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Published online: 16 Dec 2018.

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Conceptualising 'quality work' in higher education

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ABSTRACT

The issue of quality enhancement within higher education has attracted considerable research interest and the article suggest that managerial and cultural approaches have thus far dominated the literature in the field. While acknowledging the importance of both management and culture, the article argues for the relevance of 'quality work' as a concept to better understand the processes involved in quality enhancement. By advocating that a stronger focus should be given on analysing practices, the article underlines the role of individual actors and their actions for understanding the foundations related to both quality maintenance and enhancement, as well as the research needed to empirically investigate these processes.

Is there a need for another concept for quality in higher education?

There is by no means a lack of literature on quality in higher education. Considerable number of concepts have been developed to capture the specific aspects of quality in higher education and the variety of processes that are undertaken under the quality label (see, for example, the glossary by Harvey (2004–2018)). Still, this multitude of concepts and terminology suggests two things. First, there is considerable fragmentation regarding the terminology used; and second, there seem to be comparatively few overarching concepts that would provide a concise analytical toolbox for studying the overall institutional attempts in working with quality. Many of the studies on how higher institutions address issues of quality tend to focus on internal quality *management* systems, examining (and often criticising) a managerial account on quality development within higher education. Alternatively, terms like quality culture are being introduced, to emphasise aspects of quality enhancement that are not well accounted for by having a focus on rules, procedures and managerialist approaches (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). However, between those two overarching concepts lie a range of mundane day-to-day activities that are undertaken to enhance and also maintain educational quality (Hulpiau & Waeytens, 2003) and

neither quality management nor quality culture as concepts seem to capture these processes and practices in a comprehensive manner.

This article suggests that the notion of 'quality work' is a means to address this gap in exiting literature about quality in higher education. The conceptualisation in this article builds on literature on 'institutional work' (Lawrence *et al.*, 2013; Lawrence *et al.*, 2009a) and consequently defines quality work as a set of activities and practices within higher education institutions, that address the quality of its educational provision. This kind of focus is not necessarily concerned with defining quality as such; rather, it takes a starting point in conceptions of quality as situated and contextual and focuses on analysing the various kinds of organisational processes and practices that are undertaken under the quality label. An emphasis on quality work takes a practice-oriented approach, where quality work can span multiple organisational levels and arenas within higher education institutions, encompasses both formal and informal processes and involves a variety of actors within these institutions. Having an actor- and practice-focused starting point, this approach also inherently provides a space for disruptions, adaptability and the dynamism found in higher education institutions despite the emergence of a more centrally steered and a more strategic university (Stensaker *et al.*, 2014). While this way of conceptualising quality work can at the outset seem rather broad, the article demonstrates the demarcation and distinctiveness of a 'quality work' perspective by placing it in relation to the more recognisable concepts of quality management and quality culture. The key argument is not that the notion of 'quality work' would necessarily replace these two foci but provide a third-line of analysis, which would complement existing analysis on quality management and quality culture.

This is a conceptual article and is meant as both a reflection on the current status of research in the field of quality assurance and quality enhancement while it, hopefully, also inspires a renewal of the empirical research conducted in this area. The article first proceeds by reflecting upon existing overarching conceptualisations in the literature, followed by an elaboration of the concept of quality work and its conceptual embeddedness in studies of institutional work. The article then proceeds by providing a comparison of key dimensions differentiating quality work, quality management and quality culture. The article concludes with some reflections on the relevant uses for the concept in empirical research and possible avenues for further conceptual development.

Quality in higher education: is there something missing between management and culture?

Literature on quality in higher education is rich with a range of conceptualisations and analysis of quality in higher education. Discussions on quality assurance on the system level have focused on the continuum between improvement or accountability (Thune, 1996) and, on the institutional level,

studies have examined the effectiveness of different quality assurance proce-
dures, new organisational routines or new teaching and learning practices that
have been introduced (Frederiks *et al.*, 1994; Brennan & Shah, 2000; Kis, 2005;
Westerheijden *et al.*, 2007; Stensaker, 2008; Barandiaran-Galdós *et al.*, 2012;
Stensaker & Leiber, 2015). Often, studies that concern quality in higher educa-
tion also (critically) discuss the various definitions of quality, taking a starting
point in the conceptions of quality, defined in the now classic article by Harvey
and Green (1993). There are also ample studies on specific quality enhance-
ment processes in higher education institutions, aiming to identify both pro-
blems and approaches to 'what works' (Massy, 1999; Newton, 2000, 2002;
Massaro, 2010; Shah & Nair, 2013; Nair, 2013; Bollaert, 2014). This variety is
also an indication of the multiple change processes related to quality in higher
education: as a result of external quality assurance régimes, a more rhetorical
shift towards highlighting excellence in national policy environments, as well
as the internal competitive mechanisms of academia itself.

There is little doubt that external quality assurance has had significant
impact on higher education institutions (Stensaker *et al.*, 2011) and higher
education institutions need to cater for these external expectations. In general,
it can be argued that there are two more generic responses as to how quality
concerns should be addressed on the institutional level. The first type of
response is related to the need to build up and strengthen the managerial
control over quality issues. Hence, during recent decades many higher educa-
tion institutions around the world have developed internal quality manage-
ment systems intended to establish more formal organisational rules and
routines related to the governance of the educational provision (Brennan &
Shah, 2000). These systems can have different foci but tend to unite in the
belief that leadership and management is essential for coordination, for devel-
oping good indicators of quality, for making things happen and that a key
objective of these quality management systems is to enhance students' learn-
ing experience (Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010, p. 47). A recent review of
quality management approaches also suggested that quality management
routines are increasingly becoming integrated into the global management
structures of higher education institutions (Manatos *et al.*, 2017). As such, one
could argue that the introduction of quality management in higher education
has contributed to the strengthening of a more managerial and 'governed'
university (Williams, 2012; Frølich *et al.*, 2013). This view on quality in higher
education also frames the kinds of research questions and approaches that
emerge. In broad terms, such analysis can become focused on either the
formal set up of quality management systems and their accountability func-
tion, or the kinds of mismatches and contestations that emerge when exter-
nally defined quality standards are imposed on higher education.

The second type of institutional response to external quality assurance is rooted
in the belief that broader cultural changes are needed throughout the institution

and that universities and colleges should build a quality culture based on a more widespread commitment to quality and its improvement (Yorke, 2000). The cultural approach to quality has gained considerable popularity over time, not least as an alternative to perceptions of a more bureaucratic and centralised university (Burnes et al., 2014) with rigid quality management routines. The idea of building quality cultures has also been backed by European interest organisations such as the European University Association (EUA) (Bollaert, 2014). As a consequence, at the European level it is possible to identify the rise of special evaluation schemes where the identification and fostering of institutional quality cultures have been a central element (Rosa et al., 2011). At one point, EUA (2006, p. 10) argued that the fostering of a quality culture depended on the 'shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitments towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts'. The latter statement is interesting in that it assumes a close integration of norms, values and beliefs, on the one hand, and management and structural measures, on the other. In a critical comment related to the ambitions of building a quality culture in a more instrumental fashion, Harvey and Stensaker (2008) argued for the need for understanding the relation between quality and culture in a more integrated way and that quality actually is embedded in broader cultural practices. While quality culture is a term that has gained policy relevance, as an analytical lens it also has specific consequences for how quality processes are analysed within higher education. This kind of emphasis shifts focus towards the shared meanings that underpin the identified quality culture, how to facilitate it or the specific barriers that are identified in the construction of quality culture.

The issue of practices is of special interest here, as it can be argued that both the managerial and the cultural approach to quality enhancement can be seen as ways to 'fix' the more fragmented, loosely coupled and even perhaps slightly chaotic day-to-day running of educational offerings within universities and colleges. This article argues that such practices, here labelled 'quality work', constitute an important missing link between management and culture for two reasons. First, while management routines and shared norms and values indeed may be important for fostering quality, they offer no guarantee for aligned practices (Yorke, 2000; By, 2005), especially with respect to educational offerings where a large number of actors are engaged in the delivery process. Second, management routines and cultural norms and values are not fixed entities but dynamic constructs that are shaped and transformed as they unfold during the specific actions taken by individuals in the organisation. Management and culture should not be understood as predefined and codified entities but as more iterative and dialectical processes more characterised by evolution than stability (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008, pp. 438–39). As such, it can be argued that quality work stands in a dialectical and dynamic relationship to both managerial and cultural perspectives, a relationship that needs to be understood better.

Quality work: sources of inspiration and key distinctions

A starting assumption in this article is an overall institutional perspective on education as an enterprise. Education is a core activity for modern higher education organisations, although the provision of education may have multiple and sometimes even contradictory functions in society (Castells, 2001). Embedded within universities and colleges, education represents a distinct social structure with formal rules (for example, national regulation for study points or programmes), informal rules (for example, disciplinary traditions, academic traditions), wider societal norms (for example, ethical and civic norms), role division (for example, scientific staff, administration and the learner) and a set of established practices (for example, the notion of specific courses, how learning activities are organised, assessment procedures). Maintaining and assuring the quality of educational provision is a core component of higher education institutions. Viewing quality as a desired characteristic of the core processes of higher education as an institution, it also becomes an expression of institutions' core norms and values.

Since education is first and foremost about delivery, quality work in education requires coordination of a range of organisational actors and activities. Being embedded in higher education institutions along with other core functions (research and third mission), education is a function that is composed of multiple processes across various organisational levels. This complexity with its multiple interactions highlights the need to shift focus on practices. The perspective proposed here builds on the recent attention to institutional work in studies of organisation, stressing the role of actors and their agency in institutions (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence *et al.*, 2011). With this in mind, in the next sections, key elements of quality work are outlined by discussing the notion of agency, change, intentionality, effort and a processual view on *multiple* practices of quality work.

Employing institutional work perspective to studying quality work in higher education institutions

In the realm of institutional studies of organisational life, institutional work is a comparatively new term. The shift towards studying institutional work represents a reorientation of institutional analysis from macro discussions of institutional logics that operate at specific organisational fields, to discussions about the relationship between institutions and the individual actors who operate within these institutional contexts. More precisely, this shifts the focus to 'how action affects institutions' (Lawrence *et al.*, 2009b, p. 1). Having this in mind, actors are of direct rather than indirect interest for analysis and emphasis has shifted from analysing institutions to analysing the 'permanent recursive and dialectical interaction between agency and institutions', with particular focus on how action shapes institutions (Lawrence *et al.*, 2011, p. 55). Yet, this

agentic turn does not imply that the institutional assumptions of actor behaviour are principally discarded and actors are viewed as fully autonomous. The institutional work perspective maintains the institutional conception of embedded actors (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006), where their identities and conceptions of roles are shaped by institutional rules. However, this shaping process is not viewed as deterministic and the very notion of actorhood becomes a construction, a result of co-creation between different actors and their interactions. Hence, the perspective offers a dialectical view on causality: actors are not just the result of institutional forces but have an active role in creating, maintaining and disrupting the institutions they are inhabiting (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011). For quality work in higher education, this implies that actorhood within higher education is viewed as constructed. Traditionally, students, administrative staff, academic staff and leadership are viewed as stakeholders in quality-related processes within higher education institutions. From a quality work perspective, attention is shifted from broad groups to the agency of specific actors. In their work with quality of education, these actors are embedded in the specific institutional context in which they are located and their actions are guided both by various institutional norms of what good quality education consists of and also by idiosyncratic preferences and interests.

The study of institutional work stresses specific local practices that are continuously shaped, in other words, the 'situated practices of actors reflexively engaged with the institutions that surround (penetrate) them' (Lawrence et al., 2011, p. 56). Thus, the core assumption is that both maintenance and change of institutions is interlinked with the ongoing activities of actors who populate these institutions. The way in which institutional work was initially conceptualised had also linkages to conceptualisations of institutional entrepreneurship (Garud et al., 2007). However, while institutional entrepreneurship is primarily concerned with actors who aim to change existing institutional arrangements, maintenance of institutions (Lawrence et al., 2013) and potential unintended consequences (Lawrence et al., 2009b: 11) are also an aspect of institutional work. This positions institutional work as a dynamic concept, following the life cycles of institutions throughout their development, maintenance and disruption (Scott, 2008). Thus, in comparison to perspectives that focus on the development of shared beliefs, norms and standards; which, once established, are assumed to have some degree of taken-for-grantedness and durability unless disrupted by powerful institutional entrepreneurs, this perspective also adds an emphasis on maintenance and the daily work required to sustain these. Thus, quality work in higher education is not only about creating quality or dramatic shifts, it is also about maintenance and routine changes in the agreed upon notions of what quality in higher education entails within that specific institutional context. In practical terms, this shifts the focus away from overarching quality culture or a quality management system, towards specific practices undertaken to enhance quality of educational provision and how such practices interrelate.

This highlights two central characteristics of institutional work: intentionality and effort (Lawrence *et al.*, 2011). Lawrence *et al.* (2009b, 2011) built on the work by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), identifying and discussing three distinct forms of intentionality. First, there is future-oriented intentionality, where the focus of institutional work is towards more forward-looking initiatives; second, there is a practical intentionality related to the management of emerging situations; and third, there is a more habit-oriented intentionality that emphasises reproduction and reapplying already taken-for-granted notions and schemas for action. Each of these concerns is a means for 'actors to relate their actions to their situation' (Lawrence *et al.*, 2009b, p. 13). As Lawrence *et al.* (2009b) argued, this distinction implies that temporal orientation is important when discussing intentions. The notion of effort was in most basic terms referring to the necessity of linking goals to action (Lawrence *et al.*, 2011). In sum, the two characteristics suggest that institutional work is purposeful and reinforces the agentic perspective of the process. Moreover, it is this emphasis on effort that provides a demarcation to notions of institutional entrepreneurships that tend to concentrate on successes (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011). Thus, quality work is not necessarily related to successful examples of enhancing quality of education; it may also include initiatives that have been undertaken but which have failed. A key dimension here is that quality work is purposeful and intentional, yet the outcomes need not to be predetermined. Intentionality concerns the decisions regarding which routine, conception or conceptualisation of quality is applied in a given context. For example, when a study programme leader is engaged in quality work, this can take multiple temporal orientations, whether emphasising habits, emerging situations or future initiatives.

The implication of this broad understanding of what quality work encompasses implies multiple institutional processes, rather than focus on single processes of diffusion or institutionalisation (Lawrence *et al.*, 2013). This multi-process approach also broadens the scope of actors involved; agency, in this context, has a distributed element, being the result of 'coordinated and uncoordinated efforts of a potentially large number of actors' (Lawrence *et al.*, 2011, p. 55). This comprehensive nature further implies that quality work does not only concern a single process within higher education, it can be seen as a set of practices and initiatives that have a focus on the quality of educational provision. In these processes, a range of different actors can be involved, their collective effort can have multiple purposes and the rules in which they are embedded are continuously negotiated.

Thus, while there are a range of studies that have examined specific aspects of quality work (for example, application of a new teaching method, or the impact of introducing a new quality assurance procedure), these are rarely analysed as specific practices and linked to other related practices within the organisation. Quality work defined in this manner emphasises an interrelated view on multiple practices of quality development, maintenance and enhancement.

Quality work vis-à-vis quality management and quality culture: an analytical framework

As indicated in the previous section, an important feature related to the concept of quality work is that it addresses the many processes, activities and dilemmas involved in developing and running educational offerings within higher education institutions. Thus, quality work involves a set of multiple processes, where agency is the result of coordination, or at least ambition of such coordination, between different actors. The following sections specify the quality work approach *vis-à-vis* quality management and quality culture as distinct lenses for analysing how higher education institutions address issues of quality. Compared to quality management and quality culture, the *rationale* for quality work is distinctly different. While one can argue that quality management would stress compliance with externally set criteria as a key purpose (Newton, 2002), a quality culture perspective would rather underline academic excellence as a key value (Yorke, 2000). Thus, studies would focus on quality work that has a more practice-oriented starting point, where multiple expectations meet. For those that are directly involved in the educational delivery, and perhaps facing such diverse expectations, it is likely that finding ways to balance such multiple expectations is prioritised above such unidimensional ambitions. Thus, from studies of implementation or preserving excellence, the focus shifts to how practices affect the specific institutional context in which they are embedded.

This implies that the underlying assumptions of where and how quality is defined differ considerably between these three lenses. From a management perspective, the definition of quality is at least to some extent defined externally through existing quality assurance régime. While the prescriptive nature of such régimes varies between countries, they often set at least some frame for what is being measured and how institutions need to demonstrate accountability. There is ample literature that would refer to internal contestations that emerge as a result. Within the lens of quality culture, the assumption of having a shared commitment towards quality implies at least some notion of shared and taken-for-granted norms of what quality entails. From a quality work perspective, the notion of quality is much more dynamic and a result of the coordination and communication of the actors within the specific institutional context. Thus, while there might be some institutionally agreed-upon notions of quality, this is also continuously redefined and mixed with actors' individual preferences. For researchers studying quality, this means that a predetermined definition of what quality 'really is' becomes much less relevant; it is the practices and local definitions that would be a much more relevant starting point.

This also implies that the *actors' roles* would be different. Actors who put intention and effort into quality work become both problem solvers and

innovators, while their success cannot be taken for granted. Here, the proposed conceptualisation of quality work differs from a quality management perspective, which more likely would emphasise task fulfilment and loyalty towards formal objectives (Burnes *et al.*, 2014), and from a quality culture perspective where upholding academic standards would have priority (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

These different rationales and understandings of quality would most likely also lead to an expectation of very different *outcomes*. While the expected outcome in a quality management perspective would be accountability and being able to legitimise the educational provision externally (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011), a quality culture perspective would likely be more oriented towards building reputation and academic credibility (Clark, 1998) through a shared commitment among the staff towards this goal. A quality work perspective, on the other hand, would not assume predetermined outcomes. While transformation is one possible outcome, the necessity to renegotiate and balance different views assumes a much more open-ended process where intentionality can also be directed towards maintenance.

It follows from the above that the underlying logic of a quality culture perspective is deeply rooted in idealism and 'deep' academic values and norms (Clark, 1998; Birnbaum, 1988) and that a quality management perspective would be tightly associated with instrumentalism (Olsen, 2007), while the quality work perspective is more closely related to pragmatism, where specific practices are the focus of the analysis.

Finally, the three perspectives have quite different takes on how *power and authority* is conceptualised. While quality management is a perspective that underlines the formal authority rooted in hierarchical command structures, rules and regulations (Dill & Beerkens, 2010), the quality culture perspective gives more attention to normative assumptions about what appropriate academic scholarship should look like; even in times of reform and change (Barandiaran-Galdòs *et al.,* 2012). In contrast, quality work perspective underlines that individuals need, and normally also have, quite substantial autonomy related to their own practices (Yorke, 2000, p. 30). Thus, building on an institutional work perspective, actor behaviour is neither the result of mere following existing rules and norms, nor the result of pure rational actors. Instead, actor behaviour is a result of a combination of both institutional norms and their own idiosyncratic preferences.

The key dimensions differentiating the three perspectives are summarised in Table 1.

The three perspectives presented in Table 1 are more ideal-type representations than as a real-life description of how quality processes take place in universities and colleges. However, by presenting the perspectives in this way, the relevance of the quality work perspective hopefully also comes to the fore with several potential benefits for analysing quality-related processes in higher education organisations.

Table 1. Dimensions differentiating quality management, quality work and quality culture.

	Management	Work	Culture
Rationale for operation	Compliance with standards	Balancing multiple expectations	Academic excellence
Notion of quality	Imposed and potentially contested	Negotiated and dynamic	Shared and taken for granted
Actors' roles	Task fulfilment	Problem solvers and innovators	Uphold academic standards and ceremonies
Outcomes	Accountability	Open-ended	Commitment
Underlying logic	Instrumentalism	Pragmatism	Idealism
Power and authority	Leadership and steering authority	Individuals having autonomy related to practice	Normative assumptions about scholarship (appropriateness)

Implications of a quality work perspective for research and practice

The three proposed perspectives represent a heuristic tool for analysing specific institutional processes related to quality enhancement. As such, it is possible to argue that they complement each other and that they together offer a more comprehensive take on how higher education institutions work with maintenance and enhancement of quality in their educational provision. However, there are good reasons to also engage in a 'practice turn' in analysis of quality in higher education. There are several arguments for this.

First, a quality work perspective offers an opportunity to go beyond studying quality processes in higher education that take place as a product of quality assurance procedures. Mårtenson *et al.* (2014) have suggested that there is an increased need to look into the micro-processes surrounding teaching and learning and the emphasis on quality work offers some insights into these processes that neither cultural nor managerial perspectives are able to address in the same close-up fashion. Traditional institutional analyses of quality in higher education have tended to study how institutionalised environments shape actor perceptions and actions, or have aimed to explain the persistence of institutional norms regarding how quality is conceptualised. Studies of quality work would shift this perspective around. Instead of studying how specific institutional structures, quality systems, strategies or norms and values affect quality, attention would be turned towards how actors' quality work also reshapes the institutions themselves. More importantly, this would also explicitly bring into focus the actors who are engaged in the processes establishing particular practices (construction of quality) maintaining current institutional order as well as attempts at changing institutional practices. While there have been studies of academic staff and how they are trying to cope with quality assurance (Newton, 2002), there is a need for more comprehensive studies where the problem-solving capacity of those working in the sector is displayed and analysed in detail. While there are ample studies that explore different aspects that matter for good quality teaching and learning (see Damşa *et al.*, 2015 for a review), these are rarely connected to the broader studies of quality in higher education.

Second, a quality work perspective also has the potential to include the many different activities involved in the educational delivery of universities and colleges, by highlighting the significance of interlinked practices. Education is one of the most complex activities conducted in higher education, involving a range of actors and routines that influence the teaching and learning in both visible and invisible ways. In principle, there is a range of staffing, economical and legal issues that comes together when education is delivered at micro-level and to study these organisational contexts in which educational offerings are embedded is an opportunity provided by the quality-work perspective. As Westerheijden *et al*. (2007) have underlined, there is a distance from what is being designed, to what is implemented, and the final impact of the initiatives taken. While there are ample studies of specific aspects of quality work, there is far less attention to quality work as a coordinated activity within institutions.

Finally, the quality work perspective also offers a more optimistic take on the future of higher education. While a range of studies related to quality assurance have been quite critical about the negative impact of this activity (Newton, 2000; Burnes *et al*., 2014), a quality work perspective acknowledges that individuals and academic staff in particular still have considerable influence over their own work: an influence that may be less visible both with respect to formal designs of quality management systems and in changing quality cultures but is highly relevant concerning the specific practices and activities conducted in teaching and learning processes. A quality work perspective might have the potential to examine the interplay between structures and agency of individual staff. Question whether indeed it is the case that academic staff have lost autonomy in their practices related to quality in educational provision. Not least, this perspective would also broaden the scope of activities and processes that are relevant for our conceptualisations of quality in higher education, while retaining a clear boundary by emphasising intentionality and effort.

For the field of practice, the three perspectives may serve as a reminder that in a well-functioning higher education institution, effective coordination is not only about acknowledging management and culture but also a range of local practices that are not always visible in the formalised systems. In an era where universities are often accused of becoming more formal and bureaucratised, the quality-work perspective underlines the need for balancing expectations and having space for open-ended processes. Moreover, the three lenses also represent distinct underlying logics that should all be present and themselves balanced in the institution. For example, stressing only compliance with standards and being focused on accountability, and not emphasising academic development and carrying through necessary activities to assure future performance, mean that institutions can become stagnated. While quality management tends to be forward looking, and quality culture seems to glance to the past glories, quality work directs attention to the practicalities of

enhancing quality in increasingly complex institutional settings. Thus, the conceptualisation of quality work can both function as a means for analysing forms of quality enhancement processes within institutions and also to provide relevant corrections to formal designs and values and norms that may be de-coupled from what goes on in practice.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

Funding

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