



# Exploring organisational culture in Saudi Arabian higher education

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## Interim report

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## *The relevance of organisational culture for organisational performance*

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Since the 1980s researchers have started to pay serious attention to the concept of organisational culture (e.g. Ouchi 1981). Through this work it has become clear that organisational culture is one of the factors explaining organisational performance. Organisational culture concerns what is valued, dominant leadership styles, language and symbols, habits and norms, and procedures and rules in practice. Cameron and Quinn (2006) report on many scientific studies that demonstrate a positive relationship between dimensions of organisational culture and effectiveness.<sup>1</sup> Organisational culture also has an impact on individuals (morale, commitment, productivity, etc.), which in turn also affects organisational effectiveness.

Despite the progress outlined above, organisational culture still is a contested and unclear concept. Cultural aspects are not very noticeable, as they concern intangible taken-for-granted scripts and values. Most of the time they only become detectable when changes in the organisation or its environments are taken place. Organisational culture is probably best experienced when one moves to another (place in the) organisation, and these newcomers are surprised that things are done in a slightly different way, even when task description or formal rules are more or less the same.

In the literature on management and organisation studies there are many definitions of organisational culture. One of the leading researchers in the field, Hofstede (1994, p.4), defines culture as the “collective programming of spirits which separates the member of a group or a category of persons from others”. We see the organisational culture as the ‘personality’ of an organisation, a pattern of shared basic assumptions – values, beliefs and codes of practices – that have emerged in an organisation to achieve its mission and to solve its problems. Over time useful behaviours and values become institutionalised as part of cultural traditions within an organisation. It serves as a ‘normative glue’ that holds an organisation or group together (Tichy (1982). It is “the way organisational members do things around here”. In a more formal sense, for this project organisational culture is defined as:

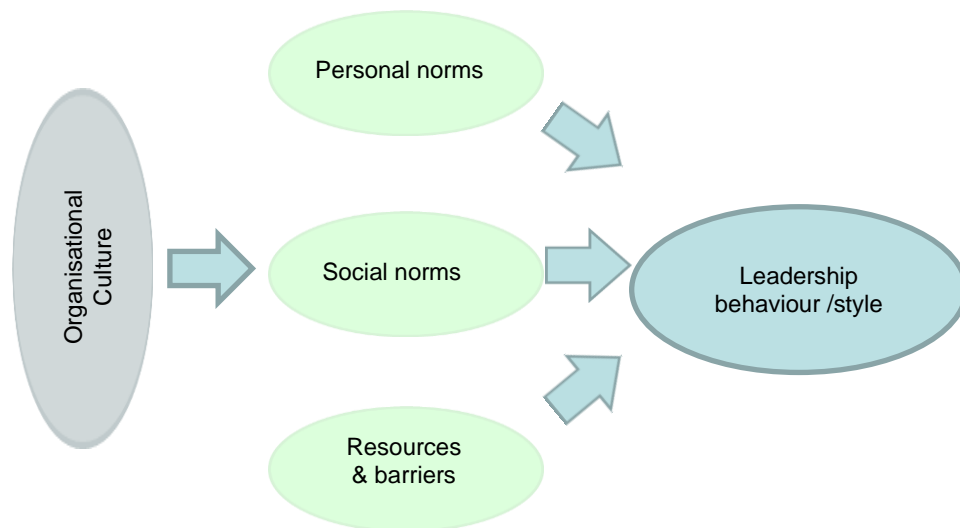
*a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group learns as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems. It is about beliefs, values and learned ways of coping with experience that have developed during the course of an organization’s history, and which tend to be manifested in its material arrangements and in the behaviours of its members.*

Though an organisation may have a culture of its own, we should also acknowledge that within organisations subcultures exist that distinguish one organisational unit from another.

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<sup>1</sup> See K.S. Cameron and R.E. Quinn (2006) Diagnosing and changing organizational culture, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Appendix A.

The focus in our project is on leadership styles in higher education institutions. Point of departure is the competing values framework, developed by Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1983). In this framework eight different leadership roles have been distinguished. We have argued that these leadership styles can be explained by three determinants: the personal norm, the social norm and constraints and enablers.<sup>2</sup> This conceptualisation of styles, norms and barriers is based on the reasoned action approach, developed by the social psychologists Fishbein and Ajzen.<sup>3</sup> They argue that culture, or cultural context, has an impact on personal and social beliefs, and consequently indirectly an effect on leadership styles. In other words, if we intend to understand leadership and the underlying beliefs then we should be interested in the organisational culture of Saudi Arabian higher education institutions. In the remainder of this paper we will first further conceptualise organisational culture, then operationalize this concept, and finally present a tool to investigate the organisational culture of higher education institutions.



### *The concept of organisational culture*

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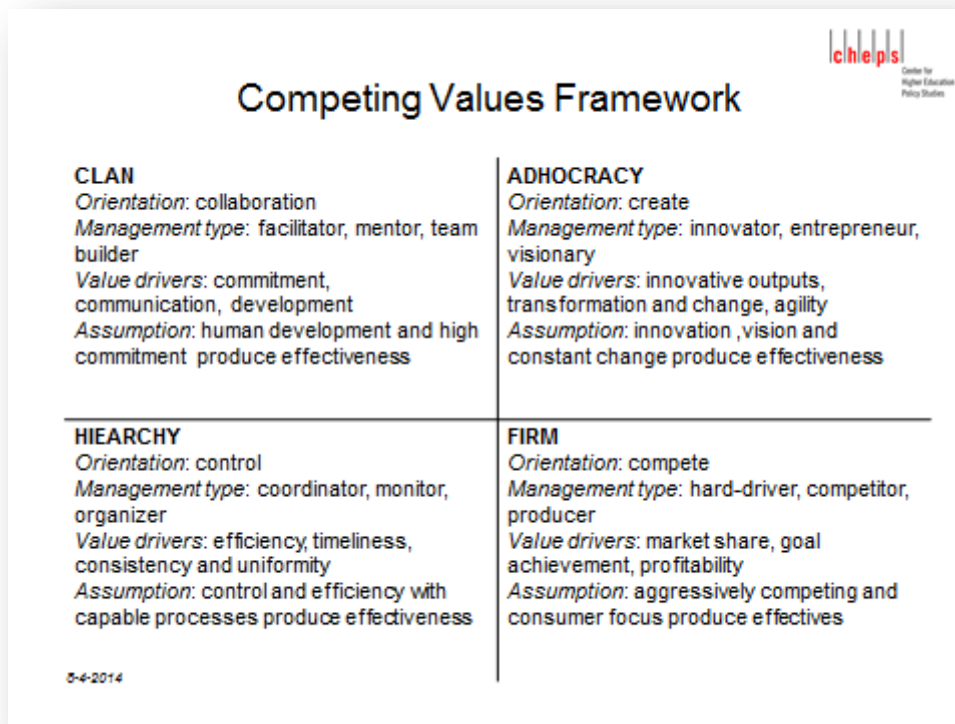
Taking our definition as the point of departure we should still realise that there are many different ways to conceptualise and to map organisational culture. Organisational culture is broad and comprises a complex set of factors. Cameron and Quinn (2006) developed an instrument to measure organisational culture that is based on the competing values framework (commonly referred to as OCAI – Organisational Culture Assessment Instrument). This framework is useful to investigate and understand a wide variety of organisational phenomena. Based on two dimensions they present four distinct clusters or sets of organisational effectiveness indicators (Cameron and Quinn 2006, p. 35).

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<sup>2</sup> That is why leadership styles, personal norms, social norms and barriers are the key components of the survey.

<sup>3</sup> See M. Fishbein and I. Ajzen (2010) Predicting and changing behavior. The reasoned action approach. New York: Taylor & Francis Group.

The two dimensions are: 1) flexibility (discretion, dynamism) versus stability (order and control), and 2) internal orientation (integration and unity) versus external orientation (differentiation and rivalry). The four clusters that stem from the two dimensions are: 1) the clan (flexible, internal), 2) the adhocracy (flexible, external), 3) the market (stability, external), and 4) the hierarchy (stability, internal). The four clusters or types of organisation are distinct in various ways, including their culture (set of underlying values). See below.



To diagnose the organisational culture Cameron and Quinn (2006) developed an instrument with six dimensions, each measured by 4 items (i.e. 24 items in total).<sup>4</sup> The dimensions are:

- Dominant characteristics (type of organisation)
- Organisational leadership (type of leadership)
- Management of employees (management values such as teamwork, risk taking, competitiveness)
- Organisational glue (what binds the organisation(al) (members)
- Strategic emphasis (human development, new resources, achievement, stability)
- Criteria of success (e.g. commitment, uniqueness, market share, efficiency)

As far as we are concerned, and based on our experiences, the OCAI instrument is not very informative and helpful in a higher education context. The dimensions and the items have overlap, and distinctions between them are not very clear. More importantly however, organisational leadership is one of the culture dimensions in the OCAI; given that leadership is the key dependent variable in our project ('mapping leadership styles') including this as a cultural dimension compromises

<sup>4</sup> OCAI – Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument.

the conceptual framework of the project. Therefore we have decided not to use this instrument but to opt for an instrument with slightly different dimensions and items, although several of them, obviously given the outcomes of empirically validated research to date, are rather similar to the items used in the OCAI (as one can see below).

In investigating the relationship between cultural values and media use in telecommunication, Rowe and Struck (1999)<sup>5</sup> identify seven dimensions of cultural values (based on the work of cultural and organisational theorists such as Hofstede, Burns and Stalker, and Lawrence and Lorsch).<sup>6</sup> The four items give an indication of the meaning of the seven dimensions:

- Reactivity
  - o Preferring action / acting quickly (+)
  - o Being quick to take advantage of an opportunity which arises (+)
  - o Not leaping in without thought (reflecting) (-)
  - o Analysing the situation before taking action (-)
- Entrepreneurship
  - o Willing to take risks (+)
  - o In order to succeed you have to dare (+)
  - o Being careful and trying to minimise risk (-)
  - o Taking precautions to avoid surprises (-)
- Innovation
  - o Looking for progress and new ideas (+)
  - o Being open to change (+)
  - o Preserve what is because it has always worked (-)
  - o Wishing to avoid ruptures and changes which can disturb the work process (-)
- Individualism
  - o Seeking a compromise in the interest of the group (+)
  - o Being sociable and fitting with the group (+)
  - o Insisting on your own personality rather than adopting to the group (-)
  - o Giving priority to personal goals (-)
- Task-orientation
  - o Working hard and achieving set targets is essential for our well-being (+)
  - o A financial reward beats an increase in leisure time (+)
  - o Valuing the contributions and the qualities of each individual and never ignoring the human factor (-)
  - o Respecting the rights of the individual and their personal dignity (-)
- Flexibility
  - o Being able to adapt procedures to the situation (+)
  - o Doing without ceremony and formality (+)
  - o A well thought through organisation ensures a good use of resources (-)

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<sup>5</sup> F. Rowe and D. Struck (1999) Cultural values, media richness and telecommunications use in an organization, *Accounting Management and Information Technologies*, 9, pp. 161-192. They follow a logic that is based on the analysis of C.A. O'Reilly, J. Chatman, and D.F. Caldwell (1991) People and organizational culture: a profile comparison approach to assessing person-organization fit. *Academy of Management Journal*, 34, 3, pp.487-516.

<sup>6</sup> See also B.C.M.C. Brouwer (2001) Culture and the theory of constraints. Exploring cultural values and organisational design parameters, University of Amsterdam: Faculty of Economics and Econometrics.

- Respecting rules and regulations avoids many problems (-)
- Hierarchical distance
  - Not avoiding conflicts with superiors (+)
  - Everybody has the same rights irrespective of their formal position (+)
  - Conforming to the point of view of a superior avoids conflict (-)
  - Those who have more responsibility have the right to certain advantages (-)

Note that for each dimension two items have a priori been correlated positively (+) and two negatively (-).

The blend of the seven dimensions, depending on the *perception* of the organisational members, configures an organisational culture. This means that it is the set of beliefs and values as seen through the eyes of the organisational members. It is their view on their situation. Because organisational members have different positions and interact with different persons their perception of organisational values and routines can plausibly differ. The perceived culture, therefore, is likely to vary across organisations, across groups within an organisation and across individuals. Despite the differences in perception within an organisation or within groups, there are common cultural values that make them (more) different from other organisations and groups. In the context of our study this means that for instance the culture of the school of engineering may be (somewhat) different from the culture of the school of architecture. And university managers and administrators may have different beliefs systems than faculty members. The paradox, however, is that even when various groups within an organisation perceive different routines and habits, they still feel closer to each other than to those of other organisations.<sup>7</sup>

#### *The instrument: the Cultural Values Card game*

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To provide a description of the organisational culture, respondents will be asked to rank the 28 items (Q sort with balanced block design) identified by Rowe and Struck (1999). Q sort is a method to gather subjective information in a reliable way. The principle is that subjective statements are relative and should be assessed comparatively. The respondents receive a set of statements that they must rank based on a particular criterion (e.g. importance, relevance, applicability). The ranking (the Q sort) represents the perception of the respondent.

In our pilot each respondent (a dean, support dean or chair) received a deck of 28 cards. Each card contained a statement. A statement refers to one particular 'cultural value'; a value that in the perception of the respondents is, or is not, 'common practice' in the university. Each respondent had to assess to what extent the statements reflect or indicate the current state of the university. While all cultural values may be present, or absent, in the eyes of the respondent some of them will be more, or less, characteristic for the university. They thus had to rank the 28 cultural values: *To what extent are the statements correct for, typical of or applicable to your university?*

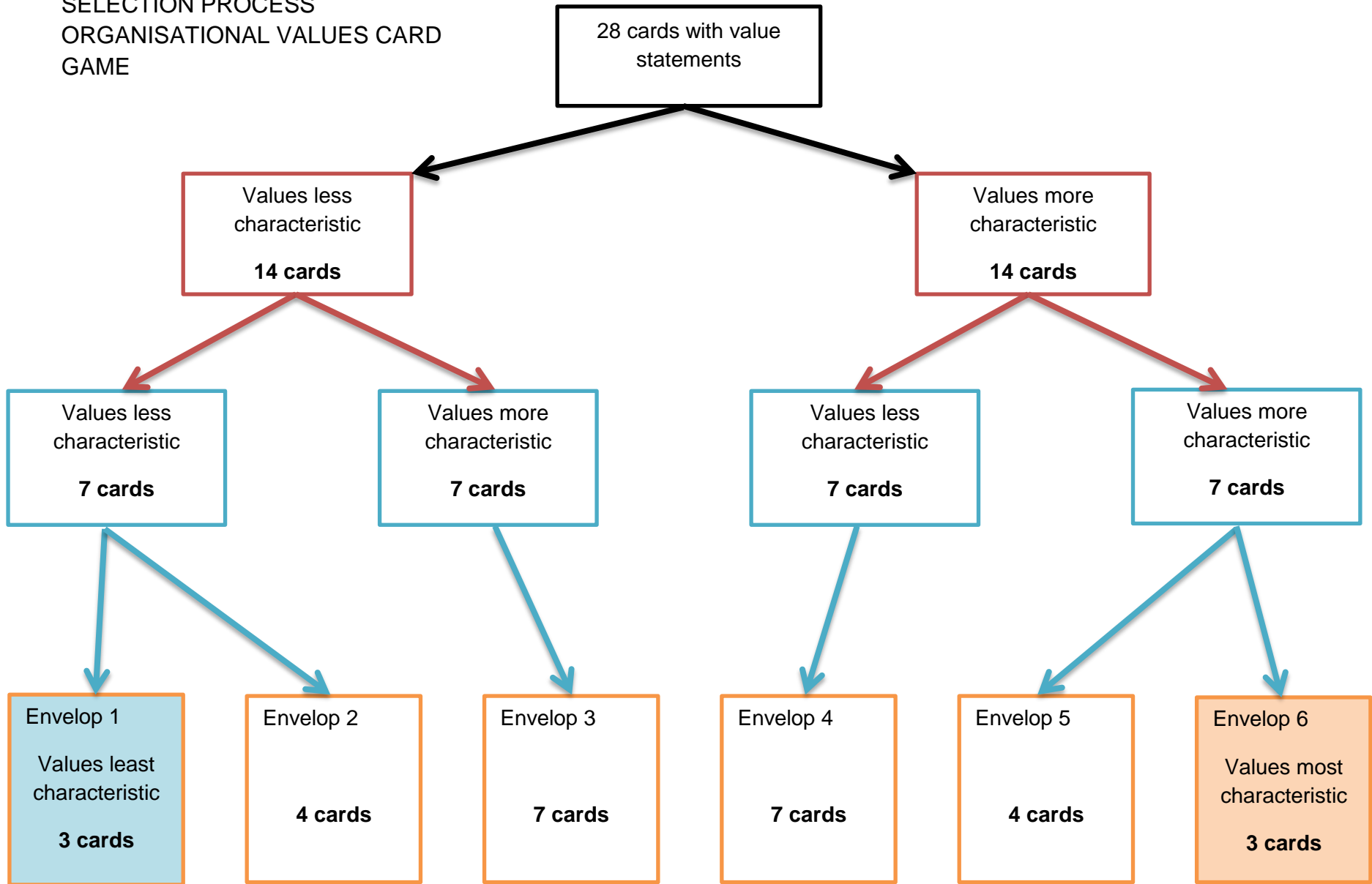
The statements (cards) have to be ranked (compared) in the following way. First, the respondents were asked to divide the 28 cards in two equal parts (14 cards each), one consisting of the most

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<sup>7</sup> Although this is true in a general sense, the situation for professionals such as academics can be rather different. According to Clark, a leading scholar in higher education studies, academics certainly shares values and habits (having the same culture) but this culture is scientific discipline based more than organisation-based. We leave this discussion aside in this paper.

characteristic values of the university and one consisting of the least characteristic of the university. Next, by the same logic each part had again to be divided in equal parts (this rounds means in total there will be 4 stacks of seven cards). Finally, the respondents were asked to divide the two extreme parts in three and four cards. This means that at the end there are 6 stacks (that we call 'envelopes'), containing respectively 3, 4, 7, 7, 4, 3 cards (ranging from values least characteristic for the university to the values most characteristic for the university). See the figure below for a summary.

SELECTION PROCESS  
ORGANISATIONAL VALUES CARD  
GAME





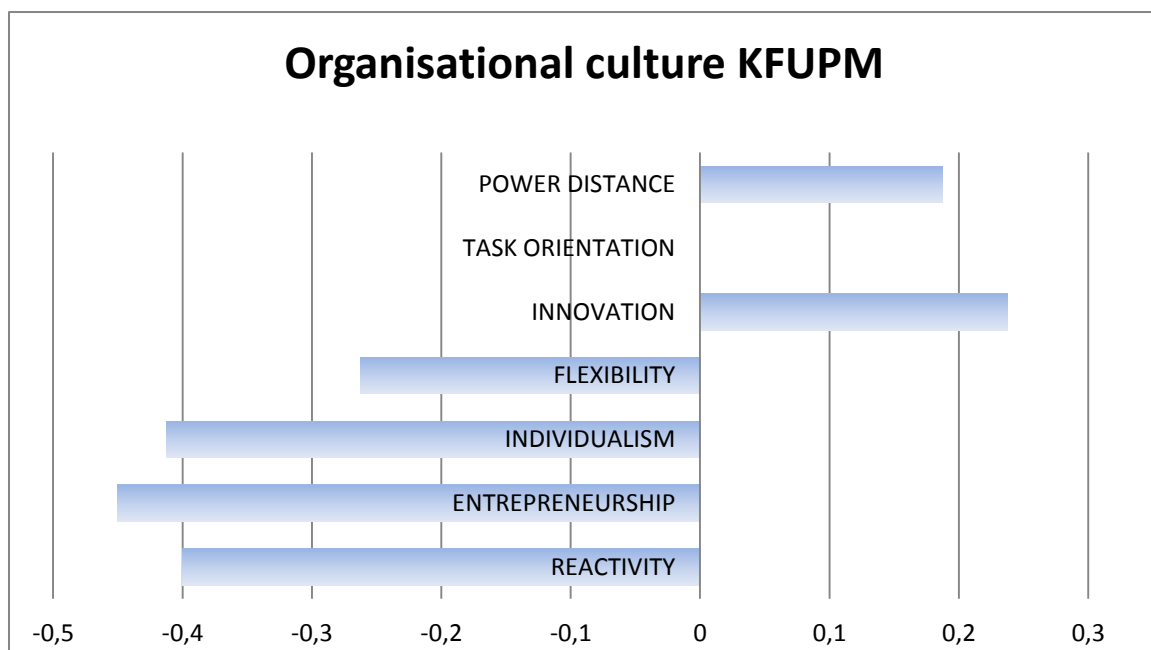
### *The pilot study at KFUPM*

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One of the goals of the project is to get a better understanding of the organisational cultures of the Saudi Arabian universities, because 1) organisational culture may have an effect on the university's effectiveness (as Cameron and Quinn suggest in their research) and 2) organisational culture and leadership are related. KFUPM was used as a pilot with a twofold goal. Firstly, to see if the game was properly designed for the Saudi context. Were the goals of the game clear, instructions well understood and statements correctly interpreted? Is there is need to adapt certain parts of the game or certain statements? It can be concluded that in general the Q sort method was received well, though two respondents did not manage to rank the cards properly. The other respondents managed to finish the game in less than about twenty minutes. Two lessons can be learned:

- 1) the envelopes ranked from 1 to 6 need explicit references to avoid that respondents exchange to extremes (envelop 1 and 6). Using different colours for the envelopes and adding expressions "least applicable" to "most applicable" should be considered.
- 2) The respondents should write down their position on each envelop ("dean", "chair", etc)

Secondly, to get a first impression of what an organisational culture in Saudi higher education might look like. After explaining the game to the respondents in total twenty-two respondents of KFUPM played the game. Two respondents made mistakes (wrong distribution of cards) and are not taken into further account. The respondents are deans, supporting deans and department chairs. Seven of the twenty-two respondents are part of the project team. After the presentation of the outcomes of the whole group, the outcomes of the seven will be depicted.



This figure represents the organisational culture of KFUPM as perceived by the twenty respondents. At face value, in their eyes KFUPM is rather hierarchical, innovative and collectivist and is not very flexible, entrepreneurial and reactive. Task orientation seems to be neither present nor absent.

If we take a closer look at each of the seven dimensions the following can be said. The scores for each item range from 0 to 5, where 0 means 'not characteristic for the university' and 5 means 'highly characteristic for the university'. The score 2.5 implies that the cultural value is neither characteristic nor not-characteristic.<sup>8</sup>

	from least characteristic -----> to most characteristic					
Envelop	1	2	3	4	5	6
score red item (pos)	0	1	2	3	4	5
score blue item (neg)	5	4	3	2	1	0

**Power (hierarchical) distance.** As said, the impression of the twenty respondents in total is that KFUPM is rather hierarchical, but perceptions really differ: 30% do not perceive the KFUPM culture as hierarchical while 45% believes it is (the other 25% is in between). In fact, 25% thinks it is very hierarchal, but there is no full consensus on this dimension. It could be that the differences in perception are related to the position of the respondent. Taking a closer look at the four items of the power distance dimension we observe that the vast majority of the respondents agree that people do not have the same rights without regard to their position and conflicts with superiors are avoided where possible. Views are very different on whether those that have more responsibilities also have the right to certain advantages.

**Task orientation** seems to be neutral, but also here perceptions vary: 20% believes there is not much task orientation, where 35% does. The balanced average score of this dimension does not imply consensus at all! In fact, on all the four items of this dimension there is great variety in perception. Respondents disagree on whether achieving set targets is a cultural value present at FKUPM, or whether valuing the contributions and the qualities of each individual is common practice. By and large half the respondents think that such task orientation aspects are part of FKUPM culture and the others have a view opposite to that.

**Innovation** seems to be an aspect of KFUPM's organisational culture. The overall picture leaves hardly any doubt. But again the scores show that 35% of the respondents do not perceive an innovative culture at KFUPM! The innovativeness of KFUPM's culture rests on the perception that the university is looking for progress and new ideas (70% believes that this is the case), while at the same at least half the respondents think that change is not welcome, preserve of what is a recognisable value and ruptures which can disturb the work process are to be avoided. So apart from looking for progress many perceive 'conservatism' as well.

<sup>8</sup> The scale in the figure has been adjusted: the 0 in the figure represents the middle of the scores that range from 0 to 5 (where the middle is 2.5). In other words, where the average score of the 20 respondents on the scale from 0 to 5 is 2.5, then in the figure this reads as 0.

**Flexibility** seems not to be part of the organisational culture: 40% certainly agree with this, while only 10% sees flexibility being part of the KFUPM culture. The majority holds the opinion that respecting rules and procedures, which in principal decrease flexibility, are a value found at KFUPM.

**Individualism** is in general not seen as a cultural asset of KFUPM: 60% of the respondents endorse this, while 25% believes that individualism is a cultural value found at the university. Prioritising personal goals and insisting on own personality instead of group conformity is according to more than 70% of the respondents not a cultural value.

**Entrepreneurship** is not a key value as well: 20% perceives an entrepreneurial culture, but 55% thinks such a culture does not exist. Here the majority believes that the university is careful and precautious to minimise or avoid risks. The willingness to take risks and to be daring in order to succeed is nevertheless endorsed by respectively 35% and 45%.

**Reactivity** is another value that according to the general picture seems lacking at KFUPM: 15% believes the university is characterised by being reactive (responding swiftly), while 40% thinks the institution is not very reactive. In more detail: more than 60% believes that acting and decision making is rather slow, and 60% to 70% thinks that the culture is reflective ('not leaping in without thought and analysing the situation before taking action'). As reflectiveness requires time, action is slowed down.

Another issue concerns the interrelatedness of the seven dimensions. The outcomes of the bivariate correlation show that some dimensions are correlated. There are significant positive correlations between reactivity and entrepreneurship, between individualism and flexibility, and between entrepreneurship and innovation. Intuitively this makes sense, except that it is not directly clear why at KFUPM the respondents (as a group) consider the university innovative and not entrepreneurial. The explanation could be that in the university's culture there is an attitude of looking for progress and new ideas (innovation) but without taking too much risks (or looking at new ideas but not leaping in without serious thought).

Because the game was played with complete anonymity we are not able to trace back the differences in perception on organisational culture. This is unfortunate since perceptions are likely to be coloured by position – where you stand depends on where you sit.<sup>9</sup> For all the dimensions it would be important (the next step!) to find out who has different perceptions (related to position or discipline) and particularly why they differ in perception (for instance because of particular events in the recent past). In this phase it will be important to tease out how respondents have interpreted the cultural values mentioned on the cards (e.g. what kind of change are they thinking about? What kind of risk do they have in mind?, etc). Based on follow-up discussions the picture of the organisational culture should become more fine-grained. As has been made clear from the outset the card game is to be used as a tool for input to obtain further insights and clarification. It will encourage institutional leadership to raise specific questions to enhance their understanding of the university's culture, which in turn might help to improve performance and to lead change if deemed necessary.

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<sup>9</sup> This is for instance in many times the case when people change positions. In the new position responsibilities and expectations are different and so are patterns of interactions. This has an impact on how a person 'sees the world'.

One should bear in mind however that a homogeneous view on culture across (complex) organisations is highly unlikely. The ultimate, and probably scattered picture of the organisational culture of KFUPM, as for the other universities as well, is important for at least two reasons. First, it should be linked to the leadership styles of the organisation. Do they fit well? Second, it could be the starting point of a discussion if the existing culture is not the most preferred one. The same exercise should be repeated, except that the leading question would be to rank to cards according to a desirable culture: which organisational values should be present in your university in five year's time?

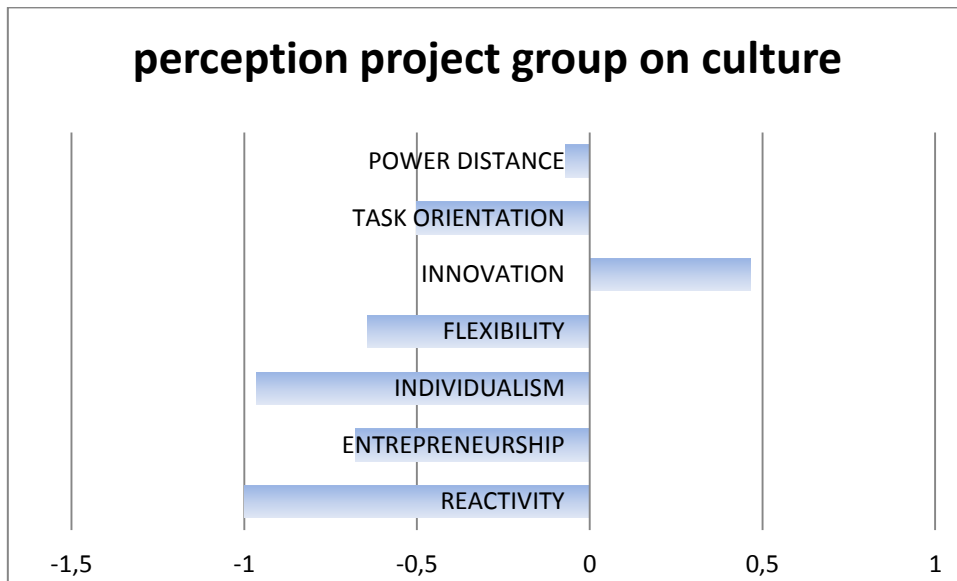
### *Recommendations – food for thought*

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When the cultural card game is carried out in the universities we need to know the position and professional background of the respondent. The respondents need to be selected with care. For each university the group should reflect the variety of the university (different positions) and should be representative to the largest extent possible.

Although it is impossible to have perfect consistency in ranking 28 statements, the rankings of some of the respondents in the pilot are “hard to believe” (e.g. acting quickly *and* not leaping in without thought or welcoming change favourably *and* wishing to avoid ruptures and changes logically do not sit together easily). The use of items having a priori positive and negative correlations with the dimension should serve this purpose. To increase the likelihood of consistency in the ranking we will reconsider the formulation of some of the statements. Particularly eyebrows can be raised with respect to the task orientation and power distance dimension. Therefore we suggest to adapt some of the statements on the cards (without deleting or fundamentally changing the dimensions).

The pilot has resulted in some interesting findings for KFUPM, which could be used as input for further discussion. However we recommend to play the cultural card game once more (after the recommendations above have been taken into account). The pilot has shown that it is not very time consuming for the respondents and it is even not necessary that all the respondents meet at the same time in the same place (as long as the instructions are provided properly, including the possibility to raise questions for clarification).



The perception of the project group (seven members) differs from the overall picture on two of the seven dimensions. The perceptions on innovation, flexibility, individualism, entrepreneurship and reactivity are largely similar to those of the overall group. The views on task orientation and power distance however substantially differ.

**Power distance.** In contrast to the overall group the project group does not perceive the university as hierarchical. It should be noted however that the opinions greatly differ: four members do not see power differences where the three other do. The different perceptions concern “conforming to the point of view of superiors” (subordination) and “those who have more responsibilities have the right to certain advantages”(differentials). There is at the same time consensus on the characteristics that conflicts with superiors are avoided (indicating there is some kind of distance) and that everybody has the same right without regard of position (indicating there is not some kind of distance).

**Task orientation.** According to five of the seven project team members task orientation is not a cultural value at KFUPM. The perceptions are rather similar: KFUPM has: no culture of financial rewards being favourable to an increase in leisure time; contributions and qualities of each individual are valued; and the rights of the individuals are respected (personal dignity). These three items explain the project team’s perception that task orientation is not highly valued in the organisational culture. One task oriented value that is present however is accomplishment: working hard and achieving set targets as a source of well-being is seen as a value by five of the seven project team members.

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