contextualised within an organisational field.⁷

While it is true that the university as an organisation can be subject to pressure from external powers (Selznick, 1948; 1949; 1957), it is equally true that, with an appropriate level of leadership, it

⁷ The latter, as is known, is made up of those organisations that collectively constitute a recognised field of institutional life (e.g. the other organisations that are similar in terms of objectives and services provided, in this case the other universities). The notion of field denotes the existence of a community of organisations that share a common system of meanings and whose members interact with each other frequently, more intensively than they do with actors outside the field. The reference environment is here considered, in a manner appropriate to the analysis in question, in a broad sense, also encompassing organisations and actors that are institutionally different, such as the state, public bodies, and so on.

can itself become a subject capable of exerting pressure on the external environment and inducing it to conform to its goals. In this case, as Selznick (1957) points out, the organisation is an institution. In this direction, where the university manifests itself in practice as an adaptive system, it is possible to note that the charter of services – an instrument *of* and *for* quality – represents, at a concrete level, an instrument that performs those functions through which the system itself is kept alive:

- Contributes to the stability of internal lines of authority and communication;
- Contributes to the continuity of the policy and the sources of its definition;
- Contributes to maintaining the consistency of the university's image with regard to its meaning and role.

Also not to be underestimated is the role of leadership when the organisation decides to introduce the topic of 'quality'. The service charter is often the instrument through which the university – but, in this sense, also all other organisations – can concretely reinforce a specific identity and convey certain values. Just as Selznick (1957) states, when he recalls that, while in instrumental organisations, administrative efficiency and rationally oriented procedures count, in institutions it is important to define and propose values, to have an identity and a project.

While it is true, therefore, that a certain dynamic of isomorphism seems to be present within the university organisation, where there is talk of 'quality', it is equally true that this does not translate into the presence of a univocal 'quality model' for all universities and unique within the same organisation.

5. Quality and Organisational Learning

Quality represents a mechanism that, in practice, can generate organisational learning and enrich the organisation's heritage of intangible resources. Moreover, it represents an important instrument of interaction between two types of knowledge, the tacit and contextual one, on the one hand, strongly rooted in individual experience; and the explicit one, on the other, contained in organisational artefacts, i.e. procedures, patterns and models. In order for learning to take place, appropriate organisational reinforcement systems must be developed. From this point of view, quality, by its very complex nature, acts in an ambiguous manner: on the one hand, for its generation, it requires innovative behaviour and often discontinuity of operational practices, on the other hand, in its application phase it requires stability, repetitiveness, measurability and controllability.

The dual nature of quality often leads organisations towards two different types of objectives: a control objective and a learning objective. This duality invokes opposing organisational needs: on the one hand the need for stability and reliability, on the other the need to explore and innovate. There is, in other words, a *trade-off* between stability and innovation.

This is an example of the process that from a theoretical point of view can be defined as 'recalcitrance of the tools of action' (Selznick, 1948; Bonazzi, 2022) and that the institutionalist approach has highlighted well. Recalcitrance stems from the fact that structures created to achieve a given end have self-preservation needs that may conflict with that end, as is the case when the organisation decides to embark on a quality-driven path.

The following table shows, by way of example only, a number of different and opposing quality orientations – control orientation and learning orientation – that can occur in organisational practices and that can also be observed in the university organisation, characterising them with reference to three fundamental aspects: user, process and learning.

Table 3: Quality guidelines to be applied in the university

Dimensions	Control orientation	Learning orientation
User	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• monitor and assess user needs• respond to user needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• stimulate the definition of new needs• surprise the user

Dimensions	Control orientation	Learning orientation
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> optimise and improve existing resources and capabilities increase control and reliability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> explore new resources and capabilities increase variety, flexibility and learning
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> elementary learning (<i>single loop</i>): stability of standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> complex learning (<i>double loop</i>): development of new standards and parameters

From the table it emerges how the university is called upon to balance the various aspects, generating a situation of equilibrium. It is the dynamic combination of quality and organisational structure that stimulates, in different ways and directions, the process of enriching the university's intangible resources.

6. Quality and Communication

The learning orientation highlights the importance of the aspect related to communication, both internal within the organisation and external towards users. Working together, learning to communicate, knowing mutual expectations and learning to trust are elements that are known to be of decisive importance. This seems particularly appropriate when talking about quality in organisations. Quality, in these cases, draws meanings from the context: it is a quality that is appropriate to that specific situation, i.e. it takes on value from those specific contextual relationships and is, therefore, a quality that is difficult to use for other purposes.

This aspect may apparently represent a limitation, because quality is created on shared experience and what is possible in that specific organisation, through physical contiguity and cultural, social, organisational homogeneity, is not possible when value chains expand territorially and dimensionally. On closer inspection, in reality, a correct understanding and interpretation of the variety of quality management models – and the consequent effectiveness of the model adopted – should take place not by reference to generic quality ideal types, but by taking into account the consistency of the changes made with respect to the objectives set when implementing quality-related objectives. This makes it possible to develop a quality that, yes, can find inspiration in the models proposed by other universities, but which at the same time can be unique and innovative at the level of ideal and practice.

In all these cases, universities attach importance, more or less unwittingly, to the 'human factor'. They move towards a cooperative approach that, based on the 'School of Human Relations', but with significant differences, conceives the organisation 'in an opposing way to the 'classical school', that is, to the conception of Weber and Taylor' (Iannone, 2019, p. 125). 'The idea that the organisation is not a rational machine that proceeds exclusively through rules and procedures, or top-down programmes, that descend from above, but through natural, spontaneous and adaptive processes, determined by the subjects that operate in it, can be said to be a now certain and consolidated acquisition in the reference literature at least since the 1930s. Since this time, as is known, the image of organisation as a *machine* in which people have, at most, the role of cogs in an increasingly mechanical and artificial wheel, has gradually given way to the idea of organisation as an *organism*, made up, if anything, of cells, such as the people and groups that make them up' (Iannone, 2019, p. 125; Morgan, 1993).

This approach makes it possible to shift the focus of the analysis from individual transactions, understood in the neoclassical view as isolated events characterised by the presence of anonymous parties, to long-term interactive relationships between the university and the users. Thus, in the field of the Service Charter, usually neglected factors come into play in the provision of a service, such as the trust relationship between the parties, the mutual involvement and the temporal perspective of the relationship. Through this approach it is also possible to achieve an overall reduction in transaction costs – service provision – due to the joint effect of:

- Increased reputation and trust;
- Reduction of opportunistic behaviour;
- Reduction of information needs.

The variables indicated then present reciprocal interdependencies between them, capable of systemically enhancing the positive effects exerted by quality on the variables considered individually.

If the investment in quality is not just a formal choice or constraint for the university, but a true strategic option, then reputation and trust, not only institutional but also interpersonal, are enhanced through the provision of recognised and appreciated differential quality. As is known, reputational and trust mechanisms, when activated, again impact on the dimension of transaction costs, reducing information needs and consequently transaction costs, both *ex ante* and *ex post*. In this way, virtuous circles of reciprocal and positive conditioning between relational variables are established.

In this sense, quality also produces positive effects with respect to any opportunistic behaviour that may arise within the university. Indeed, compliance with standard procedures reduces the room for discretion, while still imposing minimum standards. And so attempting to draw up Service Charters that are as detailed as possible and provide for a well-codified procedure for every aspect of the organisation's life meets that need, as highlighted well by Crozier (1963), to control as much as possible the 'margins of uncertainty' (Bonazzi, 2002, p. 84) present within the organisation, because that is where power lurks. Hence also the need to make processes transparent, to reduce phenomena of *mismanagement*.

It is now common knowledge, both at the level of organisational practices and theoretical backgrounds, that a good internal communication system generates numerous advantages:

- First of all, sharing as much information and data as possible enables the organisation to achieve very high levels of efficiency and effectiveness, with the positive effect of achieving its objectives in a less costly manner.
- Indirectly, being aware of the activities undertaken by the organisation, even if only superficially, increases the sense of belonging to the organisation, with a positive effect on the internal climate and organisational well-being.
- It also makes it possible to expand what Barnard defines as the 'area of indifference'. According to the theory of the organisation as a cooperative system, there are two personalities: the individual personality and the organisational personality. However much individuals come to identify with the organisation they belong to, they will never do so completely, because they will always retain individual, personal motives that go beyond what the organisation requires. If you think of the university, you can see that this is true for the university staff (professors, researchers, administrators, and so on) as well as for the students. Each member has personal motives and no matter how strong the sense of belonging to the institution, this belonging will never be complete, it will never be total.

In summary, then, communication impacts quality in several ways. And it also enables other goals to be achieved. If quality is an end in itself, it is also a means. A means that enables the university to increase its user base, to obtain more funds at national and supranational level, for example, to improve its image and other related effects. It therefore seems plausible to say that quality represents the end of a previous action (which hinges on the service charter, for example) and a means for the next action. In other words, it is that 'means-end continuum' analysed by Simon (1947).

These areas relate to the fundamental function of management within the organisation. Recalling Barnard's statement in *The Functions of the Manager* (1938), the three functions a manager must fulfil are:

1. Ensure a communication system;
2. Ensure a smooth flow of resources;

3. Establish the purposes of the organisation.

The communication aspects have a much more preponderant importance in this sphere than the decision-making aspects (Bonazzi, 2002, 68). Thanks to an effective internal communication system it is possible to strengthen the sense of belonging and participation in the university by using it to disseminate and promote those aspects that directly concern the organisation's vision.

But, as can be easily guessed by now, external communication to users also has its importance with regard to the services the university offers. With good communication it is possible, to name but a few aspects:

- Make the university, its services and projects known;
- Facilitate access to services and related documents;
- Know and detect the needs of users;
- Improve the effectiveness and efficiency of services;
- Foster processes of social, economic and cultural development.

7. Conclusions

As we have attempted to highlight in this paper, the topic of quality within the university organisation is expressed, in practice, in multiple paths that take place simultaneously with one another and, in its theoretical implications, the topic encompasses multiple cognitive approaches. From the analysis of the organisational conditions of quality generation within the totality of the university processes, which was carried out, it emerged that there is currently no 'one best way' of quality in this field. On the contrary, the combination of different approaches to the same topic, considered according to a logic not of mutual exclusion, but of integration, can prove to be beneficial for quality-related objectives.

The analysis carried out therefore highlights the presence of an organisational dynamic that seems to run counter to the prevailing hypothesis of isomorphism. Although with respect to the practical and theoretical modalities inherent to quality, universities tend to resemble each other, this does not translate into the preponderance of one model over all others, nor into the existence of a single model within the same university. If, on the one hand, the change that leads to isomorphism may result from pressures exerted by institutions to conform to certain standards, on the other hand, change may also be caused by other reasons and result, for example, from the 'creation of new organisational forms that gradually replace the old ones' (Bonazzi, 2002, p. 152). In this case, 'technical and social developments that modify the environment of a given organisational population' (Bonazzi, 2002, p. 152) come into play, causing a part of the population to succumb, as 'structural inertia' renders it incapable of change; a part manages to adapt and, above all, other units are born 'to take advantage of the new opportunities' (Bonazzi, 2002, p. 152). It follows that, in this case, isomorphism is not the consequence of a process of imitation, but of *selection*.

The result of the competition thus combines both a process of isomorphism and a process of *organisational pluralism* (Hannan and Freeman, 1977). Both aspects seem to coexist within the university organisation.

The use of different practices and different theories allows organisations today to move in several directions. For this reason, the perspectives adopted in this work were necessarily multiple, to take into account, for example, both the university's relations with the external environment and its relations with the internal environment.

Sapienza's internal quality chain intersects and reconnects with external chains, generating true network quality systems, projected from internal relations to external relations and synergistically, from these, to the internal relations of other units and other actors in a given field. This occurs because:

- Quality can extend and improve the university's system of external relations by flanking the mechanism of mutual adaptation linked to the sharing of experience bases with mechanisms

based on shared standards linked to common languages and codes;

- The quality is influenced by the basic organisational context, the characteristics of the knowledge bases, and the routines and experiences of the university;
- Contextual factors, institutional and relational, competitive and cooperative, internal and external to the university, constitute an important exogenous driver for improvement.

Beyond the various practical and theoretical differences that can be observed with respect to the topic under analysis, a common thread seems to unite all possible interpretations and it is given by the meaning that quality assumes for the university organisation – although this reasoning seems extendable to other organisations as well. Only when quality does not have a meaning for the organisation that is exclusively instrumental to mere compliance with the regulations on the adoption of the service charter and quality standards, then quality proves capable of asserting itself beyond its formal aspect.

In the case of instrumental adoption, quality may end up representing not a strategy, but a constraint. It superficially modifies the system and generates minimum standards that are adequate with respect to the norm, but lower than those required to create quality as a strength.

Then, perhaps, the organisation's ability to 'do quality' will reside precisely in pursuing multiple directions with multiple theoretical approaches, capable of overcoming the conception of quality as a mere synonym of standards, to embrace a more complex meaning. A meaning that in some respects is even more contradictory, since, as Crozier recalls, 'in reality there are always unpredictable situations and it is not possible to trace subjects back to predetermined behaviour as if they were bees in a beehive' (Bonazzi, 2002, 84), but precisely for this reason is more complete.

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