Governing for Quality

A Study of the Governance of Quality in Norwegian Higher Education

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For my family.

Acknowledgements

Summary

For many decades, quality has been a key policy issue in the governance of higher education at the national, regional and global levels. This concern is evident in Norway, where quality improvement has been one of the main policy goals concerning higher education, and the public authorities have implemented regulatory, financial and cultural oriented governance for this purpose. The research question in this thesis is "How is the quality of Norwegian higher education governed?". The thesis aims to deepen our understanding of how dialogue-oriented multi-level "soft governance" of quality is developed and formulated at the national level, how it is negotiated between public authorities and higher education institutions (HEIs), and how this governance is perceived and acted on at the individual staff level.

The thesis builds on three articles which all are published in international scientific journals. At the national level, the analysis of a policymaking process for a white paper on quality culture found that stakeholders who align with the preferences of public authorities informed the policy outcome (Article 1). At the institutional level, the analysis of the negotiations for new governance documents between the Norwegian government and HEIs, where quality is a key topic, found that "soft governance" allows HEIs to align national policy signals with institutional strategic priorities, thereby asserting their institutional autonomy (Article 3). At the individual level, the analysis of how different staff groups in HEIs reason when they conduct quality work, found that academic staff engage with governance on educational quality by communicating and legitimising their unique approaches to this work (Article 2).

Empirically, the articles draw on a document corpus from the policymaking process, interviews with representatives from staff groups involved in quality work, and documents and interviews on the negotiations for the new governance documents between HEI representatives and Norwegian public authorities. Methodologically, the thesis comprises thematic analysis of interviews and content analysis of documents. Theoretically, the framework is discursive institutionalism (DI), and autonomy and legitimacy serve as core analytical concepts.

The findings of the thesis illustrate how public authorities incorporate both stakeholder and institutional priorities when developing governance for educational quality, while HEIs and academic staff maintain autonomy in their interpretations and implementations of this governance. The actors involved at these different levels appear to regard the diversity of approaches to the governance of the quality of higher education as legitimate, possibly because the governance does not interfere with core academic activities or affects institutional or individual academic autonomy.

The thesis provides an account of how Norwegian academic institutions and staff actively utilise the governance process on educational quality, and the opportunities for dialogue that accompany it, to advance their strategic institutional and individual approaches to quality. The thesis explores how soft governance represents an opportunity for HEIs and academic staff to strengthen their autonomy. However, the efficacy of soft governance in steering quality in higher education is problematised.

Sammendrag

I mange tiår har kvalitet vært et sentralt mål i den nasjonale, regionale og globale styringen av høyere utdanning. I Norge har også høy kvalitet i lang tid vært et av målene i styringen av universiteter og høyskoler, og myndighetene har tatt i bruk økonomiske, juridiske og mer kulturorienterte styringsvirkemidler for å nå dette målet. Det overordnede forskningsspørsmålet i denne avhandlingen er *Hvordan styres kvalitet i norsk høyere utdanning?* Hensikten med avhandlingen er å gi en bedre forståelse av hvordan dialogorientert styring, også kalt «myk» styring, av kvalitet blir utviklet på nasjonalt nivå, hvordan høyere utdanningsinstitusjoner forhandler om innholdet i styringen på institusjonsnivå, og hvordan ansatte forholder seg til styringen på et individuelt nivå.

Avhandlingen bygger på tre artikler som er publisert i internasjonale forskningstidsskrifter. På det nasjonale nivået viser analysen av høringsprosessen i forkant av en stortingsmelding om kvalitet i høyere utdanning hvordan innspill fra interessegrupper som har sammenfallende preferanser med myndighetene, i større grad ble innlemmet i stortingsmeldingen (Artikkel 1). På institusjonsnivå viser analysen av forhandlingene om nye utviklingsavtaler mellom norske myndigheter og høyere utdanningsinstitusjoner at institusjonene i stor grad var autonome i utformingen av sine egne avtaler, men forventet i liten grad at avtalene ville påvirke deres interne styring ut over å understøtte egne strategier (Artikkel 3). På individnivå viser analysen hvordan vitenskapelige og administrativt ansatte og ledelse i ulik grad brukte skjønn kvalitetsarbeidet, og at de vitenskapelig ansatte legitimerte sin tilnærming til kvalitetsarbeid gjennom å argumentere for at den var til det beste for studentene (Artikkel 2). Det empiriske materialet består av høringssvar til den nevnte stortingsmeldingen, intervjuer med representanter for ulike grupper ansatte, dokumenter fra forhandlingene om nye utviklingsavtaler, samt intervjuer med representanter for høyere utdanningsinstitusjoner. Metodene som er benyttet er innholdsanalyse av dokumenter og tematisk analyse av intervjuer. Diskursiv institusjonalisme utgjør det teoretiske rammeverket i avhandlingen, og legitimitet og autonomi er sentrale analytiske begreper.

Avhandlingen viser at myndighetene innlemmer preferansene til interessegrupper og høyere utdanningsinstitusjoner i den myke styringen av kvalitet i norsk høyere utdanning. Samtidig rettferdiggjør og opprettholder institusjonene og de vitenskapelig ansatte sine etablerte tilnærminger til dette målet. Aktørene som medvirker i styringen, oppfatter den som legitim, trolig fordi myk styring ikke i særlig grad ser ut til å gripe inn hverken i akademiske kjerneprosesser eller berører institusjonenes og de vitenskapelig ansattes autonomi.

Avhandlingen viser hvordan høyere utdanningsinstitusjoner og vitenskapelig ansatte aktivt bruker toneangivende styringsagendaer – som kvalitet – og dialog med myndighetene for å fremme sine institusjonelle og individuelle prioriteringer, gjennom å argumentere for at deres tilnærming til kvalitet er legitim. Oppsummert viser avhandlingen hvordan myk styring representerer en mulighet for at universiteter og høyskoler og vitenskapelig ansatte kan styrke sin autonomi. Samtidig reiser avhandlingen grunnleggende spørsmål om hvordan og hvorvidt myk styring i praksis styrer utvikling av kvalitet i norsk høyere utdanning.

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PART I:
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

1 Introduction

This thesis consists of two parts. The first part begins with the following extended abstract and includes initial reflections, research questions and the contributions of the thesis. In the second chapter, I provide a review of the scientific and empirical context for the thesis. I then elaborate on discursive institutionalism (DI) as a theoretical approach and the place of the core institutional concepts of legitimacy and autonomy within this theoretical strand. After presenting the theoretical framework, I describe the research design and methodological choices in the fourth chapter, together with ethical considerations. In the fifth chapter, I summarise the articles and their contributions. Finally, in the sixth chapter, I discuss the main findings from the three articles and the thesis, elaborate on limitations and suggest possible future research endeavours. The second part of the thesis presents the three articles that together address the main research questions in this thesis.

1.1 Why should we engage with the topics in this thesis?

Higher education institutions (HEIs), like other public institutions, receive substantial public funding to deliver services to large proportions of the population. However, how do public authorities govern these institutions to deliver "quality" services to the public, and how do academic staff that work in them relate to this governance? This thesis aims to enhance our understanding of how the governance of quality of higher education is developed at a national level, and how HEIs and their staff approach this governance and the ideas and values it builds on. The thesis seeks to understand the complex encounters between macro governance ideas concerning the quality of higher education, and how this governance is negotiated, perceived and acted on at the institutional level and in local contexts among groups of staff at HEIs. The thesis explores the borders between governance on higher education quality and academic autonomy. The empirical context of the thesis is policymaking for and practices on educational quality in the contemporary Norwegian higher education sector.

With reference to Clark's seminal "triangle of coordination", national public authorities, the academic oligarchy and the market, such as the labour market and other institutional surroundings, are the main forces that coordinate higher education systems (Clark, 1983; Maassen & Stensaker, 2011). The relations between these forces may be described as tight or loose, they may be dominated by control or dialogue, and their mutual dependencies may be described as follows. Firstly, the public authorities rely on HEIs and academic staff to provide education of high quality to their citizens, and they depend on surrounding stakeholders for feedback, for instance, on the competency requirements

of the workforce, to develop relevant policies for the higher education sector. Secondly, HEIs depend on funding from public authorities, as well as on regulatory, political and financial frameworks that catalyse the quality of education while ensuring institutional autonomy. Thirdly, the "market" in the institutional surroundings, such as employers and other stakeholders, relies on HEIs to educate candidates who meet their demands for skilled and competent employees and, therefore, they seek to be included in policymaking for the higher education sector.

The quality of higher education and research relates to the essence of any academic activity, and in many countries the quality of higher education is addressed in national legislation. Quality in higher education has attracted continued political attention in recent decades and is described as one of the major grand scripts in the governance of higher education on a global level, and in most European countries (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Vukasovic, 2017; Westerheijden, Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007). Catalysed by the Bologna Declaration at the end of the 20th century, the political attention given to the quality of higher education has manifested itself and become a key concern within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). When studying the governance of higher education, it is thus inevitable to address the governance of quality.

While there is consensus that the governance of higher education quality is necessary, there is a lack of unanimity regarding how to define, manage and govern educational quality. It is widely recognised that quality encompasses various interpretations, which are context-dependent and may vary among individuals, stakeholders, and disciplinary or institutional settings (Harvey & Green, 1993; Vukasovic, 2014; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011). In parallel, the concept of the quality of higher education is continuously expanding to incorporate new factors such as digitalisation, work-life relevance and student-centred teaching. Therefore, defining and establishing the means to stimulate the quality of higher education is a complex and ongoing challenge and a dominant topic when discussing the governance relation between public authorities, stakeholders and HEIs (Dahler-Larsen, 2008; Elken & Stensaker, 2020). Consequently, public authorities tend to arrive at the conclusion that the governance of higher education quality needs to take into account that quality is indeed relative and contextual. Thus, although quality has peaked on the policy agendas in most European countries, there are great differences in how national authorities have developed governance on this issue and how this governance has been received in the respective national higher education contexts.

The above description also applies to the Norwegian context. Over the past two decades, national policies for the higher education sector in Norway have concentrated on governance aimed at enhancing the quality of education through various measures (Frølich, Hovdhaugen, & Terum, 2014;

Lackner & Stensaker, 2022). The quality of higher education is presented as one of three main sectoral goals for the Norwegian HEIs in national budgets (M.o.E.R., 2022) and in the annual allotment letters to each public HEI. The quality of higher education is also legally addressed in the Norwegian Act relating to universities and university colleges (Universitets- og høyskoleloven, 2005) and in the Norwegian regulation on quality assurance and development (Studiekvalitetsforskriften, 2010). These regulations state that every HEI is responsible for the quality of the education it provides and for developing educational quality, with both institutional management and staff being responsible for the day-to-day quality work at each HEI. Hence, the governance of the quality of higher education pertains to multiple governance levels, including the national (macro), institutional (meso) and individual (micro) levels. Furthermore, after 20 years of numerous policies, the most recent white paper dedicated to quality in higher education states that there is still an apparent need for a continuous emphasis on quality in the governance of the higher education sector (M.o.E.R., 2017). Also in Norway, public authorities, academic institutions and staff agree that the quality of higher education is an important governance goal, although there is an ongoing debate on how to enable and enhance educational quality through governance. The aforementioned acknowledgement that quality is relative to institutional and disciplinary contexts raises the question of how to govern HEIs with diverse institutional profiles and their staff in order to maintain, and, when necessary, improve the quality of higher education.

Two important dimensions of the governance of HEIs, also for educational quality issues, are autonomy and legitimacy. Regarding *autonomy*, this includes the relative autonomy that HEIs experience in their relation to public authorities and stakeholders and how governance tools, such as reforms or white papers, affect the autonomy of academic institutions and staff. The governance of quality profoundly concerns the autonomy of academic institutions and staff, given that it is targeted at governing education, and thereby potentially tinkers with core academic activities, the mere "what and how of the academe" (Berdahl, 1990). Yet, expectedly, the effects of governance and policies on educational quality depend on that the HEIs and academic staff perceive this governance as legitimate. The *legitimacy* of the governance of higher education quality is thus often debated, partly because, as mentioned, quality is context sensitive, depending on the type of HEI, discipline or staff group, and partly because this governance potentially intervenes in the autonomy of academic institutions and staff. The governance of the quality of higher education on multiple governance levels is seldom studied in higher education studies, and therefore, the aim of this thesis is to enhance our understanding of the complexities of multi-level governance of quality in academia.

This thesis engages with the topic of governance of the quality of higher education through mixed methods analyses of policy formation, negotiation processes and practices for quality work in Norwegian HEIs. Empirically, the thesis draws on a document corpus consisting of a white paper and hearing responses in Article 1, interviews with different staff groups on quality work in HEIs in Article 2, and documents and interviews on negotiations for development agreements between the Norwegian public authorities and HEIs in Article 3. The theoretical framework is based on discursive institutionalism, and autonomy and legitimacy are employed as analytical concepts to explore the relationship between national governance ideas and negotiation of the quality of higher education, as well as practices of quality work in HEIs. Notably, this thesis has no ambition to give a comprehensive account of the all-encompassing governance of quality in Norwegian higher education, but studies extracts of what is coined as "soft governance" (Dobbins & Knill, 2017) of quality in Norwegian higher education. The thesis does not focus on the quality of higher education in itself but examines the governance of Norwegian HEIs through the lens of quality, as this is one of the main policy issues in the higher education sector.

1.2 Norway as a case to study the governance of higher education quality

The growing focus on enhanced quality as one of the main policy issues in European higher education governance has had great resonance in Norwegian higher education politics. Apart from being a dedicated participant in the Bologna Process with measures to converge higher education across countries, national policies for higher education have continuously concentrated on the quality of Norwegian higher education. Among the most important policies on quality in Norwegian higher education was the Quality Reform from 2003, which aligned the Norwegian higher education system with the Bologna Process and introduced an agency dedicated to secure and enhance quality in Norwegian higher education, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) (Damsgaard, 2019; Gornitzka, 2007; Karlsen, 2010). Other quality policies have been successively introduced, such as *The Norwegian Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* (2011), and the *Concentration for Quality* (2015) structural reform, which involved institutional mergers. Furthermore, several adjustments to the financial system and governance for the higher education sector, and revisions to the regulation on quality assurance and development in higher education, have been seen. The most recent policy dedicated to quality is the white paper *Quality Culture in Higher Education* (M.o.E.R., 2017), which had many policy forerunners (Michelsen & Aamodt, 2007), and the most notable policies are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Selection of policies addressing quality in Norwegian higher education

Title	Type of policy	Year
The Quality Reform *Bologna reform, new methods for teaching and evaluation,* *NPM, changes in financing*	White paper	2003
The Norwegian qualifications framework for lifelong learning	Regulatory framework	2011
Concentration for Quality *Institutional mergers, new accreditation demands*	White paper	2015
Quality Culture in Higher Education	White paper	2017
Long-term plan for research and higher education 2019-2028	Long-term policy	2019
The Skills Reform – Lifelong Learning	White paper	2020
New Act Relating to Universities and University Colleges	Law	2020
Reports on Future Skill Needs	Reports on Norway's future skill needs	2018, 2019, 2020, 2022

These policies are designed in different ways and vary in their objectives, measures and role in the governance mix of the Norwegian higher education sector. For instance, the Norwegian qualifications framework is an example of a regulatory policy, while the white paper on quality culture is an example of a policy signalling the authorities' expectations of the higher education sector, aimed at catalysing a discussion to promote a quality culture in higher education, rather than introducing regulatory or financial measures. Relatedly, Norway has a long-standing tradition for dialogue and a communicatively oriented approach, also coined "soft governance", to govern public organisations such as HEIs, and stakeholders are invited to give input on how the sector can be governed (Dobbins & Knill, 2017; Knutsen, 2017; Rommetvedt, 2005). The 2017 white paper on quality culture is an example of soft governance and a dialogical approach to governing quality in Norwegian higher education.

With reference to the dialogical and communicatively oriented soft governance approach, it is particularly interesting to study how national authorities govern the quality of higher education, and furthermore how stakeholders are included in this governance in addition to how the governance of quality is received among Norwegian academic institutions and staff. Thus, studying how quality is governed in Norwegian higher education, and the relation between public authorities, the institutional surroundings and HEIs, may shed new light on the relation between the main coordinating forces in higher education systems (Clark, 1983).

1.3 Main focus of the thesis and research questions

The above introduction outlines the focus of this thesis, which is the development and reception of the governance of the quality in the Norwegian higher education sector. This governance presents challenges, particularly concerning its legitimacy and its impact on the autonomy of academic institutions and staff. In the light of these challenges, the primary research question in this thesis is _How is the quality of Norwegian higher education governed?_ This thesis seeks to examine and analyse the multi-level governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education and the relationship between educational quality policies and quality work practices.

The Norwegian higher education sector is governed through financial frameworks, regulations, and political signals, often through soft governance mechanisms. However, how soft governance is developed, the key stakeholders involved in shaping it, and how it is implemented and understood within the higher education sector, are still underexplored aspects. Based on these considerations, the thesis aims to address three interconnected sub-questions:

- _How is the governance of higher education quality developed and framed, and by whom?_
- _How is the governance of quality perceived and possibly acted on in the higher education sector?_
- _What is the room for negotiating the governance of higher education quality?_

In this thesis, three studies have been undertaken at multiple governance levels to answer these questions; see Figure 1 for illustration.

Figure 1. The topics, governance levels and respective articles in the thesis.

Stakeholder involvement in HE quality policy development
Article 1
MACRO
(policy level)

Legitimisation of quality work
Article 2
MICRO
(individual level)

Institutional autonomy in governance of HE quality
Article 3
MESO
(institutional level)
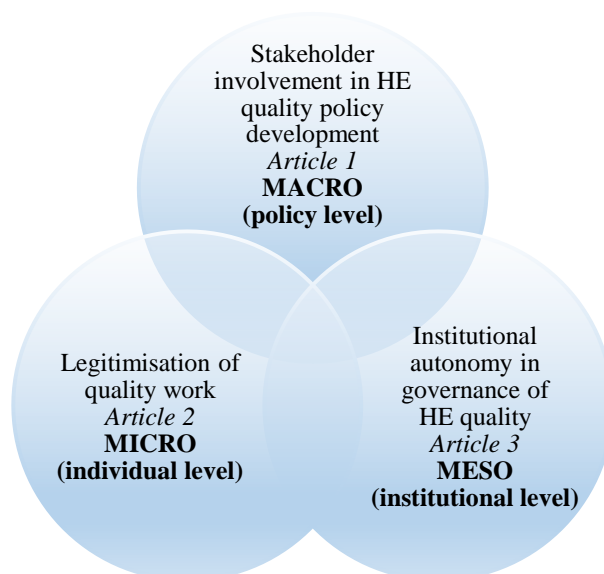
To answer the first sub-question, the involvement of stakeholders in developing a white paper on quality for the higher education sector from 2017 is discussed in Article 1. To answer the second sub-question, how staff groups in higher education work with quality is addressed in Article 2. To answer the third sub-question, the negotiating process for new agreements between the Norwegian public authorities and HEIs, and the anticipated effects of these agreements, is presented in Article 3.

1.4 Summary of findings and contributions

The three articles and this thesis independently offer empirical, methodological and theoretical contributions and new perspectives on how quality in Norwegian higher education is governed, as summarised in Table 2 and in the text below.

Table 2. Summary of research questions and contributions from the articles in in the thesis.

Aim of PhD project	Examine how the governance of higher education quality is developed and received in the Norwegian higher education sector		
Article	#1 Policy development and discursive institutionalism	#2 Quality work and legitimacy	#3 Agreements and autonomy
Title	Studying the Relation between Stakeholder Input and Higher Education Policy	Legitimising Quality Work in Higher Education	Agreements between the State and HEIs – How do they Matter for Institutional Autonomy?
Main findings	Employer groups and stakeholders in the higher education sector had a higher degree of coherence with the proposed measures in a recent white paper on quality culture in higher education, while universities and colleges had a lower degree of input represented in the white paper.	There are differences in the discretion that staff groups in HEIs enjoy in their quality work and how they legitimise this work. Despite common goals in quality work, there are both tensions and commonalities between the staff groups in their quality work.	HEIs have had substantial autonomy during negotiations for new agreements. However, agreements are expected to have limited effect on institutional autonomy in practice, except for their role in legitimising internal strategic priorities.
Contributions	Empirical contribution on studying hearing processes for white paper input and output. Methodological contribution on how to unpack hearing processes by content analysis. Theoretical contribution on how to apply discursive institutionalism for policy analysis	Empirical contribution on how different groups of staff relate to quality work. Methodological contribution on how to approach different logics in quality work. Theoretical contribution on how legitimacy and discretion are related to quality work.	Empirical contribution on studying negotiation processes for agreements between public authorities and HEIs. Methodological contribution on how to measure modifications in negotiations. Theoretical contribution to literature on governance in HE, and how autonomy and background ideational abilities are linked.

Article 1 provides empirical contributions by illustrating how the stakeholders who either complied ideologically, or were knowledge hubs for the ministry, had more influence on the aforementioned white paper on quality culture than other stakeholders. Methodologically, the article contributes to research on higher education policy, by applying content analysis of a hearing process, more specifically how to compare hearing responses (input) and the result in a white paper (output). Theoretically, the article also entails contributions on how to apply foreground and background ideational abilities in DI to the analysis of policy input and output.

Article 2 provides empirical contributions on how academic, administrative and leadership staff groups in Norwegian HEIs conduct, reason for and legitimise their day-to-day quality work. The results from this study show that academic staff protect their individual autonomy and the discretion of their quality work and legitimise this discretion with moral arguments underlining that their approaches to quality work benefit the students. Administrative staff engage in quality work because it is a natural part of their everyday jobs, and leadership staff undertake quality work primarily for the sake of audiences such as public authorities and stakeholders. The article contributes to developing the concept of quality work, by acknowledging that there are different approaches to and rationales for this work, depending on the staff group in question. Theoretically, the article contributes to unpacking how legitimacy and discretion are prerequisites for quality work, but also how different legitimacies and rationales lead to tensions when different staff groups cooperate on quality work. The article illustrates the staff groups' foreground discursive and background ideational abilities and how they apply legitimacy to argue for their respective approaches to quality work.

Article 3 provides empirical contributions on how HEIs were involved in developing new agreements with the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, and furthermore how these agreements are expected to affect institutional autonomy. The results show that HEIs were autonomous in the development of their own agreements, and furthermore that the agreements were not expected to lead to internal changes, besides supporting internal strategic plans. Methodologically, this article introduces new ways to study and measure negotiation processes between public authorities and HEIs by applying modification work (Asdal & Hobæk, 2020; Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022) as a methodological concept. Theoretically, this article contributes to governance literature in higher education studies by questioning the actual governance function of these agreements and how institutional autonomy and background ideational abilities are linked.

This thesis also provides independent empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions to higher education studies. *Empirically*, this thesis reveals that although there is consensus between public authorities, stakeholders, institutional leadership and different staff groups in higher education regarding how the quality of higher education is an issue of utmost importance, there is great variation in the perceptions of how quality is best governed at national, institutional and staff level. This finding is exemplified in Article 1 by the different stakeholder perspectives on how to enhance the quality of higher education, in Article 2 by the different staff groups' approaches to quality work, and in Article 3 by the tight connection between institutional strategies and the development agreements that, by intention, are instruments to ensure the quality of higher education. These varied approaches to the quality of higher education are perceived as legitimate by public authorities, stakeholders, leaders and staff at academic institutions.

In accordance with the theoretical framework of discursive institutionalism (DI) (Schmidt, 2008, 2010), the soft governance of quality in Norwegian higher education is, seemingly irrespective of its content, perceived as legitimate by the actors involved. One main reason for this is because soft governance gives academic institutions and staff the opportunity to communicate and deliberate on their internal core values and ideas. A tight connection between autonomy and the governance of higher education quality is thereby revealed. Therefore, this thesis illustrates that the legitimacy of the governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education depends on the extent to which institutional and staff autonomy is respected. Soft governance enforces individual autonomy in approaches to quality work at staff level and in the internal governance of educational quality at institutional level. Thus, *theoretically*, this thesis illustrates how autonomy and legitimacy can be applied as analytical concepts in DI to enhance our understanding of how the quality of higher education is governed.

In the context of *higher education studies*, this thesis sheds light on the inherent challenges in governing higher education quality. These challenges are closely intertwined with the concept of legitimacy, as discussed earlier, where the legitimacy of this governance depends on whether institutional and staff autonomy is respected. However, the tight connection between quality and autonomy also provides governance opportunities. It becomes evident that when the governance of quality is perceived as legitimate in itself, and when individual and institutional approaches to quality are likewise regarded as legitimate, the governance space widens. Furthermore, the thesis unveils that some stakeholders are more successful than others in providing input to the process for governance of higher education quality in Norway. Additionally, the thesis highlights how public authorities enable HEIs to exercise considerable autonomy in governing quality at their respective institutions. The

thesis also delves into the considerable discretion exercised by academic staff when they engage in quality work. In essence, this thesis explores the intricate and dynamic nature of the governance of quality at multiple levels. Through in-depth empirical exploration, it identifies both challenges and opportunities for public authorities who intend to "softly" govern the quality of Norwegian higher education. It also offers insight to HEIs and academic staff navigating this complex governance landscape.

Traditionally, research on the governance of higher education quality has predominantly focused on the bilateral relationship between public authorities and HEIs. Therefore, from a *methodological* perspective, as the articles within this thesis present empirical studies conducted at three distinct governance levels within Norwegian higher education – namely, the national level, institutional level, and staff level – this thesis offers fresh insights into the governance quality across multiple levels. This multi-level approach represents a valuable contribution to the field of higher education studies.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

This thesis concentrates on the link between autonomy and legitimacy in the context of the governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education. Specifically, it delves into three key areas: stakeholder involvement in policymaking, the governance dialogue regarding educational quality between the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research and HEIs, and the governance of day-to-day quality work. In essence, the thesis explores how soft governance is developed, perceived and whether and how it translates into action. This introductory chapter has established the theoretical and empirical framework for this thesis, summarising the essential findings and contributions that will be further explored in the subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 2, the scientific and empirical context of the governance of higher education quality is accounted for, both in a Norwegian and international context. A review of relevant research literature is given, and the historical lines of the governance of higher education quality in Norway are drawn up and related to an international governance backdrop.

In Chapter 3, the theoretical framework and analytical concepts in the thesis are presented and elaborated on. Firstly, the theoretical framework, DI, which is drawn from institutionalism, is accounted for. Then, the concepts of legitimacy and autonomy are presented and their relevance for DI is elaborated on. Towards the end of the chapter, the main expectations for the overall thesis are presented.

In Chapter 4, the methodological choices and considerations are presented. Firstly, the mixed research design of the thesis is presented. Then, the rationales behind the empirical deep dives into a white paper, quality work and agreements between the public authorities and HEIs are elaborated on, including strategies for data collection, as document analysis, interviews and combinations of these data sources. The method for content and thematic analysis of documents and interviews, respectively, and reflections concerning validity, reliability and ethical considerations, are discussed.

In Chapter 5, the three articles are summarised, including the main theoretical approaches, analytical tools and empirical findings.

- In Article 1, stakeholder involvement in the hearing process leading up to a white paper on quality culture in Norwegian HEIs is described and analysed.
- In Article 2, the rationales for quality work among academic, administrative and management staff are accounted for and analysed.
- In Article 3, the negotiating process between public authorities and HEIs for new agreements, intended to stimulate the quality of higher education, is presented. The analysis concerns the expectations of institutional representatives of the internal effects of these agreements.

These articles shed light on how one of the primary policy issues for higher education in recent decades, both in Norway and in other countries, namely, quality, is formulated, negotiated and comprehended. They also examine the dynamics that describe how this governance is acted upon within academic institutions and among staff groups.

In Chapter 6, the main findings from the three articles are presented and discussed, aiming to address the main research question of how educational quality is governed in Norwegian higher education, along with its the sub-questions. The value of applying DI as a theoretical approach is also discussed, and the limitations, implications and future research endeavours, are presented.

2 The Thesis in Context

Higher education studies are an interdisciplinary field that draws from various academic disciplines, including political science, sociology, history and psychology, and social science in general (Tight, 2014, 2020). This review incorporates literature from many of these disciplinary angles but primarily emphasises research from the fields of higher education studies and political science. It is important to note that the review is not exhaustive in its coverage of all aspects related to the governance of higher education quality. Instead, it represents a creative enquiry aimed at identifying relevant research literature that aligns with the research questions and illustrates the scholarly landscape in which this thesis is positioned (Montuori, 2005).

The topics of the governance of higher education, management of academic work and the quality of higher education are all extensively researched in higher education studies. For instance, quality in higher education has emerged as an area of specialisation within higher education studies, with journals, conferences and scientific milieus that focus singularly on the topic (Harvey & Williams, 2010) and specific themes within it, such as quality assessment (Steinhardt, Schneijderberg, Götze, Baumann, & Krücken, 2017). Since the literature of relevance for studying the governance of the higher education quality is extensive, some boundaries for this review have been set. The review starts by referring to canonical literature on the governance of and policy for higher education, including literature on public governance in general, to delimit central concepts. Then, literature which describes governance of HEIs, governance of academic work and quality work in higher education is reviewed, including literature on the governance of the Norwegian public sector in general and Norwegian HEIs.

2.1 Defining and delimiting key concepts

The term *governance* refers to meanings related to law, control and authority, and generally concerns patterns of rule or practices of governing (Bevir, 2023). Common to the array of definitions of governance and levels at which to study governance is the innate expectation that there is a principal and an agent in the governance relationship. For instance, when studying governance on a macro level, Ansell and Torfing define it as "the process of steering society and the economy through collective action and in accordance with common goals" (2016, p. 4), indicating that there is a principal in charge of the steering process. When governing, the principal will be concerned with motivating the agent to perform according to the principal's preferences (Dill & Soo, 2004, p. 58). With respect to the governance of public sector, the principal will normally be the public authorities,

while the agent may be a public institution, an organisation, or a group of individuals. Concerning the different levels of governance that are studied in this thesis, governance can be developed at the macro national level and implemented at the meso institutional and micro group level.

Furthermore, post-neoliberal postulates concerning decentralisation of power and active citizenship suggest that governance has evolved into increasingly individual-oriented understandings, challenging the principal-agent premise. It is acknowledged that governance can be more or less system- or rule-oriented, and in this thesis, the dialogical and communicative approach to governance is termed "soft governance" (Dobbins & Knill, 2017; Knutsen, 2017; Rommetvedt, 2011). In this, governance is increasingly understood as a dialogue between the state and public organisations (Ansell & Torfing, 2016; Knutsen, 2017; Rommetvedt, 2011), and a multilateral relationship is introduced to what, initially has been characterised by a more unilateral and rule-based relation between the macro level, and the meso and micro governance levels. Governance is understood as "regulated self-regulation", which indicates that institutions or individuals are recognised as, and expected to be, somewhat autonomous in governing themselves within the established frameworks set by the principal. In order to capture the multiple governance levels that this thesis addresses, the definition of soft governance is modified on the basis of Ansell and Torfing (2016) to "steering institutions and the staff that work in them according to common societal goals". While the primary focus of this thesis is on the soft governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education, this definition upholds an underlying hierarchical governance structure. It delineates a foundational governance relationship extending from the national macro level encompassing public authorities, to the institutional and meso levels represented by the HEIs, and finally the micro level involving individual staff members. Importantly, this definition also provides an opportunity to create lines of synthesis and analysis that span across these governance levels.

The tools that might be used in governance are manifold, and include laws, funding and signals. Among well-used characteristics of governance tools are nodality, referring to the messages that the government communicates; treasure, referring to the financial means proposed; authority, referring to the laws, regulations and norms introduced; and organisation, referring to how work related to governance is proposed to be organised (Hood, 1983). Consequently, *policies* are frequently used as messaging tools of governance. Gornitzka (1999) defines a policy as "a public statement of an objective and the kind of instruments that will be used to achieve it". This definition delimits the use of the term "policy" in this thesis, as it presupposes a principal-agent relationship, as addressed above, given the expectation that it will be the public authorities that communicate the public statement.

Examples of policies are white papers, green papers and reforms, and although these concepts might be ambiguous, they can be divided into financial, structural or more content-oriented policies (DFØ, 2020). "Soft governance" typically entails content-oriented policies and, to a lesser extent, financial and structural policies. The aforementioned white paper on quality culture (M.o.E.R., 2017), along with the new agreements between the Norwegian public authorities and HEIs, serve as examples of policies and instruments for the enhancement of the quality of Norwegian higher education.

2.2 Governance of higher education and academic work

Historically, public sector organisations, including HEIs, have been described as professional bureaucracies and loosely coupled systems (Mintzberg, 1979; Musselin, 2015; Scott & Davis, 2007; Weick, 1976). Additionally, concepts like "organised anarchies" (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972) have been employed to depict the inherent presence of conflicting interests, goals and outcomes within HEIs as organisations, and these concepts shed light on the unique challenges in the governance of these organisations. However, for the last decades, the exceptionality of HEIs has been questioned, and there has been a general tendency to regard universities and colleges as more similar to other public sector organisations, thus exposing HEIs to general public sector reforms (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Christensen, 2011; Frølich, Trondal, Caspersen, & Reymert, 2019; Paradeise, Bleiklie, Ferlie, & Reale, 2009). Globally, the public sector and HEIs have continuously been exposed to reforms, and the reform agenda varies over time and over regional and national contexts (Clark, 1983; Krüger, Parellada, Samoilovich, & Sursock, 2018; March & Olsen, 1983).

Since the 1980s, a main underlying script in the reformation of higher education systems can be ascribed to neoliberal reforms and New Public Management (NPM) (Bleiklie, 1998; Christensen, 2006; de Boer & Maassen, 2020; Ferlie, Musselin, & Andresani, 2008; Paradeise et al., 2009; Stephan, 2012). These reforms and policies were introduced as efforts to make HEIs more "business-like" by applying private sector management models and using metrics to develop and measure input and output (Feldman & Sandoval, 2018; Ferlie et al., 2008; Henkel, 2007). The idea behind this governance change was, in many countries, to devolve decision-making capacity from the public authorities to the HEIs, thereby allowing the government to steer from a distance while also strengthening HEIs as organisational actors (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Brøgger, Degn, & Bengtsen, 2023; de Boer & Enders, 2017). Effectively, NPM has played a role in introducing soft governance into the steering of national higher education sectors. This shift entails a more dialogical

approach to governance, thereby expanding HEIs opportunities for self-governance while operating within established boundaries.

Soft governance of the higher education sector has implied that HEIs have been given leeway if their strategic decisions comply with overall national and regional political expectations and the competence demands in the labour market (Solbrekke, Sugrue, & Sutphen, 2020). In parallel, Gornitzka and Maassen (2000) have illustrated how NPM has contributed to formally loosen the ties between the public authorities and HEIs, and strengthen the bond between HEIs and the market. Relatedly, Vukasovic (2017, 2018) has described how HEIs have been increasingly exposed to external interests through a rise of stakeholders that are involved in the policymaking and effectually the governance of higher education on a European level. With this, the higher education sectors in many European countries have become more directly exposed to the interests and priorities of important surrounding stakeholders, such as labour market demands. In the light of this, and pertaining to the governance of higher education in general, the question of who decides is at core (Gumport, 2005). More specifically, there is reason to examine how surrounding stakeholders and HEIs are involved both in developing and interpreting the governance of higher education.

Arguably, this general development of reforms, policies and stakeholder involvement, where the governance of higher education is dominated by managerialism, has contributed to changing the dominating political idea of higher education and the "social pact" between the state and HEIs (Alvesson & Benner, 2016; Maassen, 2014). As Bleiklie (1998) illustrated over two decades ago, it is widely acknowledged that the governance of higher education has moved from the cultural argument, emphasising the innate value of knowledge seeking that takes place at HEIs, to utilitarian arguments underscoring the HEIs' usefulness in providing society with qualified labour and relevant knowledge. On a more general, but relevant, note, Larsen, Maassen and Stensaker (2009) identify dilemmas in governing and reforming HEIs, for instance, between democracy and effectiveness, and external and internal influence in institutional decision making, and argue that these dilemmas are rooted in the different and often colliding internal governance logics. One effect of this development is the concerns that have been raised, at regional and national level, regarding how contemporary higher education policies and governance affect the institutional autonomy of HEIs and academic freedom of academic staff (Maassen, Martinsen, Elken, Jungblut, & Lackner, 2023).

However, although the dominating political ideas on higher education might have changed, there are varying perceptions of how these developments have influenced the internal governance and core academic activities at HEIs. On the one hand, scholars argue that higher education has changed

from being primarily a social institution to an industry (Gumport, 2000; Lægreid & Christensen, 2011). For instance, in an American context, Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) propose that the reigning economic world order has penetrated HEIs and generated what they call "academic capitalism". Gumport seconds these descriptions and argues that HEIs respond to NPM agendas and stakeholder interests in order to maintain and gain legitimacy from their surroundings, leading to an "academic restructuring" of higher education (Gumport, 2000). Yet, on the other hand, given the aforementioned specific challenges of governing higher education, scholars also argue that although some form of "academic restructuring" might be visible at an organisational and strategic level, there is scarce empirical evidence for the claim of fundamental changes in the core academic activities at HEIs (Berdahl, 1990). In this view, education and research largely remain unfettered by policy initiatives and stakeholder interests, so that while the procedural conditions under which education and research are undertaken in HEIs have been altered, decisions on the substantive dimensions of research and education are still dominantly the responsibility of the academic staff involved (ibid.). Musselin (2015), for instance, observes the tensions NPM measures create between academic and administrative organisations. In her view, managerial measures contribute to protecting academic territories, instead of fostering policy alignment, and have a limited impact on core academic activities. In sum, and as Kwiek, Pinheiro and Cantwell (2018) argue, although HEIs are subject to governance, they also self-regulate and make room for self-interest motivated action.

Why reforms and policies sorting under NPM and managerialism appear to have limited impact on core academic work is a complex question. One line of research focusing on the interface between managerial intentions and academic milieus describes how academics are reluctant to and tend not to comply with reform and policy agendas. For instance, Kalfa, Wilkinson and Gollan (2018) describe how academic staff react with neglect and exit from their work environment when exposed to what they call "managerialist imperatives". Ese (2019) has identified four main strategies for how academic staff react to managerialism, and these are resistance, organisational misbehaviour, gaming and what he calls functional stupidity. In line with this, Quinn (2012) seeks to understand the mechanisms that drive these reactions and argues that academic resistance is due to different discourses among academic and managerial staff. Feldman and Sandoval (2018) found, accordingly, that academic staff use strategies such as resisting management initiatives, withdrawing and not engaging with work beyond the bare minimum, when they encounter professionalising and managerialist agendas proposed by institutional management. Furthermore, they suggest that academic staff apply these strategies in order to protect their individual room to manoeuvre and their

independent space at work. Supporting this, Benner (2023) found that academic staff generally welcome nouveau approaches to governing Swedish universities that move away from the metrics and control focus of NPM-related governance and facilitate trust-based governance models, as this governance builds on the intrinsic motivation of academic staff and aims at increasing their professional autonomy.

The above literature discusses the tendency of academic staff to resist compliance with managerial governance and policy agendas when these agendas diverge from the established norms and values of academia. However, recent research suggests that the influence of managerial logics on academic staff is only moderate, and in many cases, both academic and managerial logics co-exist without significant tension. For instance, Reymert (2021) has demonstrated that managerial logics to some extent influence academic professional recruitment processes. Simultaneously, these core academic processes remain deeply entrenched in robust and enduring disciplinary and academic cultures, suggesting that the proliferation of managerial logics in academia may have reached its limits. In parallel, Edwards (2022) highlights how academics in the UK continue to engage in unfunded research, even when funding aligns with governmental and corporate interests. This practice serves as an act of resistance that rooted in intellectual creativity and commitment to the individual autonomy in academic activities. Hence, although the political and stakeholder influences may appear to shape the organisational structures of HEIs and the core academic activities to some degree, these influences have their boundaries, and much of what lies beyond these boundaries remains largely detached from managerial and governance agendas.

Building on the above discussion, there is ample research exploring the connection between managerial policy agendas and academic staff who exhibit reluctance or even defiance towards these agendas. This body of literature unveils the academic efforts to safeguard and uphold core academic activities and the autonomy associated with academic work. Despite the pervasive importance of quality in the governance of higher education across numerous European countries, there is a noticeable scarcity of research within the field of higher education studies that investigates how governance initiatives related to educational quality are received and unfold across different governance levels in the academic domain.

2.3 Governance of the quality of higher education

The quality of higher education is an extensive theme in contemporary higher education studies, with literature ranging from the critical tradition, to more applied work on how to enhance

quality and explore whether sub-themes of the quality of higher education are developing into research specialities (Rosa & Amaral, 2014; Steinhardt et al., 2017; Westerheijden et al., 2007). Although, and as argued above, there is no unanimous interpretation of the relative influence of managerial policy agendas and external interest on the governance of HEIs and core academic work, there is agreement in research literature that higher education in Europe increasingly and over time has been subject to political and stakeholder scrutiny on quality (Magalhães, Veiga, Ribeiro, Sousa, & Santiago, 2013; Stensaker, 2007; Weber & Dolgova-Dreyer, 2007). Enhanced quality is not a goal that is exclusive to the governance of contemporary higher education. Quality supervision of services and products has been around since guilds in the Middle Ages took on responsibility for inspecting the quality of products, and more formalised quality control came about in the early 20th century, when mass production increased (Nair, Webster, & Mertova, 2010). In the public and private sectors in general, enhanced quality as a prime political goal was at its peak in the 1980s and 1990s (Cole & Scott, 2000; Weber & Dolgova-Dreyer, 2007; Zbaracki, 1998).

In the last decades, quality has been an important and enduring international issue in the governance of higher education. Across Europe and in most OECD countries, quality enhancement, metrics and accountability have featured prominently on the political agenda for higher education (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Elken & Stensaker, 2011; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Huisman & Stensaker, 2022; UNESCO, 2009; Westerheijden et al., 2007). Vukasovic (2017) has also illustrated how for the last two decades stakeholders have regarded the quality of education as one of the prime policy issues in European higher education. The political and stakeholder attention concerns quality improvement in higher education in general and also the accountability of higher education (Weber & Dolgova-Dreyer, 2007). The attention to quality is thereby evident as both a global and regional policy issue in higher education and is visible in many national higher education systems (Frølich et al., 2014; Kallo & Semchenko, 2016; Tomusk, 2007).

The governance of higher education quality depends on efficiency and goal attainment, but also a shift in focus to increase the relative value and status of teaching and learning, compared to the traditionally high status of research. In doing so, the governance of the higher education quality taps into the recaptured discussion of the governance of core academic activities. It is thus possible to detect positions regarding the governance of higher education quality equivalent to other aspects of academic work, involving the relative compliance with quality reforms and political signals. On the one hand, regional and national higher education systems and institutions respond to external demands and governance of educational quality, and redefine their core educational activities to

attend to these signals. For instance, Elken et al. describe how HEIs have strong incentives to comply with external expectations related to quality, particularly with regard to quality assurance, since weak or absent compliance might entail sanctions (2020, p. 24). In this regard, it is not a question of whether, but how and to what extent the quality zeitgeist has infused HEIs and the staff working in these institutions. On the other hand, governance moves to enhance quality to some extent provide for academic institutions and staff to adjust quality policies and measures to their local, disciplinary and individual contexts. For instance, Vukasovic (2014) describes how disciplinary differences come into play in institutional work on quality assurance, and illustrates how institutional strategies on educational quality are modified to match local and disciplinary contexts. Mårtensson, Roxå, and Stensaker (2014) find, in parallel, that "strong microcultures" in academia will typically only relate to quality assurance recommendations if these recommendations comply with their own plans and goals. This research aligns with Borch (2020), who describes how academic staff mainly use student course evaluations for quality assurance, and not for quality enhancement, for which they are also designed. She describes how academic staff facilitate evaluations that are rooted in their own values, experience, academic cultures and traditions. In parallel, Prøitz (2015) also describes how although learning outcomes have been introduced in curriculum development to ensure that educational provision meets common European and national quality standards, the local national, institutional and study programme adaptations weaken their standardising abilities. However, this research does not examine the specific dynamics that occur at different levels when introducing soft governance measures for educational quality, whether at the institutional or individual staff levels. Nor does it investigate how this form of governance translates into distinct institutional, local, and individual practices.

2.4 The Norwegian public sector and HEIs

The governance of Norwegian public organisations is historically characterised by dialogue and a communicative approach between the public authorities, the public organisations concerned and interest groups, also called stakeholders (Knutsen, 2017; Rommetvedt, 2005; Solbrekke et al., 2020). This dialogue is facilitated by a long tradition for inviting organised interest groups, such as unions, employer and enterprise organisations, sectorial and professional groups, to give input on various governance processes (Nergaard, 1987; Olsen, 1983, 1988; Rommetvedt, 2011). Possibly one of the most cited quotes in Norwegian political science is "votes count, but resources decide" as Stein Rokkan's seminal summary of national power relations. Here, Rokkan suggests that although votes

decide the composition of the national parliament, the Storting, important political decisions are also taken in the corporative channel, where the public authorities negotiate policies with such influential stakeholders (Rommetvedt, 2005).

In Norway, stakeholders in higher education are manifold, and although it is challenging to draw a precise and robust line between different groups of stakeholders and individual stakeholders (Binderkrantz, 2009; Wood, Mitchell, Agle, & Bryan, 2021), one common classification is on the basis of political and economic interests. For instance, whether the stakeholder represents employers or employees in Norwegian working life, and whether the stakeholder is a higher education institution or a relevant public agency. As the above indicates, resources may influence dialogue-oriented governance, given that the most resourceful stakeholders might have more decisional power. Furthermore, a main mechanism to ensure dialogue in the governance of public agencies or organisations, such as HEIs, is to conduct formal and textual hearings prior to developing policies, such as long-term plans, laws and white papers (Asdal, 2011; Krick & Holst, 2018; Olsen, 1988). This hearing procedure is described in the Norwegian Public Administration Act (1970), which states that organisations and groups that are affected by a policy or regulation shall have the opportunity to express their perspectives on the issues subject to consultation, before the policy is put into action. Hearings are considered significant democratic features of Norwegian public administration, and they follow specific procedures concerning transparency, including identification of invitees for submitting hearing responses and granting public access to these documents. Despite the transparency inherent in hearing processes, determining the relative influence of different stakeholders on policy can be challenging. The processing, assessment, and utilisation of stakeholder input by public authorities lack transparency, and there has been limited research on the hearing process for the Norwegian higher education sector.

Another, nouveau method to enable a governance dialogue between public authorities and public organisations, such as HEIs, in Norway and in many European countries, is the use of agreements (de Boer & Enders, 2017; Degn & Sorensen, 2015; Elken, Frølich, & Reymert, 2016; Gornitzka, Stensaker, Smeby, & de Boer, 2004). These agreements generally aim to balance governmental control and the autonomy of HEIs within the frames of dialogue oriented soft governance (Krüger et al., 2018). In Norway, the new development agreements (DAs) between the Ministry of Education and Research and universities and university colleges were introduced in 2015 and today are used as an important aspect of the governance mix for all 21 state-owned HEIs (Elken & Borlaug, 2020; Hægeland et al., 2015; Larsen, Hofsøy, Yuan, & Aasen, 2020).

There is scarce research of the Norwegian agreements, but Elken and Borlaug (2020) have shown how they have contributed to a complex governance structure for Norwegian HEIs. Apart from this, we know little about whether such agreements enable institutional autonomy, how these agreements operate internally, and how HEIs engage with this communicative and dialogue-oriented approach to governance.

Furthermore, the previously outlined descriptions of the global changes in higher education governance have resonated in how Norwegian policy makers and researchers account for incremental changes in the governance of higher education. Although the extremes in the above debate on managerialism have not gained foothold in the public debate on Norwegian higher education, numerous voices contend that managerialism and NPM penetrate vital features of Norwegian HEIs. A recent official report has raised concerns about the increased professionalisation, and bureaucratisation of the higher education sector, which may blur the lines between academic work and administration, posing a potential challenge to academic freedom (NOU 2022: 2, p. 71). Also, academic concerns regarding managerialist agendas and governance have been voiced frequently in recent decades. For instance, Kjeldstadli (2010) called for freeing the Norwegian HEIs from state and commercial interests, asserting that academic capitalism had also set foot in our corner of the world. Recently, Tjora, together with a palette of influential Norwegian academics, was concerned for how "[…] recent reforms are able to destroy HEIs' possibilities to contribute with solid and relevant education […]" (2019, p. 11). However, studies of higher education reforms in Norway suggest that they seldom have a dramatic impact on the core academic activities inside the HEIs (Frølich et al., 2014). The absence of radical change as a result of reforms might be due to the specific institutional characteristics and complexities of HEIs (Christensen, Gornitzka, & Ramirez, 2019; Clark, 1983), and furthermore that these characteristics enable HEIs to "neutralize managerial panaceas" (Maassen & Stensaker, 2015). Thus, while there is ample research on the governance of higher education in Norway in general, the governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education, especially with respect to the soft governance relations between the system, institutional and individual levels, has until now received limited attention.

2.5 Governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education

In Norway, the Quality Reform of 2003 introduced quality as a central concern in the governance of the higher education sector, and a series of policies and measures aimed at addressing this issue have successively been introduced, see Chapter 1.2. Similar to other countries, Norwegian

policies concerning the quality of higher education operate under the assumption that HEIs will engage with policies by responding to the challenges they address (Frølich et al., 2014). Studies on Norwegian policies related to higher education quality have demonstrated that utilitarian arguments have gained prominence over the last few decades. For example, there is a growing emphasis on these policies becoming more market oriented, viewing higher education as a means to fulfil market demands for relevant competences and innovation (Lackner & Stensaker, 2022; Sundby & Lackner, 2022). Recent research has also indicated that Norwegian HEIs strive to respond to these governance demands through organisational adaptation (Frølich et al., 2019). However, how HEIs respond to soft governance, especially governance have they themselves have contributed to developing, as is the case with the new DAs, remains and unanswered question.

Furthermore, to Bloch et al. (2021), quality work undertaken at HEIs includes systemic, cultural and practice-oriented initiatives to enhance the quality of higher education. Regarding systemic quality work, every Norwegian HEI has a regulatory responsibility to take charge of the quality of their education programmes through systematic quality work and by developing the quality of education programmes at their institution (Studiekvalitetsforskriften, 2010). Consequently, every HEI has a quality system, and normally the board of the institution approves and has the final responsibility for the institutional quality system. Although much of the quality work pertains to the institutional quality system, a large share of the day-to-day quality work in higher education is embedded in everyday practices that are relevant to the cultural aspects of quality work, and not necessarily connected to the quality systems. Cultural quality work in higher education is distributed among various groups of staff at all levels within the institutions. It involves individuals in various roles among academic, administrative and leadership staff. Additionally, groups such as dean meetings and various councils play a role, and substantial amounts of documents are utilised in both the systemic and cultural aspects of quality work related to educational provision. Hence, and as Elken and Stensaker argue (2020), and as illustrated by studies of educational leadership by Aamodt et al. (2016), quality work in Norwegian higher education is a highly dispersed phenomenon and responsibility within the HEIs, involving an extensive range of personnel and a mix of disciplinary, administrative and leadership "lines" of work. Yet the relation between these different lines in their day-to-day quality work, and how they approach the governance of quality in higher education, is understudied.

We should also remember that HEIs can be characterised as exceptional examples of professional bureaucracies, and loosely coupled systems, entailing specific challenges for the

governance of these institutions (Mintzberg, 1979; Musselin, 2015; Scott & Davis, 2007; Weick, 1976). These characteristics, and the literature reviewed above on academic responses to managerial agendas, suggest that HEIs and the people that work in them do not necessarily direct their actions in accordance with governance on the quality of higher education. Hence, the question of how soft governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education affects the HEIs beyond organisational changes, among staff groups and on an individual level remains largely unanswered.

2.6 Review in summary and implications for this thesis

The review in this chapter has provided general insights into the overarching trends in higher education governance. It has highlighted the growing emphasis on market-driven approaches, the impact of managerialism on academic endeavours, and the prominent policy focus on enhancing the quality of higher education. The review includes various research perspectives, exploring how public authorities develop policies and govern the higher education sector, as well as the involvement of stakeholders in these processes. While external pressures exert some influence on academic activities, it is important to note that academic staff and institutions do not invariably conform to these policies and governance. Furthermore, although there has been a significant increase in governance attention toward the quality of higher education, its impact may be limited to specific facets of academic work, with other areas remaining less affected by this agenda. Additionally, the review suggests that academic institutions and staff are somewhat autonomous in their approaches and interactions within the context of the governance of higher education quality. However, our understanding of how this autonomy is argued for and manifests itself within Norwegian HEIs and among academic staff remains limited.

According to the review, the quality of higher education is a policy issue that is relevant to three dimensions that also are distinct for EHEA governance (Vukasovic, Jungblut, Chou, Elken, & Ravinet, 2018). First, quality is a *multi-level* issue, since the governance of quality is distributed across many governance levels; at micro (individual), meso (institutional) and macro (national) levels. Second, quality is a *multi-actor* issue, since non-state actors, such as stakeholder organisations (Lackner, 2021; Vukasovic, 2017), are invested in the governance of higher education quality. Third, quality is *multi-issued*, since the governance of higher education quality has spill overs to and from other sectors, while the complexity of the concept of quality in itself is open to multiple understandings (Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011). Consequently, the governance of the quality of higher education requires multi-level approaches, possibly including one or more of the above dimensions.

According to Sandberg and Alvesson (2011), both notable research gaps and problematisation of previous research problems may guide the development of new research questions, as is the case in this thesis. *Firstly*, at macro level, the review describes how, although there are longstanding traditions for including stakeholder interests in policymaking for the Norwegian public sector, it is scarcely problematised how public authorities handle and potentially make use of input from stakeholders when developing policies in general. Additionally, the relative influence of stakeholders specifically on policymaking and governance of the quality of higher education is understudied. Therefore, a recent, influential policy on the quality of higher education is investigated (Article 1) to understand whether and how stakeholder perspectives on quality influence quality policies in Norwegian higher education. *Secondly*, at meso level, few studies have been conducted of how Norwegian HEIs relate to the "soft" governance of higher education quality at the institutional level, and whether and how this governance influences their internal organisation and activities. Therefore, a negotiation process for new agreements between the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research and HEIs is examined (Article 3) to understand how issues concerning the autonomy of academic institutions are handled in the governance of quality in the higher education sector. *Thirdly*, at micro level, studies have been undertaken to elucidate how staff in higher education generally relate to managerial governance agendas, but there is still an opening to problematise whether and how different staff groups in Norwegian HEIs govern themselves according to these agendas, particularly with respect to the governance of quality in higher education. Therefore, quality work among staff in Norwegian HEIs is studied (Article 2) to understand how governance agendas on educational quality are perceived and acted upon among different staff groups within higher education.

In summary, even though the Norwegian government is flanked with relevant stakeholders and equipped to softly govern the quality of higher education, there is no automatic response to this governance at institutional and individual level. Consequently, this thesis problematises our understanding of how academic institutions and the staff that work in them navigate between academic values and traditions, and governance, and external interests concerning education quality. The research gaps and problematisations identified lead to the key focus of this thesis, namely how quality in higher education is governed at multiple levels, and how this governance relates to institutional and staff autonomy in academia.

3 Theoretical Framework

The previous chapter emphasised the need to enhance our understanding of the multi-level governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education. This is a multifaceted domain intertwined with academic traditions, norms, and external interests through the agendas of the public authorities and stakeholders, manifested in policies and reforms aimed at improving educational quality. To describe the interplay between the governance of higher education quality and the autonomy of academic institutions and staff, a robust theoretical framework is required. This framework should be capable of comprehending both the surface interpretations of quality governance in higher education and the intrinsic values that underpin academic institutions and academic work. We need a theoretical approach that facilitates an understanding of how individual and institutional academic values intersect with externally driven policy objectives concerning the enhancement of educational quality. In this thesis, a variant of institutional theory is employed, known as discursive institutionalism (DI), as the theoretical framework. This choice serves to address the main research question on the governance of quality in Norwegian higher education.

3.1 Institutional theory and discursive institutionalism (DI)

At the heart of political science is the study of institutions (Peters, 2012). Institutionalism, and especially recent strands that emphasise how the environment impacts organisations, is extensively applied in social science, also when researching higher education systems, universities and colleges, and individual academic behaviour. Institutionalism is amorphous and complex, but generally serves as the basis for studying and explaining how institutions work, how they are maintained and change, and how they may prescribe behaviour among specific actors (Olsen, 2007), such as university leaders and academics. Institutional theory hereby dismisses assumptions that individuals solely act autonomously irrespective of institutional frames, for instance, that individuals act exclusively based on rational utility maximising principles or socio-psychological characteristics. This thesis applies an institutional approach to studying the governance of quality in Norwegian higher education and therefore assumes that formal and informal institutions influence the behaviour and autonomy of both staff who work in higher education and higher education institutions (HEIs) per se.

According to Scott (Scott, 2014; Scott & Davis, 2007), there are some common denominators and assumptions for all branches of institutional theory. Firstly, institutions are governance structures that embody rules for social and political conduct. Secondly, when individuals, groups and organisations conform to these rules, they gain legitimacy, which is crucial for their survival. Thirdly,

institutions tend to resist change and, relatedly, autonomy is a general topic of concern in institutional theory. Fourthly, previous institutional structures matter for new developments within institutions. The various branches of institutionalism vary in how and the extent to which they build on these assumptions for understanding how and why institutions are stable or change, and the logics that explain institutional stability and change (Olsen, 2009a; Schmidt, 2010).

If institutionalism is a genus, it has many species. Notable subdomains within institutionalism include rational choice institutionalism (RI), historical institutionalism (HI), and normative institutionalism (NI, also known as sociological institutionalism). While the utility of drawing a clear distinction between "old" and "new" institutionalism for enhancing our understanding of governance issues may be debated (Selznick, 1996), it is essential to acknowledge that these strands of institutionalism were, at least in part, developed to critique earlier models that placed significant emphasis on the power of individuals and actors within organisations (Selznick, 1948, 1984). However, these various strands of institutionalism have distinct focuses and explanations for institutional change, including their approach to how institutional features influence individual behaviour (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Additionally, they offer different perspectives on institutional change and stability. As shown in Table 3a, RI leans on rational features, such as utility-maximising capabilities, while HI emphasises the significance of historical features of institutions, such as "stickiness" or "path dependency", and NI places emphasis on normative features, such as values and intentions, to elucidate institutional change and stability. Nevertheless, these variants of institutionalism share common ground considering institutions as relatively stable entities and attribute change primarily to exogenous factors, such as external shocks.

Table 3a. The four major strands of institutionalism (based on Schmidt 2010)

Institutionalisms	RATIONAL (RI)	HISTORICAL (HI)	NORMATIVE (NI)	DISCURSIVE (DI)
What is explained?	The behaviour of rational actors	- Practices - Structures	- Norms - Culture	- Ideas - Discourse
How is it explained?	Calculation	Path-dependency	Appropriateness	Communication
How are institutions defined?	Incentive structures	Macro structures	- Cultural norms - Frames	- Meaning structures - Constructs
How is change approached?	- Institutions are stable - Continuity due to fixed preferences	- Institutions are stable - Continuity due to path dependency (interrupted by critical junctures)	- Institutions are stable - Continuity due to cultural rules and norms	- Institutions are dynamic - Change due to ideas and discursive interaction
How is change explained?	Exogenous shock	Exogenous shock	Exogenous shock	Endogenous communicative action and deliberation

Furthermore, the scholarly attention to language has gained attention in social science in general, and for the last decades, it has been influential in studies of institutions and policy (Fischer & Gottweis, 2012). Variations over "the argumentative turn" and "discursivism" are frequently used to label contemporary scientific approaches to empirical material, where research "lends itself to representations in the form of language, for example, conversations and texts" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 136). Institutionalism has also shown an interest in this theoretical orientation towards language and discourse, and particularly the normative approach has projected an interest in the language of governance. However, these previously mentioned variants of institutionalism do not have a primary interest in the communication and language of governance, and generally regard language as expressions of values and ideas in governance, and do not regard communication and language as the objects to study per se. Since this thesis revolves around research questions that address how policies are formulated, negotiated and framed, these words allude to a primarily language and communication oriented theoretical approach.

In recent years, a strand of institutionalism has emerged in political science, and particularly in public administration and public policy studies, that is interested in the role of ideas and discourse in governance, namely discursive institutionalism (DI) (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; Peters, 2012; Schmidt, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2015). Alongside its more established forerunners (including RI, HI and NI), DI is also aimed at explaining institutional change and stability. According to the previously mentioned institutionalisms, rational behaviour and calculation (RI), historical rules and path-dependency (HI) and cultural norms and appropriateness (NI) (March & Olsen, 2006) are the objects and logics of explanation when studying institutional change or stability. In DI, the objects and logics of explanation differ from the other institutionalisms mainly because this theoretical approach is primarily based on discourse, communicative practices, and narratives of institutional change and stability (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998; Schmidt, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2015), as the overview in Table 3a illustrates. Also, DI is more inclined to regard institutions as dynamic entities and, possibly because of this perspective, highlights endogenous factors and subjective ideas to explain institutional change. Furthermore, and regarding the fundamental question of what an institution is, the previously mentioned versions of institutionalism distinguish between the institution itself and the individuals that inhabit it (Peters, 2012), whereas DI is more open to regard the institution as a process, or that the institution is embedded in acts of communication. In DI therefore, ideas and discourse per se and the process of communication tend to be the objects and logics of explanation, as illustrated in Table 3a.

3.2 DI as the main theoretical approach

In DI, the primary approach to explaining institutional change and stability revolves around founding ideas on how ideas are communicated, and the act of communication itself. Scholars who apply a DI approach often argue that other institutionalism are better equipped to explore institutional stability rather than change (Peters, 2012; Schmidt, 2010). One significant critique of DI is its suggested amenability to change, given that institutions are, after all, regarded to provide stability. It is not given that scholarly interest in the communication of ideas and the intrinsic values they are built upon is more adept at explaining change rather than stability. Notably, institutional ideas and values may exhibit as much stability and predictability as the formal structures that surround them.

Furthermore, DI scholars are oriented towards the "interactive processes of ideas generation, deliberation, and legitimization" (Schmidt, 2010, p. 15). They pay particular attention to the Habermasian concept of "deliberation" (Habermas, 1995; Habermas & Rehg, 1996), and how deliberation inherently involves an act of legitimisation. DI scholars typically study how ideas originating within institutions are brought to the fore to be deliberated on and consequently legitimised. One reason for this attention to the communication of ideas is, as Schmidt (2010, p. 15) argues, the necessity to comprehend how ideas transition from individual thoughts to collective action. This is because, as Schmidt puts it (ibid.):

> [w]e don't, after all, know what people are thinking or why they act the way they do until they say it. And we don't for the most part engage in collective action or in collective (re)thinking of our actions without the articulation, discussion, deliberation, and legitimization of our ideas about our actions.

The proposition here is that the communication and expression of ideas serve as a foundation for institutional change or stability. This implies that the control and direction of both individuals and institutions are not rigid or unchanging; instead, they are continuously redefined and moulded not only by the mere notions and viewpoints of the participants (Fischer, 2015), but also through the act of articulating and disseminating these ideas.

In DI, two concepts are at the core of explaining institutional change and stability, namely "background ideational abilities" and "foreground discursive abilities". *Background ideational abilities* explain the deep-rooted ideas and processes that contribute to creating and maintaining institutions, "signifying what goes on in individuals' minds as they come up with new ideas or follow old ones" (Schmidt, 2012, p. 92; 2015). By identifying and articulating the background ideational abilities and the ideas and values that reign in specific settings, research applying DI entails the ability to portray how different agents make sense of and act within different contexts of meaning (Schmidt,

2008, 2012). Furthermore, the profound ideational abilities cannot explain institutional change and stability single-handedly, and therefore the concept of *foreground discursive abilities* is applied and described as the "ability to think and argue outside the institutions in which they continue to act" and include actions of communication, deliberation and persuasion. In this way, individuals or collectives contribute to change or maintain institutions when they communicate and deliberate on their intrinsic ideas and values to others.

Therefore, DI is not only useful for understanding which ideas and values are rooted within organisations, but also for explaining why some of these ideas and values are communicated as part of an institutional or individual agenda. DI is a theoretical lens that both explains the front and backstage of ideational reasoning; why some ideas are successful within an institution, and how individuals and groups within institutions use their agency to change or maintain institutions by discursive tools. DI is relevant for this thesis because this theoretical approach is instrumental to furthering the understanding of how quality in higher education is governed and articulated, how policies on the topic are developed and negotiated, and which values and ideas both are and are not included in this governance. Furthermore, a DI theoretical approach also aids in understanding why some agents are closer to the orbit of idea generation and deliberation on quality in higher education than others. This counts to study how governance of educational quality is perceived and possibly acted upon. Here, DI is used to further the understanding of why some policy ideas are prone to reverberate at different levels within HEIs. DI is thereby capable of capturing the links between high-level ideas at macro level and micro local contexts and is an adequate theoretical perspective for this thesis.

However, to apply DI as a theoretical framework to answer the research questions in this thesis, two concepts that are at the core across all variants of institutionalism need to be explained – legitimacy and autonomy. As Table 3b illustrates, rational choice explains an institution's legitimacy by its ability to follow rules, and normative institutionalism emphasises the importance of normative matches between the institution and its surroundings for the institution to gain legitimacy and be able to execute autonomy. In DI, these concepts are not sufficiently articulated to, for instance, help us understand how and why individuals, groups and organisations interact with governance agendas, such as on quality, to gain legitimacy? Furthermore, given that DI is more concerned with explaining institutional change than stability (Schmidt, 2010, 2012); how can we characterise the narratives of institutional resistance to change, for instance, academic responses to managerial intentions of change that are discussed in Chapter 2 in this thesis, from a DI perspective? The concepts of legitimacy and

autonomy address the overarching theoretical structures of institutionalism for institutional change and stability, but in DI, how legitimacy and autonomy are gained still needs to be untangled. In the next section, legitimacy, autonomy and the links between these concepts within the theoretical approach of DI are accounted for.

3.3 Legitimacy and autonomy as analytical concepts

As mentioned in 3.1, one core concept in institutionalism, and as mentioned in 3.1, is how institutions seek *legitimacy* to justify their actions and, in essence, their existence (Scott, 2014). Legitimacy means lawful and Suchman (1995, p. 574) defines legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate with some socially constructed system of norms, beliefs and definitions". Since Meyer and Rowan (1977) observed how organisations increase their legitimacy by conforming to institutionalised myths in their environment, legitimacy has been regarded as a determiner for institutional change or stability. Within institutionalism, substantial efforts have been devoted to explaining how external stakeholders such as governments, interest organisations and customers grant legitimacy to organisations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), suggesting that actions are legitimate if they are perceived as desirable or proper by external stakeholders.

Notably, institutionalist approaches to legitimacy have explored how external stakeholders and institutions can construct and penetrate organisations. This connection between external and internal legitimacy arises because the internal resonance of external interests can also foster legitimacy (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Suchman, 1995). From a normative institutional approach, Gornitzka describes legitimacy as the assumption that for governance to lead to institutional change, there must be a "normative match". This match entails a "congruence between the values and beliefs underlying a proposed programme or policy and the identity and traditions of the organisation" (1999, p. 10). However, Olsen (2007) suggests that institutional autonomy is legitimised by reference to the value of a rule or a norm. This brings us to the starting point for applying legitimacy as an analytical concept. In our case, quality in higher education, beyond being a core issue in governance, appears to encompass additional dimensions that go beyond merely representing a normative match between policies and institutional values.

Furthermore, and as Schmidt notes, the concern with RI, HI and NI approaches to legitimacy is their foundation, which is built on the premise of a hierarchical relationship between the institution and its surroundings, i.e., that the institution depends on legitimacy from authorities, stakeholders etc.

In DI, it is acknowledged that gaining legitimacy can indeed also be "a process of ongoing contestation in deliberative discursive processes" (2008, p. 320). This perspective suggests that institutional surroundings, including public authorities, also depend on internal legitimacy when governing, and this draws our attention towards how institutions, and individuals and groups within organisations, negotiate the internal legitimacy of policy issues, such as quality. DI not only articulates how institutions select their environments (Weick, 1995) and *who they seek legitimacy from*, but also *what they seek legitimacy for*, in other words DI articulates what their purpose is. Hence, institutional legitimacy in DI, has, in accordance with the other strands of institutionalism in general, an external dimension related to the organisational surroundings, in addition to an internal dimension related to intrinsic values and the deliberation of these values.

In the above it is argued that both external and internal legitimacy are relevant for DI, although the link between internal and external legitimacy, and the internal legitimacy of governance values and actions *within* institutions, still arguably needs to be articulated in DI (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; van der Steen, Quinn, & Moreno, 2022). Furthermore, how discursive and ideational abilities are engaged in gaining legitimacy both internally and externally needs to be articulated. As DI gives emphasis to the dynamic nature of institutions and deliberative actors within institutions, this theoretical stance is expected to regard legitimacy as a consequence of endogenous communicative action. In this, institutions deliberate on how and why their actions are desirable and proper, and by justifying their actions they gain both internal and external legitimacy (Scott, 2014; Suchman, 1995). However, given that there are no explicit rules (RI), historical paths (HI) or norms (NI) to follow, a pertinent question is how actors know whether their ideas and values are legitimate? Is it the mere act of communication and deliberation of intrinsic ideas and values that provides institutions and actors within them with legitimacy, or may other factors or processes explain how institutions and actors gain legitimacy? Consequently, DI is applied in this thesis to explore how academic institutions and staff potentially use discursive and ideational abilities to gain legitimacy when they approach and interact with governance on educational quality. As highlighted in Table 3b, in DI it is expected that academic institutions and staff gain legitimacy as a result of the communication of their internal ideas when they approach governance on higher education quality.

Another significant concept in public administration, as well as within institutionalism, is *autonomy*. Autonomy pertains to the relative freedom to self-govern and can apply both to organisations and the individuals within them. Within political science and the nexus of

institutionalism, the independence of public organisations in their interactions with public authorities has been extensively studied. For example, scholars have examined the extent to which agencies can establish their own operational goals and procedures to achieve these goals (Bach, 2016; Maggetti, 2012; Maggetti & Verhoest, 2014; Olsen, 1983, 1988, 2009a, 2009b; Verhoest, Peters, Bouckaert, & Verschuere, 2004). When autonomy is studied at the organisational level, it concerns the organisation's capacity to set goals and develop strategies based on those objectives (Bach, 2016; Maggetti & Verhoest, 2014; Verhoest et al., 2004)[1]. In recent decades, global higher education reforms and governance have paced significant emphasis on the concept of 'autonomy', partly as a result of NPM, where the state adopts a more distant steering approach, and partly a response from organisations to what they perceive as limitations on their autonomy (de Boer & Enders, 2017).

Similarly with the concept of legitimacy, various branches of institutionalism have been occupied with explaining how and why organisations and the actors within them gain or lose autonomy. In RI, autonomy is expected to result from how organisations operate within their formally defined and explicit boundaries, whereas in HI, autonomy is explained by an organisation's ability to operate in accordance with historical paths. NI posits that autonomy presupposes organisations establishing a normative match with its surroundings. Although DI is equipped to illuminate the links between macro governance ideas and micro local practices, the conceptualisation of autonomy in this theoretical perspective is under-articulated. DI's emphasis on endogenous dimensions, as well as communicative actions and deliberation, can be expected to generate new perspectives on the conditions for institutional autonomy. Consequently, DI is applied in this thesis to study how institutional autonomy is articulated and communicated with respect to the governance of higher education quality and individual autonomy in quality work. As highlighted in Table 3b, in DI it is expected that the autonomy of academic institutions and staff is a result of the institutional capacity for deliberation of internal values. This entails that it is the capacity to deliberate on endogenous values per se, and not necessarily the content (what is deliberated on) that provides autonomy to academic institutions and staff.

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[1] See Article 2 for further explanation of the demarcation of studying individual autonomy (as in discretion) and institutional autonomy.

Table 3b. Legitimacy and autonomy in the four major strands of institutionalism.

Institutionalisms	RATIONAL CHOICE (RI)	HISTORICAL (HI)	NORMATIVE (NI)	DISCURSIVE (DI)
How is legitimacy explained?	Institution follows rules	Institution acts according to historical legacy	Normative match between institution and surroundings	*Consequence of communication of internal ideas*
How is autonomy explained?	Autonomy within defined boundaries	Autonomy according to historical legacy	Autonomy presupposes normative match	*Result of institutional capacity for deliberation of values*

As previously discussed, and outlined in Table 3b, this thesis employs DI as a framework to integrate the analysis of how the quality of higher education is governed across the national, institutional and individual levels. Within this framework, it is anticipated that legitimacy and autonomy are regarded as consequences of the communication of internal values and the process of deliberation, respectively. The application of DI as a theoretical framework aims to facilitate and identify the potential linkages and dynamics between legitimacy and autonomy in the governance of higher education quality. How these concepts in DI aid an understanding of how quality is governed will be discussed considering the findings in Chapter 6. It is worth noting that while legitimacy and autonomy are fundamental aspects of institutional theory, their precise conceptualization within the scope of DI remains somewhat ambiguous. Therefore, employing DI when analysing the findings might contribute to creating new couplings between DI and the larger framework of institutional theory.

Within this thesis, the three articles relate differently to DI, legitimacy, and autonomy. In Article 1, DI is explicitly applied as a theoretical framework, while Articles 2 and 3 utilise the central concepts of autonomy and legitimacy within the DI framework in the analysis. These two concepts, legitimacy and autonomy, occupy a pivotal role in this thesis, situated within the primary analytical context of DI. Moreover, DI not only guides the theoretical framework, but also gives direction to the methodological tools employed in the articles. It directs attention toward language, argumentation, and textual modifications, thereby also influencing the methodological approaches utilized in the articles.

4 Methodology

The ontological starting point of this thesis is based on the premise that there are multiple social realities, dismissing that there is one, objective and concrete social world (Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015). Thus, a founding assumption for this thesis is that it does not portray reality, but approaches to and perceptions of reality, and, hence, the methodological and theoretical choices that are made impact the descriptions of this version of reality (Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, the epistemology that forms the theoretical basis for the research project and the thesis, assumes that the meaning of concepts, such as "governance" or "quality", depends on cultural, institutional and individual contexts, and that no universal definitions of these concepts exist. Based on these ontological and epistemological assumptions, the thesis applies a fundamentally qualitative methodology to answer the research questions, drawing on interpretative methods to explore the governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education.

4.1 Research design

Studying multi-level governance of higher education is complex, since the limits to this governance are challenging to identify, even when only a singular aim in a given national context, such as the governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education, is studied. As mentioned, only some elements of the soft governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education are studied in the articles in this thesis, and the thesis addresses the context that these elements have been extracted from. To answer the research questions in this thesis, I have adopted a mixed method that arguably is necessary to address complex governance issues.

Mixed methods are described as a type of research that combines elements of qualitative and quantitative approaches for the purpose of infusing "[…] breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017, p. 108) into the study in question, which may expand and strengthen the conclusions of a study (ibid., 4). Table 4 shows the set-up of the whole doctoral project, including the theoretical framework, research questions and types of data that have been gathered, and methods used to answer the research questions.

This PhD thesis comprises three studies that resulted in three respective articles. As the above introduction describes, the sub-research questions in this thesis allude to qualitatively driven research, in order to answer the main research question of *how the quality of Norwegian higher education is governed* (Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015). Yet, although the thesis is fundamentally qualitative, it also

applies elements of quantitative research in the content analysis of documents in Articles 1 and 3. For example, in Article 1, the aim was to map and inquire why the input from the different groups of stakeholders was in coherence with the white paper. This involved extensive coding of all relevant text fragments in the hearing responses and the white paper. There are also elements of quantitative approaches in Article 3, where the differences between the first and final development agreements are quantified. Hence, the methodological approach of this thesis is mixed.

Table 4. Set-up of doctoral project 2019-2023.

Research question	How is the quality of Norwegian higher education governed?		
Study	*#1*	*#2*	*#3*
Status	Completed 2020	Completed 2021	Completed 2023
Article title	Studying the Relation Between Stakeholder Input and Higher Education Policy	Legitimising Quality Work in Higher Education	Agreements Between the State and Higher Education Institutions – How do they Matter for Institutional Autonomy?
Journal and publication status	Higher Education Policy (published 2021)	Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research (published 2023)	Studies in Higher Education (published 2023)
Research question(s)	1. What is the relation between input from different stakeholder groups and quality policies for the higher education sector? 2. How can the possible relation between stakeholder input and policies for the higher education sector be explained?	3. How do staff groups in HEIs approach quality work? 4. How do staff groups in HEIs explain their rationales for quality work?	5. How is institutional autonomy reflected in the negotiations for new agreements between the state and HEIs? 6. How do agreements between public authorities and HEIs affect institutional autonomy?
Theoretical framework	Discursive institutionalism Uploading, downloading	Institutional theory Legitimacy	Institutional theory Autonomy
Data and method	Content analysis of documents (hearing responses and white paper)	Thematic analysis of interviews with staff at three HEIs	Content analysis of negotiations for DAs and thematic analysis of interviews with HEI staff

As Table 4 shows, the overall doctoral project consists of both qualitative (thematic analysis) and quantitative (content analysis) methodological approaches by zooming in and out of the governance of the quality of the Norwegian higher education sector. The first study gave a broad overview of the relative influence of stakeholders when an influential policy for quality in higher education was launched in 2017. The second study then focused on how quality work is conducted at

three different Norwegian HEIs. In the last study, the negotiations for new agreements between the public authorities and HEIs, and the potential effects these agreements might lead to internally at the HEIs, were studied.

The later studies build partly on the previous ones, where the research questions have evolved and are connected to previous questions and analyses. For instance, the themes in the interviews in the second and third studies build partly on findings from previous studies. Furthermore, Article 1 includes a document analysis of input to the white paper on the quality of higher education and Article 2 digs deeper into how three HEIs have worked to follow up the political signals on quality culture and quality work from this white paper, illustrating how previous articles lay the ground for coming articles. Hence, and according to relevant literature on mixed methods, the PhD project is characterised as *qualitatively driven sequential design* with inter-related research questions where "[…] QUAL and QUAN strands occur across chronological phases, and the procedures/questions from the later strand emerge/depend/build on […] the previous strand" (Schoonenboom and Johnson 2017, 12). In conclusion, the three articles ask sub-questions that contribute to elaborating on the overall qualitatively driven main research question of how the quality of Norwegian higher education is governed (Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015, p. 5).

Furthermore, some changes in the PhD project were made along the way. For the first two studies, the original plan to study stakeholder involvement and quality work was followed, but in the third study, I changed the empirical focus to study the negotiations for new agreements between the public authorities and HEIs. The reason for this was that the initial background interview with the Ministry of Education and Research (ministry) and respondents at one of the HEIs revealed that both the ministry and the institution in question were more interested in the new agreements than studying the effect of the white paper in Article 1. At the time of these first interviews, the development agreements (DAs) were a main concern for both parties, since throughout 2022 they had been through a substantive process to develop new agreements. The empirical focus of this third study was altered to examine the Das, as this revised focus opened for new empirical opportunities that would address highly relevant issues for the contemporary governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education. As such, this thesis is an example of how ingoing analysis can contribute to changing and developing the research design.

In qualitative research, data sources such as documents and interviews are typically selected purposefully in order to help the researcher understand the issues that are addressed in the research

questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The strategies used to identify relevant data sources in the three studies are described below.

4.2 Hearing responses and white paper

In Article 1, the white paper Quality Culture in Higher Education (Regjeringen, 2017) from 2017 and the hearing responses submitted prior to the launch of this policy were selected as data sources. The policy was selected as it was the most comprehensive contemporary policy on the quality of Norwegian higher education at the time that the PhD project started. Therefore, the selection of hearing responses was given and amounted to 71 hearing responses. Hearing responses from stakeholders that could be placed in one of the defined stakeholder groups were included in the data set, leaving a small number of less relevant hearing responses out of the document corpus. For instance, hearing responses from individuals or organisations that were not directly relevant for the policy on quality culture were not included as data sources.

One pertinent question when processing the hearing responses submitted from the stakeholders was how to group them. The stakeholders were a heterogeneous collection of organisations and institutions that needed to be grouped, but the groups and organisations within these groups would not be homogeneous (Binderkrantz, 2009). According to Beyers, Eising and Maloney (2008), stakeholders are effectively interest groups and organisations that are perceived to have a mandate to voice their interests to policy-makers, but they do not seek public office. A stakeholder can be defined by the factors of organisation, political interest and informality. Organisation indicates that the stakeholder is not elusive, but somehow stable; political interest indicates that the stakeholder is goal oriented in its political work, i.e., that it has political interests; and informality indicates that the stakeholder is not a political actor, such as by competing in elections. Given that none of the stakeholders that submitted hearing responses were political actors, this was not a relevant criterion for grouping the stakeholders. Yet, organisation and political interest were relevant criteria, and the stakeholders were grouped according to whether they represented HEIs or other knowledge organisations in the higher education sector in Norway, or whether they were unions or employer organisations.

4.3 Higher education institutions (HEIs)

In Article 2, three HEIs were selected to study quality work at different levels within these institutions. The HEIs included one research intensive university, one mainly professionally oriented

university and one university college. In sum, these three institutions represent a variety of HEIs in Norway and were selected to map and analyse quality work irrespectively of institutional differences. Furthermore, the respondents at the three institutions were selected based on their involvement in quality work. The selection of respondents was made purposively, according to website, documents and oral descriptions of who among these staff groups worked with educational quality.

In Article 3, as mentioned above, I first held a background interview with the ministry and one HEI concerning the overall governance dialogue on educational quality. I sent out interview invitations to all 21 Norwegian public HEIs. I wanted to ensure that a broad selection of the Norwegian institutional landscape was covered by the study, and this resulted in interviews with experts at eight universities, two university colleges and one specialised university college. In effect, these institutions were purposively sampled, based on the institutional profile and availability of relevant respondents. Furthermore, experts on the governance dialogue and more specifically on the new DAs were identified by purposive sampling, as the person at the institution who was either responsible for or most knowledgeable about the topic of governance of educational quality in the new DAs. In many cases, the respondents were part of the leadership staff (rectorate or top management) and in fewer cases, I was advised to speak to heads of sections in the central administration. All respondents were employed in the central leadership or administration at the HEIs. Moreover, core documents from the negotiations leading up to the new DAs for the 11 Norwegian HEIs were used as data sources to study the negotiation process. To have an adequate profile of this process, the documents selected from the process included the preliminary draft DAs from the institutions to the ministry, the formal feedback from the ministry on the institutional drafts, and the final DAs in the individual institutional allotment letters. These points in the negotiating process were selected deliberately because they reflect the initial priorities of the HEIs in the negotiations, how the ministry responded to these priorities and the ultimate text of the final DA.

4.4 Interviewing experts

Qualitative interviews to gather data can be performed in a variety of ways in terms of how open or structured they are. In unstructured interviews, the respondents may solely be given a theme to elaborate on, and in fully structured interviews, the researcher looks for answers that can be directly coded and processed (Clark, Foster, Sloan, & Bryman, 2021). In any of these cases, the researcher has some idea of the themes they wish to understand further (Yeo et al., 2013, p. 183). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher will normally follow a set of themes or broad questions

throughout the interview, but these will only serve to guide the conversations without being strictly observed, and provide for flexibility to follow the perspectives and interests of the respondents (Yeo et al., 2013). In Articles 2 and 3 in this thesis, where interviews were used to collect data, the interviews were semi-structured and interview guides were used in both cases, covering the main topics I wanted to address in these conversations.

According to the interview guide, the respondents were asked about their day-to-day quality work (Article 2) and how they expected the new agreements to affect the internal governance at their institution (Article 3). The interview guide was a list of questions and issues to be addressed, but it was not imperative to follow them strictly. In Article 3, for instance, I asked whether the institutions' representatives expected that the new DAs would lead to internal change. If the respondent answered clearly negatively to this question, I would ask a second follow-up question on one of the dimensions of living autonomy, but I would not ask about other dimensions if the answer to the initial dimension and the follow-up question was negative (see interview guide in Appendix). In addition, I mainly asked questions which motivated the respondents to elaborate further on their previous answers, for instance, "could you explain this further" or "what do you mean by this" or asked the respondents to exemplify their answers (Yeo et al., 2013).

4.5 Content and thematic analysis

The analytical process in this thesis and the articles is generally a cyclical process (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020; M. Q. Patton, 2002), meaning that I have moved between induction and deduction when refining research questions, interview guides and content and thematic analysis. For instance, in the first article I grouped the categories differently before I decided to use the headings from the white paper as categories for structuring the content in the hearing responses. Furthermore, content and thematic analysis were the main analytical tools throughout all three articles: in Article 1 on the white paper and the hearing responses content analysis was applied; in Article 2 thematic analysis was applied to the interviews; and in Article 3 content analysis was applied to the documents and thematic analysis to the interviews. With content analysis, as used in Articles 1 and 3, the intention is to code the content of the documents to identify key categories in the texts (Clark et al., 2021). With thematic analysis, as used in Articles 2 and 3, the interviews were searched for themes that were relevant to the articles (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, there were different variants of content and thematic analysis in the three articles, as described below.

In Article 1, I conducted a two-step approach in the content analysis (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Firstly, I coded the content in the hearing responses on how to enhance the quality of Norwegian education. In total, 71 hearing responses and 728 pages of text were coded using NVivo. Then, the singular codes were placed in the relevant category in the white paper on quality culture, after which they were summarised and their relative coherence with the white paper was reviewed. Furthermore, the codes and the significance of each code in the hearing responses was given one or two points, based on the emphasis of the code in the document. In this manner, the analysis provided insight into which stakeholder hearing responses corresponded, or did not correspond, with the content of the white paper on quality culture in higher education. As described, this analytical approach in Article 1 was a quantitatively oriented approach to content analysis. In Article 3, the document material was just below 170 pages, and the content was structured and dense. Here, detailed readings of three steps of the negotiation process for the new DAs were made, more specifically the preliminary draft DAs from the institutions to the ministry, the formal feedback from the ministry on the institutional drafts, and the final DAs in the individual institutional allotment letters (see Article 3 and Appendix for the steps).

I applied thematic analysis of interviews for Article 2 and Article 3. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. However, the interviews for the two articles differed in the sense that the interviews for Article 2 were longer and more in-depth and constituted the main data source for this article. In Article 3, the interviews functioned as triangulation of the findings from the document analysis of the new DAs and as a primary data source for how the new DAs were expected to affect the living autonomy at the HEIs. The 11 interviews for this article were held with institutional representatives, and the corpus was approximately 20,000 words, varying from 752 to 4,300 per interview. In Article 2, 19 interviews were held with academic, administrative and leadership staff at three Norwegian HEIs (see Appendix for details of staff type and level). The interviews were transcribed, and the total corpus was approximately 35,000 words, varying from 1,236 words to 4,248 words per interview. The analysis of the interviews focused on the individual staff's approach to quality work and their perceived discretion in this work. Their answers were summarised (Hopwood, 2018; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014) and through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the data on the staff's reasoning for their quality work was categorised into three types of legitimacy. Since there are few participants in each of the staff groups, the interviews were analysed for their typicality of each of the groups' legitimacy type, according to the operationalisation of the legitimacy types. The

purpose of this methodology was to extract the contrasts between the staff groups in their legitimisation of quality work.

4.6 Validity and reliability

The *internal validity* of findings concerns the quality of inferences based on the findings in the thesis (Maxwell, 2013). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), member checking, triangulation and peer debriefing are listed as some of the multiple procedures that researchers can use to check the internal validity of their findings. In the interviews, I frequently applied member checking to clarify whether I had understood the respondents accurately. At the end of each interview, I summarised the main take-aways from the interviews to the respondents, in order for them to potentially correct my perceptions. In the document analyses, I also repeated the content analyses of the documents to check that I came to the same results regarding the correspondence between stakeholder input and the content of the white paper in Article 1, and essential and semantic modifications to the DAs in Article 3. Additionally, I applied triangulation in Article 3 as a methodological procedure to strengthen the validity of the findings in the content analysis of the DAs. This took place at the interviews, when I presented the findings from the content analysis to the respondents and asked them to comment on whether they perceived that essential modifications in the new DAs could be ascribed to feedback from the ministry. The respondents confirmed that the institutional representatives had only made minor changes to the DAs based on the feedback from the ministry. The interviews also confirmed the finding that the DAs were developed autonomously by the HEIs and are an example of triangulation. Throughout the work on the three studies, I sought peer debriefing, by facilitating and encouraging fellow researchers to question the designs, findings and discussions in my studies, and all three studies have been or are undergoing peer review. I also aspired to describe how the theoretical frameworks in the studies informed my analyses, thereby adding transparency to the analytical process.

Regarding *external validity*, or generalisation, the findings presented in this thesis are highly sensitive to the context they are drawn from. As for other types of qualitative research, it is the particularity and not the generalisability that is the hallmark of this thesis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The same sets of theoretical frameworks, research questions and methodological approaches therefore need to be applied to other contexts, to find out whether it is possible to generalise from these studies. However, the founding analytical concepts used in the articles and in the thesis might be transferable to other empirical settings (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2014). For instance, the

combination of Berdahl and Maassen's approaches to autonomy in Article 3, or how different staff groups in academia legitimise quality work based on Suchman's typology in Article 2, can be set up and applied to other contexts.

Reliability concerns the relative extent to which the methods used will give the same results in future research (Clark et al., 2021, p. 363). For the documents analysed in the articles, the possibility of reproducing the results is evident, since all documents are publicly accessible, and can be retrieved by web search or on demand to the Ministry of Education and Research. The document analysis methods used in Articles 1 and 3 are also reliable in the sense that the steps in the analysis are explained. The words, sentences and concepts used in the document analysis are described, making it possible to conduct the same studies at a later point in time. For the interviews in Articles 2 and 3, the reproducibility is more questionable, given that it is not possible to "freeze" a social setting as an interview (ibid.). Yet, the interview guides (see Appendix) will make it possible to ask similar questions at a potential later point in time. The respondents were also interviewed as representatives of different staff groups (Article 2) or institutions (Article 3), and their responses were expected to be influenced by their formal roles and the institutional positions on the topics that were discussed. Hence, it is not given that the same questions put to other individuals in similar positions, at other institutions or in other local contexts, or at another time would have given substantially different answers. Still, the data from the interviews must be regarded as expressions of perceptions that only have relevance for the context in which they are given.

4.7 Ethical considerations

Research projects in education and social sciences require approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). Prior to commencing data collection for all three studies, I submitted applications to the NSD and obtained their approval (see example in the Appendix). These applications included information about each individual study in the context of the overarching PhD project, interview guides and letters of consent. In accordance with NSD guidelines, I crafted consent forms for the interviews conducted in Articles 2 and 3 (see Appendix). These forms encompassed information pertaining to the individual studies and the overarching PhD project. They highlighted the rights of the interviewed individuals, information on measures taken to ensure anonymity, and outlined their ability to potentially withdraw consent at any point. Additionally, the consent forms provided insights into how the collected data would be stored and analysed, and details on data protection at the University of Oslo, with contact information to the data protection office. Prior to

conducting the interviews, I sent these consent forms to the individuals involved. Before interviewing, I repeated the information about the project, and particularly issues on anonymity and consent. The recordings and transcriptions from the interviews were securely stored on the UiO OneDrive, and deleted when the data analysis was completed.

The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (NESH, 2021) established guidelines and responsibilities for researchers and research communities, particularly regarding rigor of research questions, theoretical approaches, methods, and transparency. These guidelines are pertinent to my case, as I previously worked in the Norwegian higher education sector before embarking on this research journey. Adhering to the NESH guidelines, it is crucial to be mindful of personal connections during the research process to avoid potential biases or undue influence due to informal relationships (ibid., p. 35). Consequently, I made a deliberate effort to refrain from interviewing individuals associated with institutions or organisations where I had prior affiliations. However, it was reasonable to leverage my knowledge of the internal workings of quality management within the higher education sector. This included an understanding of the units and positions involved in the governance dialogue with Norwegian public authorities, and familiarity with previous institutional responses to evolving national policies in the Norwegian higher education sector. Recognising that researchers cannot entirely discard their existing knowledge, research practice rather needs to apply this knowledge through a process of "purposeful sampling" (M. Patton, 2015; M. Q. Patton, 2002). As argued by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018), previous professional knowledge can directly inform the research design and execution within the framework of a synthetic and reflexive methodology, and my familiarity with the Norwegian higher education sector proved advantageous, especially in identifying suitable interview respondents.

5 Presentation of Articles

The three articles are independent research contributions on the governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education. Collectively, they answer the main research question in this thesis, and speak to different strands of literature in higher education studies. The first article speaks to policy studies in higher education, the second speaks to general concerns in educational research about how different staff groups in higher education approach and collaborate on quality, and the third speaks to founding issues on autonomy in higher education studies and public administration. Below, the articles are summarised and the relevance of the findings for the thesis is recapitulated, with particular attention to how they address foreground discursive and background ideational abilities.

Lackner, E. J. (2021): Studying the Relation Between Stakeholder Input and Higher Education Policy. *Higher Education Policy 35*(4), 929–945, DOI:10.1057/s41307-021-00240-2

This study examines the relationship between stakeholder input and policy output in contemporary policymaking, specifically in the context of Nordic countries' democratic values and dialogue-oriented governance. The thesis focuses on the hearing process held by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (ministry) in 2017 before the launch of a white paper on quality culture in higher education. The concept of "uploading" is used and combined with DI to identify the coherence between stakeholder input and the quality measures proposed in the white paper. Content analysis is used to analyse the hearing responses and the white paper. The findings suggest that employer groups and stakeholders from the higher education sector had a greater degree of coherence with the proposed measures, while universities and colleges had a lower degree of input that was represented in the white paper. The findings contribute to question the essence of the democratic component of the hearing institute, and whether it solely represents the opportunity to be heard when submitting a hearing response, or whether the public authorities also are obliged to listen to the input that is submitted in the hearing, or even more, to use the input when developing policies.

The study is relevant for the main research question in this thesis by addressing how and why the priorities of stakeholders are included in the governance of Norwegian higher education. The study is particularly relevant for the first sub-question of how and by whom the governance of higher education quality is developed and framed. The study illustrates how input from stakeholder groups who share foreground discursive and background ideational abilities with the ministry has a greater

degree of coherence with the white paper than input from stakeholders who do not share these commonalities.

Lackner, E. J. (2023): Legitimising Quality Work in Higher Education. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, DOI:10.1080/00313831.2023.2262494

This study explores the empirical characteristics and theoretical underpinnings of the concept of quality work in higher education, which has gained increased political and scientific attention. Interviews with academic, administrative and leadership staff from Norwegian HEIs are thematically analysed to understand the individual autonomy, termed discretion, these staff groups experience in their quality work and how they legitimise this work. The findings show differences in the discretion these groups enjoy in their quality work, and that academic staff have more discretion in their quality work compared to administrative and leadership staff. Furthermore, academic staff argue for their discretion in quality work based on moral legitimacy, while administrative staff and to some extent leadership staff apply cognitive and pragmatic legitimacy to argue for increased transparency and standardisation, respectively, in quality work. Despite common goals in quality work, which is to the benefit of the students, the study reveals both tensions and commonalities between the staff groups in their quality work.

The study is relevant for the main research question in this thesis by illustrating how the staff groups in Norwegian HEIs relate to governance agendas on educational quality in their day-to-day work. The study is particularly relevant for the second sub-question of how the governance of quality is perceived and possibly acted on in the higher education sector. The study addresses how background academic ideational abilities, in this case the discretion that academic staff enjoy in their quality work, are vital for the governance of educational quality to be legitimate among academic staff. However, the study also highlights that this discretion is not uncontroversial, given the drift towards increased standardisation and transparency among administrative and leadership staff.

Lackner, E. J. (2023): Agreements Between the State and Higher Education Institutions – How do they Matter for Institutional Autonomy? *Studies in Higher Education*, DOI:10.1080/03075079.2023.2258901

This study investigates the role of development agreements (DAs) as a governance tool within the Norwegian higher education sector, as they are considered integral components of the governance

mix for HEIs. These DAs have recently undergone change, and the institutions have been invited to develop their own goals and parameters for these agreements. The study investigates how institutional autonomy is reflected in the new agreements and what internal changes are expected to result from them. First, a content analysis of the formal negotiations for new DAs is conducted to assess the extent to which HEIs have been autonomous in the negotiation process. Second, interviews with key officials from HEIs were thematically analysed concerning how these officials expected the new agreements might affect the factual institutional autonomy. The results show that while the HEIs have had substantive and procedural autonomy in developing the agreements, the new agreements are expected to have limited impact on their factual autonomy, except that they will be used to legitimise internal strategic priorities.

This study is relevant for the main research question in this thesis, as it offers insights into the role and effectiveness of autonomously developed agreements as governance mechanisms for Norwegian HEIs. Specifically, the study addresses the third sub-question, which explores the room for negotiation within the governance of higher education quality. Through its findings, this study demonstrates that recognising institutional autonomy is a critical prerequisite for the governance of quality to be seen as legitimate within academic institutions. In doing so, it sheds light on the dynamics of governance in the higher education sector, emphasising the importance of accommodating institutional autonomy for effective quality governance. Also, the study raises concerns about how and whether agreements serve as instruments for governing quality in higher education.

6 Discussion and Implications

In the first chapter of this thesis, a summary of the findings is presented, together with the contributions made by the individual articles, as well as the thesis. This chapter serves as a platform to discuss the findings for each research sub-question and the main research question. Additionally, it elucidates the advantages of employing discursive institutionalism (DI) as an analytical tool. Moreover, the chapter explores the limitations encountered during the research process and implications for the existing literature in Chapter 2. Finally, the chapter outlines potential directions for future scholarly research in this field.

6.1 Key findings discussed

Regarding the first sub-question, *How is the governance of higher education quality developed and framed, and by whom?*, this thesis presents elements of "soft governance" of quality in Norwegian higher education, and how actors at multiple levels are involved in this governance. The thesis shows how actors at all levels, stakeholders, HEIs and academic staff are involved in interpreting policies on educational quality and how they appropriate and redefine the governance of quality in accordance with their "background ideational abilities" (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). The findings illustrate how deep-rooted ideas on autonomy among academic institutions and staff explain their diverse and discrete approaches to the governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education. This thesis thereby identifies and articulates the background ideational abilities for autonomy that reign in academic settings, i.e. "what goes on in individuals' minds as they come up with new ideas or follow old ones" (Schmidt, 2012, p. 92) and how academic institutions and staff apply these background ideational abilities when they interact with the governance of higher education quality, and when they interpret this in relation to their own autonomy. By applying DI, the thesis portrays how academic institutions and staff make sense of and act on the governance of quality in Norwegian higher education.

Regarding the second research sub-question, *How is the governance of quality perceived and possibly acted on in the higher education sector?*, this thesis illustrates that the legitimacy of the governance of quality depends on whether institutional and staff autonomy is respected. Furthermore, the legitimacy of the governance of quality also depends on whether institutions and staff are enabled to amalgamate their own ideas into this governance, thereby enacting with it and rephrasing it. The Norwegian soft governance of the higher education quality enables academic institutions and staff to "think and argue outside the institutions in which they continue to act" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 315) on the

issue of educational quality, and thereby contribute to maintaining their own institutional and individual academic autonomy. According to the expectations in Chapter 3 that follow from a DI approach, this thesis illustrates that quality is used as a foreground discursive ability to legitimise institutional strategies and individual practices.

The third research sub-question asks, *What is the room for negotiating the governance of higher education quality?*. This thesis illustrates that in soft governance, the room for negotiating the governance of quality is generous at the levels that have been studied. The articles show how stakeholders (Article 1), HEIs (Article 3) and staff groups (Article 2) articulate their discrete approaches to the quality of higher education. This underscores the flexible and discursive abilities of quality as a policy issue, since it is multi-interpretative (Vukasovic et al., 2018) and is thereby open for great variety in both institutional and individual approaches to quality in higher education that, in turn, are considered legitimate. The flexible nature of the term "quality" is made full use of by the actors at the governance levels studied in this thesis. Again, in accordance with the expectations that follow from applying DI and successive "background ideational abilities" in the analysis, quality is instrumental for both academic institutions and staff when deliberating on their internal values on autonomy. This thesis exemplifies and explains how the governance of the quality of higher education is appropriated and permeated with meaning by academic institutions and staff.

Ultimately, and to answer the main research question in this thesis of *How is the quality of Norwegian higher education governed?*, pertaining to soft governance of Norwegian higher education, this thesis describes how quality is governed by including various actors and agendas in the act of governing. By applying a (DI) approach to study the governance of quality, this thesis illustrates how academic institutions and staff respond to governance agendas on quality. Specifically, at the macro national level, Article 1 exemplifies the interface between stakeholder input and national governance agendas on the quality of higher education, and how stakeholders and their priorities are included into the development of policy for the quality of higher education. At the meso institutional level, Article 3 describes how governance that emphasises dialogue enables HEIs to transform national policy signals by adjusting governance documents, the development agreements, to their own strategic, internal priorities. Through this deliberation, they correspondingly enforce their institutional autonomy. At the micro individual level, Article 2 addresses how academic staff approach governance agendas on quality work by communicating and thereby legitimising their individual approaches. In this way, the different approaches to and perceptions of quality at the various levels are articulated as governance of quality, and perceived as legitimate.

In sum, this thesis describes how academic institutions and staff navigate national governance agendas on quality by adopting and advocating for their institutional and individual approaches to the quality of higher education. The academic institutions and staff perceive and act on national governance agendas based on considerations of "what are our strategic priorities" at the institutional level and "what is best for the student" among academic staff. Academic institutions and staff thereby legitimise these approaches through endogenous arguments that assert their autonomy, and these arguments appear to be powerful to the extent that they exceed governance agendas. This perspective on the governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education nuances some of the literature that is reviewed in Chapter 2. As we have seen, strands of literature on academic responses to the governance of higher education depict academic institutions and staff as mere "receivers" of governance, implicating a passive or resistant approach to governance agendas (Gumport, 2000, 2005; Kjeldstadli, 2010; Tjora, 2019), or that governance and managerial logics potentially represent logics either are in conflict with, or co-exist without notable interaction, with academic values and logics (Musselin, 2015; Reymert, 2021). Notably, this thesis adds subtlety to previous narratives of how the higher education sector responds to NPM reform agendas, by displaying how academic environments use governance agendas and the room for dialogue to actively enforce their institutional and individual priorities. This thesis thus offers a different take on, and subsequently a contribution to, higher education studies by portraying academic institutions and staff as active participants in the governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education.

Furthermore, a key finding that emerges from the empirical analysis in this thesis is the strong association between autonomy and quality across governance levels. At the micro level, Article 2 shows great variation and discretion in how academic, administrative and leadership staff groups at HEIs approach quality work in higher education. At the meso institutional level, Article 3 shows that the institutional approaches to the quality of higher education were closely aligned with institutional strategies, resulting in great divergence in how the HEIs link the overall governance agenda on quality with their internal priorities. At the national level, Article 1 depicts the perspectives of various stakeholders and their numerous suggestions for enhancing the quality of higher education in Norway. Relatedly, and according to institutional theory (Scott, 2014; Scott & Davis, 2007), legitimacy is core for public organisations, and is instrumental to maintain their autonomy. This thesis illustrates how academic institutions and staff appear to use quality as a foreground discursive ability to legitimise their autonomy (background ideational abilities), as illustrated in Articles 2 and 3. The findings in these articles show that academic institutions and staff do not necessarily adjust their priorities

according to national governance ideas and policy signals. Rather, they illustrate how, when given the opportunity, academic institutions use their autonomy to continue and strengthen their own strategic work and, in parallel, academic staff apply legitimising strategies to develop and continue their discrete, individual approaches to quality work.

6.2 Who governs the quality of Norwegian higher education?

For every reform or governance agenda, the question of who decides is at the core (Gumport, 2005). In this thesis, the governance in question concerns the quality of higher education, specifically elements of soft governance that are developed to steer the priorities, cultures and practices at HEIs and among academic staff towards enhanced quality in Norwegian higher education. As Article 1 illustrates, stakeholders contribute to developing policies for quality in Norwegian academia, for instance by suggesting making higher education more relevant and increasingly connected to working life. However, this thesis illustrates that the priorities of these stakeholders and the public authorities do not appear to be directive for academic institutions and staff. Furthermore, and as Article 3 shows, agreements between HEIs and the public authorities intended to be an important part of the governance mix to enable HEIs to attain sectoral educational quality goals were, at large, autonomously developed by Norwegian HEIs. However, these agreements appear to have limited effect in attaining these sectoral goals. Thus, how national authorities' and stakeholders' quality agendas might gain ground in academia through soft governance is challenging to elucidate.

Therefore, in our case, the question of who decides entails at least a two-folded answer. While the public authorities appear to be influenced by stakeholders with whom they share background ideational abilities (i.e., the higher education sector and employers) when *developing* soft policies on quality in the higher education sector, academic institutions and staff appear to be rather independent when *interpreting* such policies. Since these two governance levels are not the same regarding either content or actors involved, the quality policy arena may be an example of an inherently de-coupled policy arena. Therefore, to fully answer the question of who governs quality in Norwegian higher education, pertaining to soft governance, as studied in this thesis, it first needs to be established whether the question concerns policy development or policy enactment. If the question of "who decides" concerns policy development at national level, authorities, employers and the higher education sector appear to govern; while, in contrast, if the question concerns local interpretations of policies, academic institutions and staff appear to be largely autonomous and arguably to be the decision makers. Furthermore, academic institutions and staff who use opportunities to adjust

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governance agendas to their own priorities and values might be a necessary dynamic in the governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education, since this governance needs to be perceived as legitimate and not inflicting the autonomy of HEIs and their staff. Soft governance that does not substantially threaten the autonomy of academic staff is regarded as legitimate, possibly as opposed to "hard governance" that might be perceived as intrusive. Thus, the governance dialogue on quality might function as the fixative that re-couples policy development and policy interpretation on the quality of Norwegian higher education.

Concerning the main research question of how quality is governed, this thesis raises a fundamental concern as to whether the elements of soft governance examined in this thesis genuinely reflect the actual governance of the quality of higher education. To explore this question, we revisit the adapted definition of governance as "steering institutions and the individuals that work in them according to common societal goals" (Ansell & Torfing, 2016). As noted, this definition presupposes a principal-agent relationship between the ministry, the principal; and the HEIs and academic staff, the agent(s). The thesis illustrates how the authorities, HEIs and academic staff all gather around different ideas, practices and rationales on the quality of higher education. However, the thesis also illuminates how academic institutions and staff are highly involved in their own governance of the quality of higher education, respectively the elements of governance that have been studied. In essence, while the different governance levels align on national governance agendas concerning the quality of higher education, it becomes evident that additional priorities exert significant influence on how this governance is interpreted and acted on at HEIs and among academic staff.

Therefore, when studying "soft" governance, characterised by dialogue and communication, this thesis highlights the challenges of pinpointing the actual "steering" that public authorities employ in such governance. The governance that has been studied primarily appears to reflect a room for an ongoing dialogue on quality. While the Norwegian public authorities might characterise, for instance, DAs as integral components within the overarching framework of the governance of the higher education sector, the aspect of governance akin to principal-driven steering towards shared objectives, proves challenging to recognise within the articles and this thesis. Specifically, it is challenging to discern to what extent governance is instrumental in attaining national sectoral goals on the quality in higher education. In essence, this thesis raises critical questions about the true nature of governance in the context of the quality of higher education, shedding light on the intricacies and challenges of identifying explicit steering mechanisms within dialogue-driven soft governance.

However, without this dialogue, the total governance mix concerning the quality of Norwegian higher education would have been dominated by more inflexible and non-negotiable regulatory and financial governance instruments, often described as "hard governance". This approach to governance could potentially be perceived as too rigid and thereby not legitimate within the higher education sector. Therefore, the process of open deliberation on the quality of higher education, where the HEIs and academic staff have the flexibility to define their own approaches to quality, emerges as a vital prerequisite for the overall legitimacy of the governance system. Public authorities may even rely on dialogically oriented governance, with particular emphasis on deliberations of academic institutions and staff to ensure the higher education sector's approval of the governance system. Hence, while soft governance facilitates deliberation and, consequently, legitimises institutional and individual academic approaches to quality, it may also reinforce the legitimacy of public authorities' governance on this matter. Without recognising and articulating this fundamental premise for how academic institutions and staff prefer to be governed, and the rationales and dynamics behind these preferences, establishing a constructive dialogue between public authorities and HEIs could prove to be challenging.

6.3 Analysing the findings from a DI perspective

This thesis shows how the elements of soft governance of the quality of higher education that have been studied do not appear to curtail the autonomy of Norwegian academic institutions and staff. This finding should be theoretically discussed, and the value of applying DI as a theoretical lens, including the concepts of legitimacy and autonomy, to study governance of quality, are explicated in the following. At first glance, it can be argued that this finding suggests that the institutional and individual responses to the governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education are based on a logic of appropriateness. In this regard, it is appropriate for HEIs and academic staff to align internal, strategic priorities with national quality policies and thereby seek external legitimacy by complying with established norms on educational quality. In this respect, the findings might be suggested to align with normative institutionalism (NI), where the logic of appropriateness is key to understanding institutional behaviour. However, this claim leads to further reflection on the thesis' findings in the DI perspective and the value of applying this theoretical framework.

The findings in this thesis illustrate how soft governance of higher education quality allows for a significant degree of autonomy when academic institutions and staff translate these quality agendas into their own priorities and values. This is in accordance with the expectations that follow

from using DI as a theoretical lens in this thesis, which pays great attention to endogenous processes and autonomy resulting from the act of deliberation. Furthermore, the deliberative processes surrounding both institutional and staff approaches to quality are not only perceived as legitimate by HEIs and academic staff, but also appear to garner recognition and acceptance from public authorities. Once again, this accords with the expectations that follow from using DI, given that legitimacy is expected to be a consequence of the communication of internal values.

Therefore, by applying DI to analyse the findings, this thesis illustrates how quality is used by academic institutions and staff as a foreground discursive ability to argue, and thereby legitimise, institutional and individual approaches to the quality of higher education (Schmidt, 2008, 2010, 2012). The use of DI explains why this is the case, namely that quality is also deeply intertwined with the intrinsic and profound idea of academic autonomy, being a "background ideational ability". In other words, quality is used as a foreground discursive ability to deliberate on, and thereby legitimise, the background ideational ability that is the autonomy of academic institutions and staff. Given that quality is widely recognised as context-sensitive, flexible, multi-interpretative and subjective (Mårtensson et al., 2014; Vukasovic, 2014; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011), it serves as an ideal discursive tool for legitimising the autonomy of academic institutions and staff. The flexibility of the term quality allows actors across governance levels to engage in developing, negotiating and interpreting quality policies, while they simultaneously, and legitimately, argue for their individual approaches to how the quality of higher education is best achieved or enhanced. Thus, as the findings indicate, academic institutions and staff primarily employ quality as a tool to legitimise intrinsic values and practices, secondarily asserting their compliance with governance agendas. Thus, the internal legitimacy of academic institutions' and staff's approaches to the governance of quality appears to be superior to the external legitimacy of these approaches. Therefore, and as the revised Table 3c illustrates, one main characteristic of DI compared to the other institutionalisms is how legitimacy is granted; DI explains how legitimacy is not only granted externally, but also internally, as a result of the institutional ability to communicate ideas.

Table 3c. Revised legitimacy and autonomy in the four major strands of institutionalism.

Institutionalisms	RATIONAL CHOICE (RI)	HISTORICAL (HI)	NORMATIVE (NI)	DISCURSIVE (DI)
How is legitimacy explained?	Institution follows rules	Institution acts according to historical legacy	Normative match between institution and surroundings	*Institutional ability to communicate ideas*
How is autonomy explained?	Autonomy within defined boundaries	Autonomy according to historical legacy	Autonomy presupposes normative match	*Autonomy by deliberating on internal values*

Furthermore, the other institutionalisms presuppose the institutional harmonisation with external surroundings for the institution to be granted autonomy. For instance, NI, presupposes a normative match between the institution and surroundings concerning a given norm for the institutional behaviour, for the institution to operate with autonomy, as Table 3c illustrates. By contrast, in DI, autonomy is expected to be a result of the act of deliberation and does not necessarily presuppose an external, for example, a normative, match. This is exemplified in this thesis, where the HEIs in Article 3 deliberate on how their internal, strategic priorities should be included in the development agreements *without* elaborating on how these priorities are relevant for the national governance goal on educational quality. Relatedly, where other institutionalisms emphasise the stability of institutions, DI will stress that institutions are dynamic since they, and the actors within them, continuously engage with the communication and deliberation of their profound ideas. This indicates that we are not necessarily witnessing a logic whereby academic institutions and staff relate appropriately (March & Olsen, 2006) in relation to the governance of quality, but rather an internal logic of opportunity that explains how and why academic institutions and staff deliberate on their approaches to quality, and thereby manifest and legitimise their autonomy. This "logic of opportunity" operates within relatively wide room to manoeuvre for both academic institutions and staff concerning educational quality. Thus, quality, which is one of the reigning issues in the governance of higher education, represents an opportunity for academic institutions and staff to deliberate on their approaches to this governance, and when they engage in this action, they manifest their autonomy in a legitimate way.

In addition to emphasising the match between the findings and the expectations of how legitimacy and autonomy would emanate from a DI approach, the above considerations illustrate the benefit of applying DI as a theoretical lens in this thesis. By using DI and explicating the expectations of how autonomy and legitimacy are regarded in this theoretical perspective, important nuances in the governance of quality in Norwegian higher education have been identified, which might not have been spotted by applying the other variants of institutionalism. For instance, by analysing the findings from other institutional approaches, how endogenous ideas and autonomy motivate academic institutions and staff to deliberate on their approaches to quality would not have been explicated, but regarded as acts of match making, and conforming to norms to follow. The DI concepts "foreground discursive abilities" and "background ideational abilities" help us to develop our understanding

of how academic institutions and staff use governance ideas to communicate, deliberate, and legitimise their own values and priorities.

Furthermore, given that one concern at the core of institutionalism is how institutions influence individual behaviour (Peters, 2012; Scott, 2014), a typical criticism of institutionalism is that it lacks perspectives on internal power, and leaves the fate of institutions in the hands of their surroundings. This thesis, by applying DI, illustrates that HEIs and academic staff, when given the opportunity, interact highly independently with governance ideas on quality, and are fully capable of gaining legitimacy on their own terms, and thereby securing their autonomy. DI gives great leeway to agency, by illuminating how agents deliberate their way to power in the governance relationship between public authorities and HEIs. DI, thus, provides grounds to question the initial hierarchical approach, in which institutions are perceived as subject to the power of a superior authority. While other institutionalisms primarily are concerned with how institutional surroundings impact institutions, and how institutions, like HEIs, adapt to these surroundings, DI directs our focus to how institutions themselves and their academic staff influence their environments and govern themselves in alignment with their own strategic and intrinsic values. DI not only presents new perspectives on legitimacy and autonomy, but also represents a variant of institutional theory that incorporates the influence institutions wield over their surroundings through the power that lies in deliberation. In this sense, DI establishes a connection with Selznick's theoretical focus, which emphasises the role of individuals within institutions, and how these individuals impact the institutions they are part of (Selznick, 1948, 1984). While DI does not explicitly echo Selznick's approach, there is a resonance between DI's endogenous focus on intrinsic values and motivations within institutions and Selznick's foundational idea that individual behaviour plays a fundamental role in shaping institutional change. In sum, the attributes of applying DI as a theoretical framework are substantial, and it is evident that DI adds important dimensions to institutionalism and can be placed into longstanding traditions with reference to the founding thoughts in institutional theory. Given this thesis' attention to the complex encounters between the governance of higher education quality and academic autonomy, the use of a DI framework has revealed subtle features in these encounters that other institutionalist approaches might not have been able to illuminate.

It is noteworthy that while quality is used as a foreground discursive ability to legitimise autonomy, the findings in this thesis do not raise doubts about the value of quality for the HEIs and the staff working within them. In Article 2, it is evident that the quality of higher education is also a priority for academic staff, and in parallel, Article 3 does not illustrate that quality is unimportant for

HEIs. However, the findings show that quality is primarily applied to legitimise the autonomy of HEIs and their academic staff. By applying DI as a theoretical framework, this thesis highlights how the accommodating and flexible features of quality enable a governance dialogue on educational quality.

These observations highlight the multifaceted and flexible nature of the term quality, accommodating multiple uses and users, and underscoring its communicative potential as a governance agenda that involved parties agree upon, thereby legitimising a multitude of approaches to quality. It might possibly not be in the interest of either the public authorities or the HEIs or academic staff to further define higher education quality, because a further defined concept would not enable the same leverage for dialogue on educational quality between public authorities, stakeholders, HEIs and academic staff, and deliberation in academic milieus. In that case, the discursive capabilities of this policy issue might be weakened. Consequently, the quality of higher education functions as a syntax that facilitates and legitimises governance, and at the same time it is a governance language that enables autonomy for academic institutions and staff by providing opportunities for deliberation. This underscores the communicative potential of quality as a governance term and its capacity for negotiation, aligning with the DI theoretical framework, which emphasises communication, discourse and the negotiation power of language within the communicative and coordinative sphere of governance and policy formation (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; Schmidt, 2008, 2010, 2015). In this, DI has demonstrated its theoretical capability to capture the links between high-level governance agendas, and meso and micro level contexts.

6.4 Implications for the positioning of the study

As the literature review in Chapter 2 illustrated, it is elemental for public authorities to grant public organisations autonomy (Ansell & Torfing, 2016; Dill & Soo, 2004), but the extent and nature of how public authorities will grant public organisations autonomy in practice varies across different governance models. This thesis also examines elements of the soft governance of the quality of higher education, which emphasises dialogue and communication in the governance of the higher education sector, comprising HEIs and academic staff, who both have legal protection for academic freedom, which again is closely linked to autonomy (Berdahl, 1990; Olsen, 2009b). However, in line with other parts of the Norwegian public sector, the higher education sector is also governed. Article 1 describes the considerable expectations held of the higher education sector concerning ways to improve the quality of higher education that are included in the governance of the sector. To some extent, this

governance requires autonomy to be curtailed by steering academic institutions and their staff in alignment with the preferences of the public authorities and stakeholder interests, where the public authorities govern by developing policies which the HEIs and academic staff ideally respond to (Ansell & Torfing, 2016). Given this context, one main implication of this thesis is the emerging question of whether the governance described in the thesis reflects actual "governance" in a sector where autonomy is highly valued, extensively practised and legally enforced.

The governance scenario outlined in this thesis might be discouraging seen from a governance perspective, but we need to ask why this is the case. As the review mentions, the development in academia during the last decades, parallel with quality becoming one of the prime political goals for the sector, has been dominated by academic staff spending more time on reporting and less time on education and research. Also, at the meso institutional level, HEIs have experienced increasing demands on reporting, efficiency and accountability (Huisman & Stensaker, 2022; Westerheijden et al., 2007). Potentially, this has led to HEIs and academic staff experiencing a decrease in their professional autonomy, which explains why they seek to maintain their room to manoeuvre when given the opportunity. Therefore, a credible explanation for why academic institutions and staff deliberate and thereby legitimise their approaches to quality to secure their autonomy, may be that this is merely a response to grander changes in the overall and enduring governance of higher education, which is characterised as neoliberal and heavily influenced by NPM (Bleiklie, 1998; Christensen, 2006; de Boer & Maassen, 2020; Ferlie et al., 2008; Paradeise et al., 2009; Stephan, 2012).

It is important to note that although the above discussion implies questioning whether quality in higher education is governed, the findings do not conclusively indicate that academic institutions and staff remain unaffected by or disengaged from governance in this regard. As already emphasised, the empirical analysis presented in this thesis offers only partial insights and does not assume to provide a comprehensive overview of the entire governance system pertaining to the quality of Norwegian higher education. The extracts of the governance mix that have been studied in this thesis represent soft governance, i.e. communicative and dialogical approaches to governance between public authorities and public organisations, for which there are long-standing traditions in Norwegian public governance (Dobbins & Knill, 2017; Knutsen, 2017; Rommetvedt, 2011). Notably, more fixed and non-negotiable governance instruments such as financial and regulatory measures are not included in this analysis. However, the findings on the governance of higher education quality in this thesis lead us to fundamentally question whether communicative and dialogical governance

implicates other aspects of the governance mix, and whether dialogical and communicative approaches to governance serve as a proxy for other governance approaches, implying that both "soft" and "hard" measures are necessary to be able to govern. Henceforth, dialogically oriented governance may pave the way for other governance instruments, such as financial and regulatory, given that fixed and non-negotiable governance approaches alone might not be perceived as legitimate in the Norwegian higher education sector.

6.5 Limitations and suggestions for future research

There are limitations to the findings in the articles and this thesis that need to be addressed. In Article 1, other categories of stakeholders might arguably have given other results. For instance, categories according to the positions of their input could also have been a way to organise the data. At the same time, the stakeholder categories were in accordance with common standards on how to organise stakeholder groups (Beyers et al., 2008), and provided insight on whether and how these different groups' hearing responses cohered with the priorities of the Ministry of Education and Research. In Article 2, the interviews that were carried out only provided snapshots on quality work from a broad variety of staff in Norwegian higher education. Yet, if the same theoretical framework and analytical strategy had been applied in other institutional or national contexts, it is likely that the staff groups would have been similar, according to the principles of theoretical generalisation (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Ercikan & Roth, 2009). In Article 3, 11 out of 21 state-owned Norwegian HEIs were investigated, and it is possible that investigating all HEIs might have given other results. However, these institutions represented a majority of all HEIs in Norway and the main institutional categories in Norwegian higher education (old and new universities, specialised universities and universities of applied sciences). The key findings of considerable institutional autonomy in the negotiations for new DAs and limited expectations of the internal effects of the agreements were evident in the material and it is not likely that a larger selection of institutions would have given substantially different results. There is also a limitation to this study, since the expectations of change are studied in the article, and not the actual internal change as a result of the new DAs. Yet a study of actual change could not have been made at this point in time, since the DAs are new as of 2023.

This thesis employs an extensive empirical span, ranging from macro national processes on policy formation, to institutional approaches to governance, and micro-activities and rationales for quality work. However, despite the wide empirical span, the three articles and the thesis only shed

light on parts of the governance of higher education quality, when studying the policymaking, negotiations and practices on this issue and do not represent the overall governance of this issue in Norwegian higher education. The findings are thus solely limited to the specific points of empirical research on aspects of the governance of the quality of Norwegian higher education. Other parts of the governance system, such as regulatory and financial measures, are not studied. This makes it challenging to draw broad conclusions about the overall governance of the higher education sector on this basis, and this thesis does not assume an all-encompassing overview of the governance of the quality of higher education. However, to be able to conduct multi-level empirical research and analysis, as is the case in this thesis, and to address how policies are received and interpreted in the higher education sector, it is necessary to study these different levels and how they relate to and interact with governance. The analytical concepts employed in the analysis, legitimacy and autonomy, may also be relevant to apply to more comprehensive studies of the governance of higher education quality in Norway or in other national contexts (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

This thesis has contributed to various research streams in higher education studies and has also generated new questions that warrant further exploration by scholars. Firstly, a key insight gleaned from this thesis pertains to how Norwegian public authorities develop soft governance instruments ostensibly intended to steer higher education. However, a pertinent question is whether these policies and signals are effective in governing strategic initiatives and day-to-day work with quality among academic institutions and staff. The reasons behind this phenomenon should be investigated more closely. One explanation, as alluded to in this thesis, is that the use of soft governance strategies serves as a preliminary step, setting the stage for more intrusive governance instruments that have the potential to steer the higher education sector more actively. Another conjecture is that the prevailing governance emphasis on quality may divert attention from other governance agendas that garner less popularity. A third perspective, aligned with existing literature addressing the exceptional challenges of governing academia, posits that opting for a soft governance approach to quality might be the only viable strategy for authorities in a domain rife with vocal and capable stakeholders prepared to engage in "turf battles" if governance becomes overly intrusive. In conclusion, in-depth exploration of the rationale behind the authorities' *laissez-faire* approach to soft governance of quality is warranted.

Secondly, an intriguing avenue for further research would involve comparative studies in other countries where public authorities similarly emphasise the soft governance of the quality of

higher education. Do the findings presented in this thesis reflect a distinct Norwegian governance culture characterised by dialogue, or can analogous scenarios be identified in other countries? Analysing the governance instruments and their reception among HEIs and academic staff could yield valuable insights into how national governance contexts potentially shape the autonomy of academic institutions and their staff in the governance relationship.

Thirdly, while studying the governance of quality across different levels in the higher education sector presents conceptual and methodological challenges, I encourage scholars to undertake similar investigations concerning other policy issues. For example, exploring issues such as relevance and impact, along with delving into more "hard" governance measures, such as financial and regulatory measures, could offer valuable insights into their effects.

Lastly, regarding the prospects of employing DI as a theoretical framework within the realm of higher education studies, it would be intriguing to extend its application to analyse other governance instruments, such as financial or regulatory measures, within the governance framework of Norwegian higher education. Would this theoretical framework prove effective in elucidating how academic environments interact with "hard" governance mechanisms? A theoretically interesting endeavour would be to apply DI as a framework to study other public sectors, for instance, health, transport and defence, and determine whether DI could also add nuances to our understanding of how these sectors are governed. DI might be a better fit for analysing the higher education sector than other public sectors. This avenue can provide valuable insights into the broader applicability of the DI framework for understanding governance dynamics across higher education and public sector contexts.

7 References

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Errata list

Name candidate: Elisabeth Josefine Lackner

Dissertation: Governing for Quality – A Study of the Governance of Quality in Norwegian Higher Education

Abbreviations for errata:

Cor – correct

Ref – add reference to reference list

Page	Line	Original text	Type	Corrected text
12	24	The term *governance* refers to meanings related to law, control and authority, and generally concerns patterns of rule or practices of governing.	Cor	The term *governance* refers to meanings related to law, control and authority, and generally concerns patterns of rule or practices of governing (Bevir, 2023).
61	25		Ref	Bevir, M. (2023). Governance. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved from www.britannica.com/topic/governance

PART II:
ARTICLES

Article 1

Studying the Relation Between Stakeholder Input and Higher Education Policy

Elisabeth Josefine Lackner

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Studying the Relation Between Stakeholder Input and Higher Education Policy

Elisabeth Josefine Lackner[1]

Abstract

This study describes a key feature of modern, democratic policy making, namely the relation between stakeholder input and policy output. In the Nordic countries, there are long traditions for and democratic values attached to the dialogue between the government and civil society when developing policies for the educational sector. The case presented here is the hearing process held by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research in 2017 prior to the launch of a white paper on quality culture in higher education. The potential coherence between input by stakeholder groups and the quality measures proposed in the white paper is investigated. The theoretical framework comprises the concept of 'uploading' borrowed from research on EU policy making and discursive institutionalism to analyse the representation of input by stakeholder groups when they attempt to 'upload' their priorities into the white paper. The methodological approach is content analysis of the hearing responses and the white paper. The findings show that stakeholders from the higher education sector and employer groups had a higher degree of coherence with the proposed measures in the white paper, and universities and colleges had a lower degree of input that was represented.

Keywords Policy formation · Stakeholder influence · Higher education policy · Hearing · Political communication

Introduction

This study addresses a key feature of public administration, namely how policies may be altered through dialogue between the makers of the policies and the surrounding stakeholders that have an interest in influencing the final policy outcome. A dialogue can be established, for instance, through open oral hearings, seminars, informal meetings, and formal textual hearings. In many countries, the public

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administration will communicate with surrounding interest groups by arranging text-based hearings before they develop the policy. In the Nordic countries, there is also a tradition for dialogue between the government and various stakeholder groups outside public administration when developing policies, and research shows that "major interest organizations [play] a key role in the formation of public policies" (Lundberg and Hysing 2016, 2). In Norway, a common way to establish this dialogue is through formal, textual hearings where stakeholder groups are invited to submit letters containing input, opinions, and perspectives on a specific policy issue within a sector. A stakeholder in this context is an organised group with an interest in policies made for their sector. Given this dialogical backdrop, Norway is an interesting case when investigating questions regarding which actors gain ground in hearing processes and the potential relation between the hearings and the final policy. The case in this study is the formal textual hearing process prior to the launch of a white paper on quality in higher education by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research in 2017. This white paper was the starting point of several changes and measures in the Norwegian higher education sector aiming at increasing the quality of the education provided at universities and colleges. By examining the representation of stakeholder input in the policy paper, this study addresses the potential coherence between stakeholder input and current policies for the higher education sector and the factors that condition this coherence.

This study represents a novel approach to policy formation analysis in higher education. There is abundant research on policy implementation for the higher education sector, but theory-driven empirical analyses of policy formation processes, more specifically the hearing process, and which ideas and values prevail in the negotiations that are part of the formal policy process for the sector, are rare. Given that the purpose of the hearing process is to provide an opportunity for stakeholders in higher education to voice their opinions, it is a fair expectation that the ministry responsible for the hearing will to some extent make use of the input from the hearing. The questions then arise on whether, how, and why this input is made use of. Hence, this study also addresses the relative value of the hearing instrument as a tool for the democratic development of policies because the hearing process strengthens the legitimacy of the final policy document.

Quality is a key issue in policy on higher education, and in the Nordic countries the authorities have launched numerous measures over the last few decades to increase the educational quality in the sector. In Norway, the white paper studied here was also the starting point of new laws and regulations for enhancing quality in higher education in the following years. Various stakeholders have also become increasingly focused on how to develop policies that successfully enhance the quality of higher education. The rationales behind this development include a broad attention to the fact that rising student numbers demand increased public expenditure on higher education and the acknowledgement that higher education is tightly linked to economic growth, innovation, and general societal and individual welfare. Given the importance of the issue of quality and the white paper in question, studying the stakeholders and shapers of this policy is vital for understanding fundamental changes in the Norwegian higher education sector in recent years. In parallel, quality in higher education has also developed into a research speciality, with a substantial

number of scientific journals and researchers dedicated to the field (Steinhardt et al. 2017). One could argue that we are witnessing an era of quality in both policy and research in higher education, and this has led to a 'democratisation' of the term 'quality' in terms of an expansion of those claiming to have a legitimate stake in the development of the sector (Stensaker and Prøitz 2015). Consequently, one might expect that a large number of stakeholder groups have an interest in policies that address quality issues in higher education and will seek to influence these policies in various ways. It can be assumed that different stakeholders have different takes on the concept of quality in higher education and that some of these perceptions of and ideas on how to strengthen quality gain more traction in national policies than others. In order to address the topic of stakeholder impact on these policies, this article investigates the input that stakeholders gave in a hearing process on governmental policy development in the area of higher education quality and the possible relation to the policy in question.

The object of this study was the textual hearing process prior to the launch of the Norwegian white paper Quality Culture in Higher Education in 2017 (Meld. St. 16 (2016–2017)). Based on the above considerations, the research questions addressed in this article are formulated as follows:

1. *What is the relation between input from different stakeholder groups and quality policies for the higher education sector?*
2. *How can the possible relation between stakeholder input and policies for the higher education sector be explained?*

The research questions seek to examine whether we can observe that stakeholders are able to push their arguments, perspectives, and solutions to the fore in the political discourse, and open for discussion on whether we can conclude that they are successful in their opinion sharing or not, the case being the most recent white paper on quality in higher education in Norway. The responses to the research questions comment on the relation between stakeholder priorities and ministerial policies and whether and how ministerial priorities have been altered through the hearing process. The article sheds light on how the national policy agenda on higher education, in this case the quality education, is developed. Furthermore, this study addresses a core question for scholars of ideas, namely "why some ideas become the policies, programs, and philosophies, that dominate political reality while others do not" (Schmidt 2008, 307). Consequently, this study touches on broad questions such as how are policies for the higher education sector created and how can societal impact influence the policies for the higher education sector? What is the relation between policies for the higher education sector and surrounding interests? Can we assume that policies for the higher education sector are influenced by interests that do not reside in the responsible ministry, or do they derive solely from the responsible administration that pens such policies?

Empirical Context

The white paper *Quality Culture in Higher Education* [Meld. St. 16 (2016–2017)] is one of several policy results of a long-lasting governmental attention to quality in Norwegian higher education. The paper had several forerunners in policy papers and activities (ibid.), and among the most important for the sector was the much-debated and influential Quality Reform in 2003, which in general adopted the Bologna Process to the Norwegian higher education system and introduced the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). After this, several policy documents on quality were launched, such as *The Norwegian qualifications framework for lifelong learning* in 2011, the structural reform *Concentration for Quality* in 2015, several adjustments in the financial system and steering for the higher education sector, and revisions to the regulation on quality assurance and development in higher education. Although these and other initiatives to increase the quality in higher education had been introduced previously, the Ministry of Education and Research introduced the white paper *Quality Culture in Higher Education* with the quote, "The time is ripe for a white paper on quality in higher education" ((Meld. St. 16 (2016–2017), 17), thus stressing the need to continue to enhance quality in higher education with a white paper solely dedicated to this issue. In the white paper, the Ministry of Education and Research announced that the document would spark several measures in order to increase the quality in higher education in the coming years. Consequently, the Ministry of Education and Research launched a law introducing changes to the existing Act relating to universities and university colleges [Lov om endringer i universitets- og høyskoleloven (NOKUTs oppgaver, eksamen og personvern mv.), 2018] such as new written grading guidelines, new regulations concerning appointment and promotion to teaching and research posts, and a report on mentoring in higher education (University of Bergen 2018). The white paper was developed by the conservative government that has held office since 2013. This government has stressed the need for quality measures in Norwegian higher education, especially excellence initiatives, structural changes, and tighter coupling between higher education and working life. For the latter theme, a white paper dedicated to increase the work life relevance of higher education was launched in March 2021.

There is a long tradition in Norwegian public administration for carrying out formal, text-based hearings prior to developing green and white papers, long-term plans, and new legal frameworks (Arter 2004; Krick and Holst 2018; Olsen 1988). These hearings are regulated in the Public Administration Act, stating that institutions and organisations that are affected by the regulation "shall be given an opportunity to express their opinions before the regulations are issued, amended or repealed" (2019, § 37). The reason behind this regulation is that administrative agencies are responsible for the necessary clarification of a topic before it is put into legal action. Everyone can participate in the hearing process, and it is regarded as a democratic principle that the involved parties should be able to express their opinion on legal or policy changes that might affect them or that

they have an interest in. Therefore, several organisations and institutions are targeted and invited to the hearings and are explicitly expected to freely push their own interests and they will not necessarily be held accountable for their interests later (Nordby 1999). Hearings prior to the launch of white papers follow a certain procedure, where the ministry responsible for the white paper publishes a hearing note, inviting a broad selection of stakeholders to submit textual hearing responses and to voice their opinions on the topic described in the hearing note. The stakeholders then turn in their responses, which the ministry reviews when developing the white paper. The hearing process does not necessarily reinforce governmental perspectives and priorities and can be pivotal for a government to get vital input from relevant stakeholders. In addition, it opens for transforming the topic under consideration, possibly resulting in the initial perspectives and priorities of the responsible ministry being less prominent in the final policy document (Asdal 2011). However, although the hearing process is an open process and is designed for transparency, it is not likely that all stakeholders that participate in the hearing enjoy the same resonance with the reigning governmental priorities. It is the potential variation and reasons behind this variation that is the key study object in this project.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework in this study combines a tool to describe how stakeholders get onto the political agenda (uploading) with theory that aids in explaining how they manage to do so (discursive institutionalism). The concepts of policy 'uploading' and 'downloading' are first and foremost applied in research on EU policy formation and adaptation. In short, these concepts describe how members states are proactive shapers of policies, i.e. how they 'upload' their priorities into regional policies. Consequently, the term 'downloading' describes how the same actors adapt the policies that are initiated (Börzel and Panke 2013; Prøitz 2015). In this perspective, "a successful 'uploader state' makes its own preferences heard, so that policy, political processes, or institutions reflects its interests" (Prøitz 2015, 72). These concepts can also be applied at the national level for analysing specific aspects of policy processes, such as hearing processes, when developing national policies. In the case considered here, if there are codes within the text that correspond between the white paper in question and the hearing responses from a stakeholder group, this can be regarded uploading. With reference to the first research question, it is particularly the potential 'uploading' by the stakeholder groups into the white paper that will be discussed below. Certainly, there is the possibility that a stakeholder might voice an argument or opinion and that the same argument or opinion is mentioned in the policy independently of what the stakeholder attempted to upload into the policy. However, in our case, the purpose of the hearing process is that all affected voices shall be heard, and there is reason to believe that a large coherence between stakeholder priorities and final policies at least means that the interest of the stakeholder group in question is well represented in the policy and can therefore be considered to derive from uploading.

In order to answer the second research question and to identify the rationale and logic behind the policy formation process, in other words, how uploading takes place, a discursive institutionalism approach is applied. Discursive institutionalism aims at explaining institutional change within the field of political science and can be described as the antithesis to more established analytical frameworks such as historical, rational, and normative institutionalism. Scholars taking this perspective state that discursive institutionalism is able to describe the iterative processes of discourse (Schmidt 2008; Carstensen and Schmidt 2016) and how "agents are able to create and maintain institutions via their 'background ideational abilities'" (Schmidt 2015, 171). Discursive institutionalism portrays different agents' ability to make sense of and to act within different contexts of meaning and the ideas and rules that reign in a specific setting (Schmidt 2012). However, agents also contribute to changing or maintaining institutions through their 'foreground discursive abilities', which is the ability to communicate and deliberate about their values and ideas and to persuade others to change their minds about institutions (ibid.). In our case, this will be translated to the stakeholders' ability to be represented in policies that are aimed at increasing the quality of higher education in Norway. As an analytical approach, discursive institutionalism implies that certain ideas, in our case those measures that are needed to improve quality in higher education in Norway, are constructed in "a 'coordinative' policy sphere" (Schmidt 2010, 3). This study investigates which stakeholder groups appear to be better coordinated within the political policy sphere of the ministry. In addition, and in opposition to other theoretical approaches that mainly focus on 'successful' ideas, discursive institutionalism also aids in explaining why certain ideas *do not* find their way onto the political agenda (Schmidt 2008, 307), i.e. which stakeholder groups are not so well coordinated with the current ministry's agenda. Given the analytical framework above, this study will not only look at which stakeholders are the most able at voicing their priorities onto the national agenda, but also which stakeholders that are less convincing when they share their ideas on how to improve quality in higher education in Norway in the contemporary political landscape. In our case, the question then arises of which stakeholder groups possess greater ideational and discursive abilities and therefore are better coordinated in the governmental policy sphere regarding quality in higher education.

In this study, discursive institutionalism and especially the notion of 'foreground discursive abilities' will be used to contribute to a better understanding of which stakeholders are able to upload their ideas into the national policy on quality in higher education. It is expected that stakeholders in the higher education sector and employer groups to a greater extent will share ideational abilities with the current government, and therefore their perspectives and arguments are expected to be more represented in the white paper in question. In other words, the higher education sector and employers' foreground discursive abilities can be regarded as a way of uploading priorities Into the white paper.

Table 1 Overview of the number of hearing responses and pages per stakeholder group

Stakeholder group	Hearing responses	Pages
Universities and colleges	36	376
Employer organisations	7	38
Labour unions	15	111
Higher education sector	13	203
Total	71	728

Data and Method

The data sources in the study were the invitation to the hearing (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2016) and the white paper *Quality Culture in Higher Education* [Meld. St. 16 (2016–2017)] written by the Ministry of Education and Research and 71 hearing responses that were submitted to prior to developing the white paper[1] (Table 1, page 20). The hearing responses were placed into four groups according to what part of the Norwegian higher education sector they represented. The responses varied in amount of responses per stakeholder group and length of response in page numbers. As Table 1 shows, the universities and colleges had by far the largest amount of hearing responses and pages in the hearings, and the employer organisations had the smallest amount of hearing responses and pages. The labour unions and higher education sector had double the amount of hearing responses and pages than the employer organisations, and the higher education sector had substantially longer hearing responses than the labour unions. Examples of universities and colleges are The Norwegian University of Science and Technology and Østfold University College. Examples of employer groups are the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise or its sectoral federations such as Abelia, a business association for Norwegian knowledge and technology-based enterprises. Labour unions are, for example, the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions and the Norwegian Society of Engineers and Technologists. Examples of the higher education sector are interest organisations such as the Young Academy of Norway or organisational entities underlying the Ministry of Education and Research such as the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education. Hearing responses that were empty or did not fit the categories were not included in the analysis.

This study used content analysis (Coffey 2014; Stemler 2001) for mapping and comparing the white paper and the hearing responses, and the objects of the content analysis were the measures introduced for enhancing quality in higher education offered by the Ministry of Education and Research and the responding stakeholder groups. In the invitation to the hearing, the ministry presented factors they regarded as pivotal in order to improve quality in higher education. The stakeholders were invited to comment on and supplement to these factors. In the content analysis, these

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[1] Only hearing responses from stakeholders that could be placed in one of the defined groups are part of the data sources.

comments and supplementary input on quality by the stakeholders and the final text on quality measures by the Ministry of Education and Research in the white paper that is investigated. Because the data sources are stable and publicly accessible, they are well suited for content analysis (Prøitz 2014). Content analysis cannot in itself tell us about how stakeholder input potentially relates to governmental policies, but the method enables us to map the most important epistemological ideas, concepts, and measures for both the stakeholder groups and the government (Krick et al. 2019; Prøitz 2015). This implies that content analysis can provide insights into which stakeholder hearing responses were asserted and included in the white paper on aspects of quality in higher education, and which were not.

Because this study aimed at measuring the relation between the hearing responses and the subsequent white paper in question, the white paper was used as the methodological starting point. The categories and specific measures for quality improvement were derived from the first chapter of the white paper, and this document was used as the basis to identify "key themes and thus generate theoretical categories and identify patterns" (Coffey 2014, 5). Then, the text in the hearing responses was investigated in order to map what input that was voiced from the different stakeholder groups. The identified input on quality enhancement in the hearing responses was then placed into the according category from the white paper or not placed if it could not fit into any of the categories in the white paper. In the hearing responses, a proposed quality measure would normally be given one point, but if the measure was repeated or was devoted an entire paragraph, it was given two points. The codes in the content analysis were quasi-sentences in the first part of the hearing responses and the first chapter of the white paper. A quasi-sentence is "an argument which is the verbal expression of one political idea or issue. In its simplest form, a sentence is the basic unit of meaning" (Volkens 2001, 96), i.e. in our case these expressions were syntactic variations on quality such as words, sentences, and text parts that represent a stance on quality. For example, a sentence in a hearing response that included 'stimulate study programme leadership' would be given one point and categorised into category D (Education quality requires academic collaboration and leadership). Category A (A good study experience) consisted of codes such as 'good information on educational choice' and 'a heterogeneous student population'. Category B (Education that provides good learning) consisted of codes such as 'cooperation between education and working life' and 'relevant teaching and learning methods'. Category C (Placing value on pedagogical competence) consisted of codes such as 'making good use of teaching staff competence' and 'institutional merit systems'. Category D (Education quality requires academic collaboration and leadership) consisted of codes such as 'institutional strategies and ambitions' and 'stimulate study programme leadership'. Lastly, category E (Directing education quality) consisted of codes such as 'high disciplinary levels of study programmes and research' and 'national coordination of study programmes'. Through this methodological approach, it was possible to see exactly which phrases were coded and placed into the categories A–E from the white paper, thus making the findings less prone to subjective interpretations and increasing the transparency of the study. In order to illustrate for the reader the extent to which "certain beliefs are held, or a certain form of behaviour occurs" (Bryman 2012, 626) and to map the different

Table 2 Numbers and percentages of codes by stakeholder groups that are represented and in the white paper, sorted by the ministry´s categories (A–E) in the white paper Quality Culture in Higher Education

	Universities and colleges	Employers	Labour unions	Higher education sector	Total
A. A good study experience	8 (19)	3 (5)	14 (25)	6 (9)	31 (58)
B. Education that provides good learning	14 (41)	19 (22)	40 (64)	34 (38)	107 (165)
C. Placing value on pedagogical competence	1 (1)	7 (7)	18 (24)	9 (11)	35 (43)
D. Education quality requires academic collaboration and leadership	0 (1)	4 (4)	8 (8)	7 (10)	19 (23)
E. Directing education quality	15 (18)	4 (7)	12 (14)	7 (14)	38 (53)
Sum of codes represented in the white paper	38 (80)	37 (45)	92 (135)	63 (82)	232 (342)
Code percentage represented in white paper	48	82	68	77	68

ideas on how to enhance educational quality, the final scores were collected into tables. Although coding text in this manner increases the transparency and reduces subjectivity, it is important to note that the process basically entails categorising and quantifying material that in essence is qualitative and can only comment on the correspondence between the codes in hearing responses and in the white paper.

Findings

For answering the first research question on the relation between the input from stakeholder groups and quality policies for the higher education sector, a total of 232 of the coded arguments/inputs from the stakeholder groups were placed into the identified categories in the white paper, as shown in Table 2 (see attachment 1). All of the categories in the white paper corresponded with input from one or more of the stakeholder groups, but there was substantial variation in the amount of input among the categories and stakeholder groups. The table shows that the labour unions, the higher education sector, and the universities and colleges had large numbers of codes that corresponded with the categories in the white paper. The employer groups had the lowest number of codes that corresponded with the white paper. However, Table 1 shows that there were large differences in the number of hearing responses and the lengths of the responses submitted per stakeholder group. For instance, the universities and colleges submitted 36 hearing responses comprising 376 pages of text, while the employer groups only submitted 7 hearing responses in a total of 38 pages. Because the number of hearing responses and pages varied among the stakeholder groups, the *percentage* of the input by stakeholder groups that corresponded with the white paper was calculated and is presented in the last row of Table 2. The percentage shows that the stakeholder groups that had the

highest coherence of input in the hearings and the white paper, in the sense that they all had a high percentage of their input from the hearing responses placed into the categories in the white paper, were the employer groups (82%), the higher education sector (77%), and the labour unions (68%). The universities and colleges (48%) had the lowest percentage of their input represented in the white paper. Furthermore, it is important to note that the different stakeholder groups had more input in some categories than others. For instance, the universities and colleges had more coded input in category B (Education that provides good learning)—such as digitalisation of learning processes—than for category D (Education quality requires academic collaboration and leadership).

Table 2 also gives an overview of the priorities from the stakeholder hearings that were *not* represented in the white paper, giving further insight into why some stakeholder groups cohered less with the content in the white paper. Here, the number of codes of text that could not be traced in the codes of the white paper and sorted into the same all-encompassing categories in the white paper is presented. Because the content that was not included in the white paper did not have a final policy to compare with, a percentage could not be calculated for this content. As Table 2 shows, the labour unions and the universities and colleges had the largest numbers of codes that were not included in the white paper. Again, a credible explanation for this finding is that these stakeholder groups had the largest number of codes in general given that they had a substantial number of submitted hearing responses. This, however, was also the case for the higher education sector, but this sector had a smaller number of codes that did not correspond with the content in the white paper.

Looking further into the categories, Table 2 shows that the category with the most neglected input in the white paper was for *A (A good study experience)* and *B (Education that provides good learning)*. For categories A and B, it was the universities and colleges and the labour unions that had the most neglected content. However, the table also shows that a large number of codes in these categories *was* included in the white paper. The higher education sector provided substantial input in category B that corresponds with the white paper, but Table 2 shows that they had little input in this category that was left out (only four codes). In other words, the universities and colleges and the unions both experienced coherence with the ministry on issues of providing a good study experience and education that provides good learning, but they also had a large amount of input that was not represented in the white paper. The largest group of codes that was not included in the white paper were related to B (Education that provides good learning), and these were written by the universities and colleges (27 codes) and the labour unions (24 codes). Textual examples of what type of input this was were "Stimulate critical reflection by students" and "Improve financial frame conditions". This input to a lesser extent cohered with the most frequent codes that were uploaded in these categories such as "Relevant methods for teaching and learning" and "Cooperation with surrounding society and working life".

Summing up the findings, Table 2 shows that the ideas on quality improvement presented by the higher education sector, labour unions, and employers appeared to be better coordinated with the ministry than the universities and colleges in the sense that the input from their hearing responses on how to improve quality in higher

education to a greater extent resembled the content of the white paper. However, the table also nuances this impression and illustrates that the unions, accompanied by the universities and colleges, also experienced that large amounts of their input were not represented in the white paper when analysing the textual hearing process prior to the launch of the policy.

Discussion

The first research question addresses the relation between the input from different stakeholder groups and the quality policies for the higher education sector. Here, we see that stakeholders from the higher education sector and employer groups enjoyed a higher degree of coherence with the quality measures in the white paper and only had small amounts of input that were not represented in the white paper. The universities and colleges had a lower amount of input represented as well as a higher amount of input that was not represented. The unions had both a high percentage of input that was represented and high amounts of input that were not represented. Given that the purpose of the hearings is to provide the possibility to voice opinions, and possibly that the ministry responsible for the hearing 'listens to' these opinions, the above findings reveal a stronger relation between the higher education sector and employers and the most recent policy on quality in higher education in Norway than the unions and the universities and colleges enjoy. When applying notions of uploading, the higher education sector and employer groups appear to have been more able to 'upload' their priorities into the white paper in question.

The second research question asked how the possible relation between stakeholder input and policies for the higher education sector could be explained. In this case, what needs to be explained is the observation that the higher education sector and employers appear to have more overlapping perspectives with the current leaderships in the Ministry of Education and Research on measures to increase quality in higher education than the universities and colleges do. This study has mapped what can be described as the 'foreground discursive abilities' of the stakeholders involved in political communication (Schmidt 2015) in a recent policy case for the higher education sector in Norway. In accordance with discursive institutionalism and the findings in Table 2, the phenomenon that we encounter in this study can be described as 'discourse coalition', i.e. the notion that policy actors that share views resembles the concept of 'epistemic communities' that consist of actors who share ideas on a common policy topic (ibid.). Organisational proximity might explain stakeholders' variation in representation in the white paper. Since the higher education sector and employer groups arguably are more tightly coupled with the current leadership in the ministry that is responsible for the white paper, this can explain why they to a have greater 'foreground discursive abilities' towards the ministry than the universities and colleges and the labour unions do. First, the rationale behind this assumption derives from the fact that the higher education sector mainly consists of directly underlying directorates and organisational entities that are funded by the ministry such as The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education. These types of organisations therefore are likely to have greater expertise on

those issues that are on the higher education agenda, to understand their positions in the political landscape on these issues, and to know what rhetoric and actions are beneficial in order to advance the interests of the groups they represent. Through their organisational status, they can be expected to be more relevant for policy development and better equipped at lobbying to get their perspectives onto the policy agenda. Also, conservative governments historically have a long tradition of tight links with employer groups, such as one of the most influential interest group in Norway, namely the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NOU 2004: 25, 11; Allern 2010) and thus are expected to possess a greater grasp of policies that harmonise with the current political agenda. Because the higher education sector and employers to a large extent are expected to share the same 'background ideational abilities', they can also be expected to have a greater ability to communicate values and ideas and to enjoy coherence with the ministry in terms of which measures are needed in order to strengthen the quality of Norwegian higher education. On the other hand, the universities and colleges and the labour unions are not expected to enjoy the same coherence on issues of quality with the current ministry. The unions operate with solid distance to the ministry, and historically there have been tighter links between the Labour Party and the unions (ibid.; Allern 2010). Although universities and colleges rely heavily on public funding, they are not directly underlying entities of the Ministry of Education and Research. For instance, the governing entities such as leadership and boards are not appointed by the ministry. From the findings and discussion above, the labour unions, for example, are expected to both support and maintain, but also to disagree with, governmental priorities because they had high scores on content included in the white paper as well as a large number of codes that were not included in the final document. We observed that the 'more successful' actors' foreground discursive abilities, such as those of the higher education sector and employers, matched more with those of the government by observing how these stakeholder groups' textual arguments to a greater extent matched the governments' arguments and how little of their input was left out of the final policy. The higher education sector and employer groups thus appear to be closer to the nexus of current policy development on quality in higher education. One can also observe how the most successful stakeholder groups to a larger extent contribute to maintaining institutions through their 'foreground ideational abilities' (Schmidt 2015) by looking into the specific text of the codes that were not included in the white paper, for instance, the codes in B. Education that provides good learning where the universities and colleges included eight textual codes on Stimulating critical reflection among students and five codes on Basic ethics and understanding of society in their hearing responses. These codes were all absent in the white paper. Such 'foreground ideational abilities', accentuating a less instrumental and perhaps a more traditional and Humboldtian approach (Serrano-Velarde and Stensaker 2010) to quality in higher education, to a lesser extent harmonise with the perspectives on strengthening quality that the current ministry conveys.

The findings thus suggest that stakeholders who do not share the same ideational background as the reigning authorities to a lesser extent obtain representation in the white paper in question. In other words, stakeholder groups such as universities and colleges do not contribute to the same extent as the more represented stakeholders,

such as employers, in 'maintaining the institution' of Norwegian governmental policy on quality in higher education in 2017. Interestingly, it was not the stakeholder groups that represent the groups within the universities and colleges, i.e. the institutions themselves, that were the most successful in voicing their interests in the white paper. It was, instead, the surrounding stakeholder groups, i.e. the higher education sector and employer groups, that appear to have been the most successful in voicing their perspectives in the white paper. Leaning on discursive institutionalism, the fact that these groups surround the institutions explains why they seem to share 'foreground ideational abilities' with the ministry to a larger extent than the institutions themselves. These stakeholders have certainly communicated and deliberated about their values and ideas, but can we, in accordance with discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2012), claim that the higher education sector and employers have 'persuaded' the ministry to change their mind about how to alter higher education in Norway in order to improve the quality of the sector? Although there is a better fit between the input by these two stakeholder groups and the policy in question, the case might also be that these two stakeholder groups simply comply better with the perspectives of the ministry. It might be the case that the higher education sector and employer groups coincidentally have the same views on how to enhance quality in higher education as the ministry does and does not necessarily imply that their views on how to enhance quality in higher education derive from similar background ideas on the issue. Therefore, we cannot automatically conclude that the views on quality in the white paper simply derive from stakeholder input. It might be the case that the ideas that some stakeholder groups represent already exist in the current ministry, and although they are repeated in the hearing responses, the text in the white paper derives from the ministry and not from stakeholder input. The question then arises as to whether we can describe these stakeholders as influential at all—perhaps these stakeholders are merely kicking in open doors rather than contributing new perspectives to an important policy field in their sector. However, the above hesitations do not take the purpose and function of the hearing institute into account. Hearings have strong historical and legislative motives (e.g. Nordby 1999; Public Administration Act 2019), and although being heard does not equal being represented, there is a very reasonable expectation that hearings to some extent will influence the final policy outcome (Asdal 2011). In other words, we should be reluctant in drawing firm conclusions regarding what discursive institutionalism would describe as persuasion of others. We could rather express that we are observing 'well-coordinated policy actors' (Schmidt 2008) when we observe that there is better coordination between the higher education sector, the employer groups, and the current Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research.

Furthermore, this study motivates a discussion of hearings as an important tool in policy making and as an institution in a democratic political system. As we have seen, hearings are regarded as important democratic tools to ensure that parties that are involved in or affected by legal changes are able to voice their opinions (Public Administration Act 2019). Is it likely then to assume that the purpose of securing this principle by law is that all affected voices not only should have the possibility to express their opinions, but also—to some extent—that they should be heard as well? This study adds momentum to this question. Of course, the foundation of

democratic societies is embedded in fair and transparent elections, but democratic systems have numerous other mechanisms—such as hearings—to ensure democracy in the process of policy making. The question thus arises as to what the democratic component of the hearing institute in essence entails; is it purely the opportunity to be heard, i.e. in our case by handing in a hearing response, or is it also the obligation of the current ministry to listen to the input, or even more, to use the input when developing policies? This study cannot fully answer these questions, but it does give food for thought on these questions. In this study, the case was not categorical in the sense that input from some stakeholders was either fully included or excluded in the policy in question, but the findings show that the ministry appeared to lend their ears more to stakeholder groups sharing a common ideational background, namely the employer groups and the higher education sector, when the policy was developed. Because there are no other formal requirements that regulate the hearing process, for instance, that a fair share of the input from each stakeholder should be represented in the white paper or that the sources of the input should be consequently referred to in the white paper, the 'hand that holds the pen' when developing the white paper enjoys great freedom in whether to make use of the hearing responses or not. Furthermore, it appears that the ministry 'heard' supportive voices better than those that sounded somewhat ideologically more estranged. This study shows that stakeholders who share ideational background and abilities with the ministry have more coherent views on the issue of quality in higher education than stakeholders who do not share ideational background with the ministry. This finding strengthens the perception of hearings as an important institution in a democratic society. However, the hearing institution might not fit all stakeholders equally well and the efficiency of a hearing, seen from a stakeholder view, is possibly dependent on the ideational fit between the ministry and the stakeholder in question. Finally, it is important to note that the textual hearing responses, as analysed in this study, are not usually the only input that a ministry developing a white paper would get from stakeholders. In addition to the textual hearings, meetings, open hearings, conferences, etc., normally constitute a longer policy process.

We can sum up the above discussion by stating that hearings matter for the final policy outcome in the case of the white paper *Quality Culture in Higher Education*. In this case, the input from stakeholder groups with complementary ideational background as the ministry that drafted this policy enjoyed greater coherence with the measures in the white paper than other stakeholders.

Conclusion

This study has mapped and analysed which stakeholder groups have been more and less successful in uploading their priorities into the white paper on quality culture in higher education in 2017 [Meld. St. 16 (2016–2017)]. When analysing the textual hearing process prior to the launch of the policy, the mapping shows that the higher education sector and employer groups appear to have been able to upload a greater share of their input into the white paper, in the sense that their input to the largest extent matched the ministry's text in the white paper. For these stakeholder groups, a

large part of the codes from their hearing responses were included in the white paper and few codes were left out. The universities and colleges appear to have the lowest percentage of input represented in the white paper. The unions both have a high percentage of their input represented and a high amount of input that was left out of the white paper. These findings derive from content analysis where the text in these stakeholder groups' hearing responses to the white paper on quality in higher education and the white paper itself were coded and compared.

With reference to discursive institutionalism, a rationale behind this finding is that the higher education sector and employer groups to a larger extent than the universities and colleges and unions share the same ideational background as the current ministry. This study shows that in addition to having a smaller amount of input that was included and a larger amount of input that was excluded in the white paper, the type of input by the universities and colleges and unions that was excluded in the white paper was input that the ministry in itself did not stress in the white paper, such as stimulating critical reflection among students and improving financial frame conditions. The apparent conclusion is that there is more coherence between the higher education sector, the employer groups, and the current government, and therefore there is an expectation that these stakeholder groups to a larger extent enjoy representation when it comes to policy making on quality in higher education in Norway today. However, one could also argue that the ministry merely selects input from stakeholders that better fits their desired policy, as the discussion above elaborates on.

These findings constitute an empirical addition to discursive institutionalism based on content analysis. We have seen that discursive institutionalism can aid in explaining the findings by pointing at shared ideational backgrounds and abilities among some of the stakeholder groups and the ministry. However, we should be reluctant at taking the conclusions and discussion too far because it is not possible to point exactly at what input derives from the stakeholders what input derives from the ministry. For future studies of higher education policy, it would be interesting to examine the relation between policy for the higher education sector and how the universities and colleges adapt to these policies, in other words, the 'downloading' of national policies, such as the white paper in question, at the institutional level. For instance, which of the ministerial measures did the sector adapt to, and to what extent is this adaptation related to whether the institutions tried to upload concrete measures in the hearing process or not? Further, it would also be interesting, and complementary to the methodological approach of this study, to qualitatively explore further the rationales behind the findings, for instance, why there appears to be greater harmony between stakeholder groups that share ideological background with the creators of policies for the higher education sector.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no conflicts of interest related to this paper.

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Article 2

Legitimising Quality Work in Higher Education

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Legitimising quality work in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Quality work is a growing area of interest in higher education research, reflecting a broader political and scientific concern with how universities and colleges work with educational quality. However, the characteristics and theoretical underpinnings of the concept are understudied, and we have scarce knowledge about how different groups of staff in higher education work with quality. To address these gaps, this study explores how academic, administrative, and leadership staff at Norwegian higher education institutions approach and reason about quality work. This article draws on concepts of discretion and legitimacy to study how these staff groups engage in quality work, and the different ways in which they legitimise this work. The findings reveal commonalities and tensions in their approaches to and reasoning for quality work. The study contributes to the conceptual development of quality work, and the findings have notable implications for future policies and practices on quality work in higher education.

Introduction

In higher education, staff are concerned with ensuring and enhancing the quality of education that they or their colleagues provide. When a professor adjusts the teaching plan for the upcoming semester, executive officers arrange meeting points for first-year students, and deans host meetings in the faculty educational committee, they are all doing what can be called *quality work*. According to Elken and Stensaker, quality work in higher education as a concept is understood as being "aimed at filling in the missing links, activities, and practices conducted in the planning, organization, and delivery of education in higher education" (Elken & Stensaker, 2020a, p. 176). The concept of quality work has become a significant topic in higher education research, where some research literature covers systemic approaches to quality work, other parts of the literature are concerned with studying institutional environments and quality work practices such as peer feedback and academic development (Bloch et al., 2021; Bloch et al., 2022; Elken et al., 2020). However, in between systemic and culturally oriented perspectives on quality work, there are numerous practices, approaches, and rationales for working with educational quality that have not yet been described in research literature. Although working definitions of quality work like the one above exist, the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the concept are under articulated, partly because quality in higher education in itself is difficult to define (Bloch et al., 2021; Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011). However, given the continuous scientific and political attention that quality work attracts,

there is still a need to explore how quality work unfolds inside higher education institutions (HEIs) and the theoretical basis of this concept.

Specifically, the relationship between quality culture and quality management in higher education needs to be further explored (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). Additionally, although the responsibility for quality work is distributed among different groups of staff at all organisational levels within HEIs, we know little about how and why different staff groups engage in and cooperate on quality work. At the same time, researchers have called for the need to understand more about how external and internal expectations and performance are related to academic and administrative activities and actual work in higher education (Hansen et al., 2019), and to further explore the phenomenon of quality work, which is at the core of contemporary higher education reforms (Bloch et al., 2021; Elken et al., 2020; Pechmann & Haase, 2022). Therefore, although the general concept of quality work may describe the missing links between the organisation and delivery of higher education, the understanding of the concepts' empirical and theoretical basis is fragmented and scarce.

Based on the above, there is a significant knowledge gap in understanding how quality work is approached and reasoned by different staff members in HEIs. This study examines some of these missing links in quality work among academic, administrative, and leadership staff and explores how these groups explain and relate to one another when doing quality work. By filling this knowledge gap, the study aims to shed light on why quality work emerges and how it is approached by different staff groups in HEIs. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute new insights and empirical evidence to the development of the concept of quality work.

Similar to other Nordic countries, the Norwegian government has launched several reforms aimed at improving the quality of higher education, promoting institutional autonomy and increasing accountability (Christensen & Lægreid, 2011; Frølich et al., 2014; Hansen et al., 2019; Lackner & Stensaker, 2022; Maassen et al., 2017). The most recent reforms is the *Quality culture in higher education* reform from 2017, which introduced various measures to promote quality work in universities and colleges, such as making use of teaching staff competence and stimulating study programme leadership (Lackner, 2021; M.o.E.R., 2017). However, although this and similar reforms generally have been well received among Norwegian HEIs, such reforms also represent tensions between governance aims on educational quality and the premises of academic work (Solbrekke et al., 2020).

One tension arises from academic staff in Norwegian HEIs reporting limited time for research due to increased workload on administrative tasks, including activities related to improving educational quality (Hansen et al., 2019; Wendt et al., 2021). Similar discussions about the balance between academic work and other interests, such as complying with governance agendas on educational quality, are ongoing in other European countries as well (Erickson et al., 2021; Jongbloed et al., 2008; Shaw, 2019). For instance, Pechmann and Haase (2022) have shown how quality is used as an all-purpose tool to legitimise governance of other policy aims such as future-proofing Danish higher education and increasing its relevance.

Another tension arises from the natural diversity that exists among academic staff in how they work with educational quality. For instance, Mårtensson et al. (2014) find that 'strong microcultures' in academia will typically only relate to quality assurance recommendations if they comply with their own plans and goals. Additionally, Borch (2020) notes that academic staff tend to use student course evaluations for quality assurance rather than quality enhancement, which they also are designed for. Borch explains this preference by noting that academic staff appear to facilitate evaluations according to their own motivations, values, experiences, academic cultures and traditions. Furthermore, Prøitz (2015) shows that although learning outcomes have been introduced to curriculum development to meet common European and national quality standards, the local national, institutional and study programme adaptations weaken their standardising abilities. Hence, there are specific challenges related to the governance of quality work in Norwegian higher education, both in terms of increased workload and standardisation of academic work. These challenges are not unique to Norway, but resonate with similar scenarios in other European countries.

Given this national backdrop and recent governance measures addressing quality culture in higher education, Norway provides a good example for studying quality work and possible tensions between different staff groups in quality work. The research problem in this study is how we can increase our understanding of quality work and the possible tensions between different approaches to quality work within HEIs. The research questions of this study are,

1. How do staff groups in higher education institutions practice quality work?
2. What are the rationales for doing quality work among staff groups in higher education institutions?

Through interviews with academic, administrative and leadership staff from three different HEIs in Norway, this study aims to describe and analyse the daily practices, understandings and reasoning of quality work among staff. The study will also explore the similarities and differences in the quality work practices and rationales of the different staff groups, and assess the discretion they perceive they have in their quality work. The findings from this study can offer insights into the motivations and potential tensions that may exist among various staff groups involved in quality work.

Analytical framework

To study practices and rationales for quality work, this study draws on the theoretical framework of institutional work and particularly how discretion and legitimacy, which are core concepts in institutional work, are linked to quality work.

Institutional work is a relevant theoretical framework for understanding quality work as it highlights how professionals play a pivotal, yet sometimes translucent, role in both maintaining and transforming institutions by establishing new, professional spaces, such as quality work (Lawrence et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2013; Suddaby & Viale, 2011). Furthermore, institutional work observes how professionals use one key dynamic for reconfiguring institutions and organisational fields, namely their legitimacy to develop professional spaces and navigate within these in their field. Legitimacy is therefore crucial in institutional work, as institutional change and maintenance depends on whether the institution and the individuals that work in it are able to fulfil external and internal expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; March & Olsen, 1984; Olsen, 2009; Suddaby & Viale, 2011). In this study, institutional work is applied as a theoretical lens to understand how professional groups in HEIs use legitimacy to establish professional spaces for quality work.

Legitimacy in this context is defined as how "an organization justifies to a peer or superordinate system its right to exist" (Suchman, 1995, p. 573). In this study, national public authorities who introduce reforms on quality work in higher education or higher-level officials within a HEI who are responsible for implementing these reforms can be considered as superordinate. Furthermore, staff doing quality work in HEIs depend on the legitimacy granted by these superordinates to establish and maintain professional spaces for quality work, as well as to reduce the pressure for continuous transparency and accountability (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Diogo et al., 2015). Therefore, legitimacy is closely linked to discretion, since legitimacy from a superordinate gives staff a certain degree of freedom or discretion to manoeuvre in their work. Without legitimacy, staff may face constraints or limitations in their ability to establish and maintain professional spaces for quality work. Suchman (1995) distinguishes between three types of legitimacy – pragmatic, moral and cognitive – which all spring from different dynamics. *Pragmatic legitimacy* refers to legitimacy as adhering to the immediate audiences, based on rational calculations of how an activity may affect its audiences (ibid., p. 578). Audiences can be found both inside and/or outside the HEIs, for instance, different staff groups, governing authorities, and employers. *Moral legitimacy* refers to whether an activity, such as a form of quality work, "is the right thing to do" (ibid., p. 579), and whether certain groups will increase their welfare and benefit from an activity. This type of legitimacy is interpreted as quality work that can be regarded as the right thing to do for the welfare of the students. *Cognitive*

legitimacy implies that activities are "necessary or inevitable based on some taken-for-granted cultural account" (ibid., p. 583). This kind of legitimacy rests on the acknowledgement that activities related to quality work simply are expected to be carried out, without question, for instance when staff do quality work merely because they are instructed to do so.

Discretion refers to the ability of an individual to choose between "a set of alternatives on behalf of a principal" (Molander, 2020; Wallander & Molander, 2014). This superior power grants the individual the power to make decisions and act independently within certain boundaries and limits. In the context of quality work, discretion may be a result of the expectation that staff should naturally perform quality work independent of being instructed to do so, or it may be explicitly granted to them by superior organisational levels. However, discretion will result in variations in how different staff groups perform quality work, depending on their individual reasoning and decision-making process. This can lead to diversity in quality work, and examples of discretion in various forms of quality work have been reviewed above (Borch, 2020; Mårtensson et al., 2014; Prøitz, 2015). However, as we have seen, the variation in quality work as a result of discretion, as described above, is not unproblematic. Firstly, the discretion applied by one staff group might be scrutinised by other staff groups, especially with respect to whether it is well or ill applied or managed. Secondly, superiors at higher organisational levels might be concerned with the potential 'normative tension' that lies between the discretionary space of staff and principles of equality, rule, and law that promote accountability (Molander et al. 2012). The reason for this is that accountability requires a degree of transparency and standardisation in the reporting and the execution of quality work. Without transparency, individuals and groups cannot be held accountable for the decisions they make concerning their quality work. Similarly, without standardisation, there would be no clear descriptions or benchmarks for quality work, which makes it difficult for superiors to assess whether quality work has been performed satisfactorily. Therefore, this study concerns how different staff groups perceive their room to manoeuvre in quality work, how they apply this discretion to quality work, and how they legitimise the quality work they do. Based on this, the academic, administrative and leadership staff groups are expected to vary in whether they perceive themselves to have high or low degrees of discretion in the quality work they conduct.

The issue of how discretion and types of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) manifest in quality work among staff groups in HEIs readdresses significant questions concerning the tensions between governance aims on educational quality and the premises of academic work. We may expect that the political aims on enhancing educational quality and accountability make academic staff more inclined to pragmatically legitimise their quality work, which may decrease their discretion in quality work. Moreover, we can expect that administrative staff apply a more cognitive approach to quality work due to their familiarity with routine and rule-based tasks. Additionally, we can expect that institutional leaders are primarily concerned with student welfare given their greater responsibility for educational quality at their respective level. These expectations will be addressed through the lenses of legitimacy and discretion when analysing the findings in this study.

Method and empirical background

To gain a more nuanced understanding of how different staff groups approach quality work in HEIs and rationalise this, a qualitative approach is appropriate (Coffey, 2013; Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015). This study was conducted through 19 semi-structured interviews (Clark et al., 2021; Yeo et al., 2014) with staff at one Norwegian university college and two universities. In order to avoid one-dimensional findings and enable analysis and discussion of quality work regardless of institutional, disciplinary and level differences, the HEIs and staff groups were purposively sampled (Bryman, 2012), based on differences in research and education portfolio, age, mergers and size and levels within these institutions (institutional, faculty, department and study programme/course level). Hence, the institutional differences and differences between levels within the HEIs are not accentuated in the findings. The staff that were interviewed were 7 academic staff, 7 administrative

staff (executive officers and advisors at department and institutional level), 5 leadership staff (vice rectors, prorectors and deans at institutional and faculty level), see Appendix 1 for further information.

The interview guide included questions on how the staff worked with quality, asking them to describe typical tasks in their quality work and what room to manoeuvre they perceived themselves to have in this work, and to elaborate on why they conducted quality work. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the total corpus was approximately 35,000 words, varying from 1,236 words to 4,248 words per interview. The analysis of the interviews focused on the individual staff's approaches to quality work and their perceived discretion in this work. Their answers were was summarised (Hopwood, 2018; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014) and through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the data on the staffs' reasoning for quality work were categorised into the three types of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), according to main and secondary legitimacy type in quality work.

In the context of this study, pragmatic legitimacy is operationalised as quality work that is done to accommodate immediate constituents, such as different staff groups, students or governing authorities, for example, the need to create coherence between education and strategic documents (such as annual reports and strategic plans) and the need to successfully pass a quality audit. Moral legitimacy is operationalised as quality work that is done for the welfare of students, for example tied to the difference in students' needs during teaching, such as potential language difficulties and students' variations in background knowledge. Cognitive legitimacy is operationalised as an ex-ante acceptance of the necessity of quality work, for example, without questioning its relevance and fitness-for-purpose.

Due to the small number of participants in each group, the findings on legitimacy types were analysed for typicality of each of the groups in accordance with the above operationalisations. The purpose of these methodological choices was to extract contrasts between staff groups in their legitimisations of quality work. Quotes from the staff that were interviewed have been labelled with ACA1-7 for academic staff, ADM 1–7 for administrative staff and LEAD 1–5 for leadership staff. Supplementary data included meeting observations with educational deans and prorectors of education, institutional and educational strategies and reports (such as annual reports, calls for educational prizes etc.) and quality system descriptions. These data informed interview questions and provided background information for data interpretation.

The university college included in the study is a small institution that primarily offers applied and professionally oriented study programmes, whereas the two universities are older institutions with a formal research mandate and profile, and larger numbers of students and staff compared to the university college. Furthermore, one of the universities has a more decentralised organisation and a more professionally oriented study portfolio than the other. All three HEIs have a quality system that complies with the national legal framework, which requires that universities and university colleges have a quality assurance system that enables, ensures and provides documentation on both the state of and work with educational quality (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019). According to the regulation, the quality systems must include all the significant processes that are in place to secure the quality of study programmes, ranging from providing good information to prospective students to ensuring coherence between various parts of the study programme. The three institutional quality systems have notable similarities. Firstly, they outline the organisational levels involved in the "quality workflow", from the institutional to the course level, and how staff at these levels are involved in quality work, mainly through evaluating and reporting on the quality of educational services. Secondly, the quality systems aim to incorporate information and reports generated at lower institutional levels into the quality reports of the higher levels, for instance in educational reports that also outline the qualitative state of educational services at a department or a faculty. These reports were then included in dialogue meetings on educational quality with the faculty level, and institutional quality reports constitute the official documentation in dialogue with public authorities and other stakeholders. Finally, the descriptions of all three quality systems include

details on the responsibilities of academic and leadership staff and forums. However, the systems do not describe quality work that extends the quality systems themselves, and this additional quality work is only partially described in the other documents and strategies.

Findings

In the interviews, **academic staff** report variety in their approaches to quality work. For this group, quality work encompasses any task that seeks to enhance teaching, establish coherence among different parts of the study programme or course they teach, improve learning outcomes, and support students in various ways, such as aiding with language difficulties and organising social events. This group also considers work related to the quality system, such as reporting and evaluating study programmes or courses, as quality work. Despite the rules and routines embedded in the quality system, academic staff perceive themselves to have ample room to manoeuvre in their quality work, as illustrated by the variations in their approaches. While they recognised the need to comply with the formal aspects of quality work through the quality system, they also emphasised the importance of keeping it at arm's length and avoiding further expansion. The following quote exemplifies how academic staff prefer to exercise discretion in their quality work:

> "We are not so happy about someone from outside, a study programme leader or a dean, telling us what quality work is and who wants to 'fix' us" (ACA2)

Academic staff primarily argued that their approach to quality work was student-centred, with a focus on improving the learning experience and outcomes for students. This reflects a moral dimension to their approach to quality work, with the goal of enhancing the educational experience for students and supporting their success being a central concern. Statements such as this are typical for how academic staff generally describe their own quality work:

> "[…]processes aiming at giving the best possible education, that you manage to communicate in the best possible manner what the students need to know in order to achieve their learning objectives." (ACA6) and another "Quality work is all about the quality in the way we [educators] relate to students either during teaching or supervision." (ACA3)

Some academic staff also acknowledged that quality work related to the quality system is necessary, although they did not view it as their primary focus in quality work. This reflects a cognitive dimension to their approach to quality work, indicating compliance with the formal aspects of quality work.

Administrative staff perceive quality work as work that is done within the structures of the quality system. Their approaches to quality work include following and developing routines related to the quality system, facilitating and aiding academic staff in developing study programmes, providing relevant data and information for quality reports, and other work related to tasks that derive from the quality system. This group does not perceive themselves to have great room to manoeuvre in their approaches to quality work. Administrative staff typically work within the formal structures and procedures of the quality system, and their focus is on ensuring compliance and facilitating the undisrupted functioning of the system. Typically, administrative staff describe their role in quality work to be:

> "[…] to structure and facilitate the quality system descriptions. I don't believe that this system incorporates all work with educational quality […] but I provide the frames for it." (ADM3)

Administrative staff primarily view quality work – which for them is mainly related to the quality system – as a necessity in itself, and do not question the need for this kind of work. This reflects a cognitive rationale for their approach to quality work, with a focus on the importance of complying with the formal structures and procedures. However, when elaborating further on the purpose of

quality work, administrative staff also mention the benefit to students, reflecting a secondary use of moral explanations for quality work. While their primary focus is on meeting the requirements of the quality system, they also recognise the importance of enhancing the educational experience for students. This reflects both cognitive and moral legitimacy for their approach to quality work, with a recognition of the necessity of formal structures and procedures, as well as a commitment to improving the educational experience for students.

Leadership staff are mainly focused on promoting and facilitating quality work within their organisation, as well as effectively communicating educational quality to a range of stakeholders, including higher organisational levels within their HEI and governing bodies. They see quality work as a critical aspect of the agenda of their unit (institution, faculty, department, etc.), and work to negotiate quality practices (such as adjusting enrolment numbers to account for estimated dropout rates) to ensure that important quality parameters are not overlooked. As with administrative staff, this group does not perceive themselves to have great room to manoeuvre in their approaches to quality work. Typical feedback from leadership staff is:

> "For me quality work is to make rules and regulations relevant for those who are affected by them." (LEAD1) and another, "I need to ensure that we are in line with the governing documents, that we follow legislation […] and that we operate in correspondence with strategic plans, activity plans etc." (LEAD6)

Leadership staff primarily legitimise quality work with pragmatic arguments, with a particular emphasis on the various audiences who are involved in, or will receive reports on, the quality work at their respective unit. However, similar to administrative staff, this group also recognises the importance of quality work as a means to ensure that students benefit from high-quality education, representing a moral approach to quality work.

All staff groups expressed support for discretion in academic quality work, although there was a tendency for academic staff to argue for even greater levels of discretion. Administrative and some leadership staff did not question how academic staff approached quality work per se, but did emphasise the need to be better informed about the quality work being carried out at the course and study programme level, and furthermore to streamline and standardise the evaluations and reports generated on quality work. These staff groups argued that it was essential to document and account for the provision of educational services at a satisfactory level of quality, and believed that standardisation would facilitate this goal. Standardisation was not only seen as important for evaluations and reporting, but also for altering the approach of academic staff in cases where educational quality was reported to be low. As a result, administrative and leadership staff did not advocate for less discretion, but rather for more transparency and standardisation in quality work. This stance is exemplified by one administrative staff member, stating that:

> "The danger with guidelines on quality work being too loose, is that we deliver educational services of a low standard. The attention to the services we deliver may generally decline, become arbitrary and depend on the effort of the individual, not the collective". (ADM1)

The typical perceptions of each staff group are simplified and summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 displays a noticeable contrast in the perception of the degree of discretion in quality work between academic staff and administrative and leadership staff. Academic staff perceive themselves to have a high degree of discretion, while administrative and leadership staff feel they have a low degree of discretion in quality work. While all staff groups consider the quality system as part of quality work, academic staff view quality work as a much broader set of decisions and activities

Table 1. Staff groups' main and secondary legitimacy type in quality work.

Staff group	Perceived discretion	Legitimacy type
Academic	High	Moral (cognitive)
Administrative	Low	Cognitive (moral)
Leadership	Low	Pragmatic (moral)

than administrative and some leadership staff. Regarding how the staff groups explain their rationales for quality work, Table 1 indicates that academic staff primarily apply moral legitimacy, while administrative and leadership staff primarily apply cognitive and pragmatic legitimacy. However, as shown in the table, both administrative and leadership staff also consider the benefit of students as a secondary legitimacy type for quality work. Similarly, academic staff also apply cognitive legitimacy as a secondary legitimacy type when explaining why they do quality work.

The findings in this study have limitations. Firstly, the findings are based on data from a limited number of interviews, and few respondents per staff group. Other sets of respondents and larger groups of respondents might have given different results. Secondly, the findings are descriptions of quality work in a Norwegian context at the given time when the study was conducted. Hence, the findings in this study are not generalisable to other institutional or national contexts. However, the tensions and commonalities between different staff groups on issues of educational quality work, which have also been described in other national contexts, might inform similar studies in other countries.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of the interviews in this study, it is evident that quality work is not limited to specific staff groups or areas within the three HEIs that were studied. Rather, quality work is multifaceted and can be carried out as a part of or outside the frameworks of the institutional quality systems. Quality work takes on many forms, and it is done and reasoned for in a variety of ways – it is truly a highly context-sensitive and open-ended phenomenon (Bloch et al., 2021; Elken & Stensaker, 2020b, p. 176).

Regarding the first research question, the findings show that academic staff have greater discretion in defining and executing quality work that goes beyond the mandatory requirements of the quality system. In contrast, administrative and leadership staff have less discretion in their quality work. When academic staff are given the freedom to choose their approaches, they have significant discretionary power over their quality work. This discretionary power enabled academic quality work to be mainly voluntary, undefined, and highly context-sensitive (Borch, 2020; Mårtensson et al., 2014), resulting in variations in the descriptions of quality work provided by individual staff members who were interviewed in the study. The initial expectation regarding this research question – that academic, administrative and leadership staff groups vary in their perceptions on their level of discretion in quality work – is therefore met. Additionally, and in line with the analytical framework of institutional work, this study shows how academic quality workers "define a new uncontested space" (Suddaby & Viale, 2011, p. 428) when they approach the quality work beyond the boundaries of the quality systems. This discretion allows academic staff to mould their own approaches and rationales for quality work, resulting in unique and explicitly discrete spaces for quality work.

Regarding the second research question, the interviewed staff all perceived their approaches to quality work as legitimate. They believed that their way of carrying out quality work had a right to exist and was justifiable to a 'superordinate' (Suchman, 1995). However, the findings showed that the three staff groups legitimised their quality work differently and only partly met the expectations on the basis of the analytical framework, with mainly moral (academic), cognitive (administrative) and pragmatic (leadership) legitimacy. Furthermore, although the different types of legitimacy co-exist, they do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. The data material illustrates palpable tensions between the moral legitimisation of academic staff and cognitive and pragmatic legitimacy types, represented by administrative and leadership staff groups, respectively, and reflects the tensions embedded in quality governance and thus quality work (Pechmann & Haase, 2022; Solbrekke et al., 2020). The basis of these tensions derives from the finding that although all staff groups were in favour of the great discretion academic staff enjoy in their quality work, this discretion and consequently the great variation in practices of academic quality work is also scrutinised by administrative and

leadership staff. The drift towards standardisation and transparency in quality work that administrative and leadership staff argue for, implies less discretion in academic quality work.

The above is an example of the 'normative tension' in the delivery of public services between staff who employ discretion in their quality work and principles of rule and law embedded in standardisation (Molander et al., 2012, p. 217). The discretion in academic quality work raises the question of how discretionary power enables quality work to be accountable for a 'superordinate' (Suchman, 1995) who is concerned with the balance between the "delegation of discretionary power and the rule of law and democratic authority" (Molander, 2020). Leaders and administrative staff rely on transparent and comparable results of the quality work that is done at various levels within the HEI. Academic staff do comply with the quality system, for instance through reporting, but other than that they execute quality work in a myriad of ways and hold on tightly to the discretion of their quality work. Academic staff argue that it is the extensive discretion in quality work and their ability to mould their own approach to quality work that benefits students. In this way, discretion enables the great variety in academic quality work, but it also represents a challenge to the legitimacy of this work. For academic staff, quality work is legitimate if it entails a high degree of discretion. For non-academic staff, conversely, quality work is legitimate if it entails a high degree of standardisation, i.e. low discretion. This duality represents the tension in the governance of quality in higher education because, less discretion in quality work will be seen as favourable from a governance point of view, and more discretion from an academic point of view.

However, the study's findings suggest that despite the differences in legitimising strategies for quality work, there are also more shared perspectives among the staff groups than previously discussed. Although academic staff tend to emphasise moral legitimacy more than administrative and leadership staff, the latter are also familiar with this type of reasoning. As Table 1 illustrates, all staff groups utilise moral legitimacy, but academic staff, who interact with students regularly, may understand quality work differently than administrative and leadership staff, who have less direct contact with students. Therefore, while the top layer of argumentation for quality work may differ among the three staff groups, they do share a common goal of providing quality education for students to some extent. While they may use different rationales for quality work, and these rationales represent tensions between governing and actually doing quality work in higher education, the findings reveal a shared and fundamental objective in their motivations for doing quality work.

Revisiting the concept of quality work

As we have seen, scholars tend to agree that quality work in higher education is difficult to define, due to the fact that quality in itself is highly sensitive to context (Bloch et al., 2021; Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011). However, the findings in this study open for further refinements by articulating new dimensions to the concept. This study illustrates that quality work by academic staff has a high level of discretion, whereas administrative and some leadership staff have less discretion in this work, partly because these two groups tend to perceive that quality work is related to the institutional quality systems. Therefore, if quality work as a concept also refers to work that goes beyond the quality system, our understanding of the concept needs to take into account that this kind of work is specifically related to discretionary – and in many cases academic – work. Additionally, the findings show that the rationales for not only academic staff, but to some extent also administrative and leadership staff, legitimise quality work on the basis of its fitness for the purpose of benefiting the students. Hence, our understanding and possible definitions of quality work need to include these dimensions of the concept – that quality work is discretionary activities and practices that are aimed at student benefit. In conclusion, these two dimensions of quality work contribute to fill the 'missing links' that the initial working definition implied (Elken & Stensaker, 2020a). Furthermore, a revised understanding of quality work opens for articulating that cooperation between academic, administrative and leadership staff on quality in higher education entails tensions and possible difficulties. Based on the findings in this study, the different

practices on and rationales for quality work among these staff groups could be addressed in future strategic initiatives that aim at stimulating quality work in higher education.

This study has highlighted the tight connection between quality work and academic activity, by findings that illustrate how academic staff articulate a web of practices that they perceive to be quality work, which in most cases are not linked to the formal quality system. Additionally, and in line with institutional work, the study has illustrated how academic staff utilise their legitimacy to develop their own professional space in quality work (Lawrence et al., 2013; Suddaby & Viale, 2011). In this manner, this study has strengthened the concepts' relevance not only for systemic quality work, but also more culturally oriented quality work. Therefore, a revised approach to the concept, emphasising the academic and student-centred dimensions of quality work, bears the potential to expand the common ground for collaboration on educational quality between organisational levels and staff groups in higher education. This common ground for quality work might resonate better with academic staff, and bears a potential to ease the tensions between the groups that are addressed above.

Conclusion

This study highlights the different approaches and rationales of academic, administrative and leadership staff groups towards quality work in higher education. Both the levels of discretion in quality work and the different legitimisations of quality work that have been identified in this study are novel and represent empirical contributions to that affect how we understand the concept of quality work.

The key findings reveal that academic staff have more discretion in their quality work compared to administrative and leadership staff, who perceive quality work as linked to formal quality systems and have less discretion in their quality work. The staff groups employ different legitimising strategies for their quality work, leading to tensions in how they collaborate on educational quality. Academic staff argue for their discretion in quality work based on moral legitimacy, while administrative staff and partly leadership staff argue for transparency and standardisation in quality work, with a basis in cognitive and pragmatic legitimacy, respectively. This difference in legitimising strategies contributes to palpable tensions between the three staff groups.

However, the study also highlights a shared interest among staff groups in ensuring that quality work benefits the students, which may provide common ground for collaboration. The study contributes to the conceptual development of quality work, which can be useful for policy development, further research, and future collaboration among staff groups doing quality work. Specifically, the study contributes to understanding quality work as directed action aimed at improving educational quality for the benefit of students. Moreover, the study provides insight into how HEIs and staff groups adapt to external expectations on quality work in higher education.

When new policies, regulations and routines that address educational quality are developed, it is helpful to acknowledge that different staff groups apply different rationales, emphasising different types of legitimacy, when they do quality work. However, although different staff groups do not take the same steps in quality work, they do share a common concern for the welfare of the students. These acknowledgements add clarification and direction to discussions on how quality work among staff groups in higher education can be developed and stimulated.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix 1

Respondents per staff group and organisational level.

Level	ACADEMIC STAFF (ACA 1-7)	ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF (ADM 1-7)	LEADERSHIP STAFF (LEAD 1-5)
Institutional	–	1, 3, 4	1, 3
Faculty	2	5, 6	2, 4, 5
Department	1, 4	7	–
Study programme/course	3, 5, 6, 7	2	–

Article 3

Agreements between the State and Higher Education Institutions – How do they Matter for Institutional Autonomy?

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Agreements between the state and higher education institutions – how do they matter for institutional autonomy?

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ABSTRACT

Agreements between national public authorities and higher education institutions serve as a governance instrument in many European countries. In Norway, these agreements are currently undergoing change, as the state now invites the institutions to propose their own goals and parameters in the agreements. This study seeks to understand the negotiation process for new agreements and assess how higher education institutions expect the new agreements may affect their institutional autonomy in practice. The methodology includes analysing negotiation documents and interviews with key institutional officials to understand their expectations of the new agreements. The findings indicate that Norwegian higher education institutions have enjoyed both substantive and procedural autonomy during the negotiation process. However, it is anticipated that the new agreements will have a limited impact on institutional autonomy in practice, except for their role in legitimising internal strategic priorities. As a result, this study raises concerns and contributes to a deeper understanding of how agreements between public authorities and higher education institutions serve as instruments for governing higher education.

Introduction

Studying institutional autonomy, which refers to the room to maneuver granted to organisations in setting and implementing their goals, is crucial for comprehending how public organisations operate within their defined boundaries (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000; Maggetti and Verhoest 2014; Scott 2014). In the European higher education sector, institutional autonomy is a topic of significant political concern and a fundamental concept for studying the governance dynamics between public authorities and higher education institutions (HEIs). Over the past few decades, this relationship has developed two central features that are worth noting (de Boer et al. 2015). Firstly, the autonomy of HEIs is characterised by ambiguity, as national public authorities have simultaneously enhanced formal institutional autonomy while imposing other forms of governance though continuous demands for institutional accountability and reporting (Christensen 2011; Gornitzka and Olsen 2006; Maassen, Gornitzka, and Fumasoli 2017; Olsen 2009). Secondly, formal agreements between the authorities and the institutions have increasingly been employed as instruments to govern HEIs (de Boer and Enders 2017; Elken, Frølich, and Reymert 2016; Gornitzka et al. 2004).

However, the relationship between institutional autonomy and agreements is seldom explored in the field of higher education.

Formal agreements between public authorities and HEIs, such as development agreements, performance agreements, or contracts, vary across national contexts, including differences in their levels of legal binding and financial implications (de Boer et al. 2015; Jongbloed et al. 2020). The processes leading to agreements, their characteristics, and the expectations they generate, provide insights into how these documents function as governance instruments and impact internal affairs at the institutions. This article focuses on the negotiations leading to new formal development agreements between state authorities and HEIs, shedding light on how agreements may condition institutional autonomy. Additionally, educational quality has developed into a key policy issue in agreements between public authorities and HEIs in many European countries (de Boer et al. 2015; Gornitzka et al. 2004). While authorities and HEIs in these countries often hold diverse interpretations of the preferred pathways to educational quality, there is a recognition that quality in higher education is relative to its institutional and disciplinary contexts. Consequently, there is a gradual shift towards more differentiated agreements tailored to the specific institutions they involve.

Similarly to other OECD countries, Norwegian higher education politics have focused on governance strategies to enhance educational quality. One approach has been to implement development agreements (DAs) between the Ministry of Education and Research (ministry) and individual HEIs (Elken and Borlaug 2020; Hægeland et al. 2015; M.o.E.R. 2021a; 2021c). However, the effectiveness of DAs in achieving sectoral goals, such as educational quality, has consistently been questioned, and the link between DAs and institutional strategies has been deemed weak. As a result, the ministry has announced a revised round of DAs, inviting the HEIs to propose their own goals and parameters for the new agreement term from 2023 to 2026, thereby emphasising differentiated governance and the autonomy of the HEIs in shaping these strategically important documents (Elken and Borlaug 2020; M.o.E.R. 2021a).

This article examines the process of developing the new DAs as part of the governance of the Norwegian higher education sector and investigates how HEIs anticipate that these agreements might bring about internal changes. The research questions are as follows,

(1) What characterises the autonomy of HEIs in the negotiations for new development agreements between public authorities and HEIs in Norway?
(2) How are development agreements between public authorities and HEIs in Norway expected to affect institutional autonomy?

To study the characteristics of HEI autonomy in the negotiations for the new agreements, the study employs document analysis for the process leading to the new DAs. To explore institutional expectations regarding the internal effects of the new agreements, interviews with key HEI officials have been conducted. The analysis combines theories on the characteristics of autonomy (Berdahl 1990) and 'living autonomy' (Maassen, Gornitzka, and Fumasoli 2017). Drawing on the common concern of autonomy in organisational theory (Christensen 2019; Scott 2014; Verhoest et al. 2004), the combination of Berdahl and Maassen et al. is placed within a theoretical frame that combines both structural-instrumental and institutional-cultural perspectives (Christensen 2019).

Agreements in context

Agreements between public authorities and HEIs were introduced to European higher education in the 1980s and have since become part of the national governance systems in many OECD countries, including the Nordic systems (Binderkrantz and Christensen 2009; Degn and Sorensen 2015; Gornitzka et al. 2004; Krüger et al. 2018). While structural reforms have granted increased formal autonomy to HEIs, the agreements have provided a means for public authorities to maintain a level of

control over the institutions while also satisfying the HEIs' needs for institutional autonomy (Elken and Borlaug 2020; Krüger et al. 2018). The features of the agreements vary across countries – some are tied to financing, others are legally binding, and the degree of involvement by national ministries and HEIs in setting goals differ (de Boer et al. 2015; Jongbloed et al. 2020). The stated objectives of these agreements typically include enhancing quality, promoting institutional diversity, and facilitating dialogue between authorities and institutions (de Boer et al. 2015; Elken and Borlaug 2020).

Agreements between the state and HEIs were introduced to the higher education sector in 2015, to contribute to enhance educational quality and institutional diversity (Hægeland et al. 2015; Larsen et al. 2020). The first pilot round of DAs was implemented for five HEIs in 2016, followed by additional five in 2017, and the remaining institutions in 2018. Both the ministry and the HEIs could propose the institutional goals in these DAs and the letters of allocation provided a context for the agreements, outlining national steering parameters. During this period, a majority of Norwegian HEIs also developed long-term strategies for their core academic activities (Elken and Borlaug 2020; Stensaker et al. 2013). In 2020, the DAs were evaluated, and their impact was critically examined in a subsequent white paper on the governance of higher education in Norway (Elken and Borlaug 2020; M.o.E.R. 2021a). These documents raised concerns about the complex and multi-layered governance structure in the higher education sector that the DAs contributed to and their role among other governance instruments. As a result, in 2021, the ministry drafted a framework for the new round of DAs from 2023–2026, announcing that the institutions themselves would have significant freedom to formulate goals and parameters in the new agreements (M.o.E.R. 2021b, 5), signalling increased autonomy for HEIs in developing their respective agreements. Furthermore, to clarify the goal structure and underscore the importance of the DAs in the governance dialogue, the ministry removed the national steering parameters and individual institutional goals that contextualised the agreements in the letters of allocation.

The primary objective of the new Norwegian DAs is stated to be supporting and facilitating institutional efforts to work towards common goals in higher education, such as enhancing educational quality and enabling institutional differentiation and division of labour (M.o.E.R. 2021b, 2). According to the new framework, the DAs should include two to five main goals and approximately 12 subsequent parameters to guide the institutions in achieving their goals. The DAs do not directly link goals or parameters to the financing of HEIs, they are not legally binding and the specific indicators for each parameter are not outlined in the DA, rather they are documented in the annual reports of the respective institutions. The DAs are incorporated into the annual letter of allocation sent by the ministry to the HEIs before each new budget year. Furthermore, all HEIs have developed new long-term strategies either prior to or concurrently with the launch of the new DAs. Appendix 1 provides a description of the negotiating process leading up to the new DAs. Furthermore, the DAs are regarded to be governance instruments alongside with the national regulatory framework, white papers such as the Long-term plan for research and higher education 2019–2028, and the established goals for the sector (M.o.E.R. 2021b; 2021c). Therefore, while there is a notable emphasis on the increased autonomy for HEIs in the development of new DAs, it is important to recognise that these documents are explicitly intended to serve as governance instruments for the institutions that have drafted them. This dual role of DAs as both instruments of governance and autonomy makes Norway an intriguing case for studying agreements between state authorities and HEIs.

Analytical framework

In the realm of governance, there is a common understanding of a hierarchical relationship between the principal and the agent, wherein the agent is expected to act according to the preferences of the principal (Ansell and Torfing 2016; Dill and Soo 2004). Furthermore, post-liberal ideas of decentralisation of governmental power and the participatory state nuance the hierarchical premise in this relationship by emphasising a dialogue between the authorities and public organisations within

the context of discursive democracy (Ansell and Torfing 2016; Knutsen 2017; Peters 2001). However, although the bilateralism in the partnership between the counterparts is highlighted, the hierarchical governance relationship still persists, such as in the case of the public authorities and HEIs. One key aspect of this relationship is the autonomy of the institution, for instance, the relative liberty of public institutions in relation to the public authorities when they develop and define their core values, goals and procedures (Bach 2016; Olsen 2009).

Autonomy in public organisations refers to their ability to set goals and translate them into action (Bach 2016; Maggetti and Verhoest 2014; Verhoest et al. 2004). Regarding 'university autonomy', it is arguably developed within a political context and can be used by governments to motivate HEIs to perform according to specific political purposes (Neave 1988; Olsen 2009). Where Olsen (2009) explores the distinction between legislative (de jure) and actual (de facto) autonomy of HEIs, with a particular attention to the relationship between autonomy and academic freedom, Berdahl (1990) also reflects on how different types of autonomy provided can condition academic freedom. According to Berdahl, *substantive autonomy* refers to the ability and capacity of a HEI to define its goals, 'the what of academe'. Accordingly, *procedural autonomy* refers to its ability to determine how to pursue those goals, 'the how of academe' (Berdahl 1990, 172). To analyse the characteristics of the institutional autonomy in the negotiations for new agreements between the Norwegian state and HEIs in this study, Berdahl's (1990) distinction between substantive and procedural autonomy is employed. Substantive autonomy is operationalised as the institutional freedom to define goals on educational quality, while procedural autonomy is operationalised as the freedom to determine how these goals are pursued.

When studying the governance of public organisations, such as HEIs, a line can be drawn between structural-instrumental theories, emphasising the logic of consequence, and cultural-institutional theories, focusing on the logic of appropriateness (Christensen 2019; Christensen et al. 2007). Following the institutional perspective, historical developments, rational choices, or normative adaptation can explain institutional change (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; March & Olsen, 1984). However, a common denominator in institutional theory approaches to governance is the attention that is given to whether institutions are able to fulfil the expectations that surround them and whether they manage to gain, uphold and foster internal and external legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; March & Olsen, 1984; Olsen 2009). Institutional autonomy depends on perceived legitimacy and changes in governance that may affect institutional autonomy also require legitimacy to be effective. Thus, autonomy and legitimacy are closely connected.

Furthermore, substantive and procedural autonomy (Berdahl 1990) might have different organisational consequences. To study how reforms affect the institutional autonomy internally at the HEIs, Maassen, Gornitzka, and Fumasoli (2017) have identified five dimensions of what they call 'living autonomy', and in this study the dimensions have been operationalised as follows. *Centralisation* refers to the expectation that the new DAs will affect decision-making on educational quality at the central institutional level, for instance, more or less institutional seminars and/or meetings on educational quality. *Formalisation* refers to the expectation that the new DAs will impact the documentation and reporting on educational quality, for instance, more or less files and reports on educational quality. *Standardisation* refers to the expectation that the new DAs will lead to the introduction of new standardised procedures, for instance, 'one-size-fits-all' administrative practices and routines for all study programs. *Legitimisation* concerns the expectation of compatibility of the new DAs and the institutional identity and traditions, for instance, more or less congruence with institutional strategies on educational quality. *Flexibility* refers to the expectation that the new DAs will affect how easily the institution adapts to changes, demands, and non-standardised requests in their environments, for instance, by making the institution more or less oriented towards political signals on educational quality.

In this study, to understand the internal consequences of the new DAs, Maassen, Gornitzka, and Fumasoli (2017) framework of five dimensions of 'living autonomy' is combined with Berdahl's (1990) and the mentioned frames of structural-instrumental and cultural-institutional theory (Christensen

2019). Substantive autonomy (the 'what of the academe') is associated with legitimisation and flexibility, which are key dimensions in a cultural-institutional perspective. Procedural autonomy (the 'how of the academe') is associated with centralisation, formalisation, and standardisation, which are key dimensions in a structural-instrumental perspective.

Based on the above analytical framework, two expectations will be addressed in this study. Firstly, with reference to the described typology on autonomy (Berdahl 1990), it is expected that the institutional autonomy in the negotiations is characterised by procedural and not substantive autonomy. Secondly, with reference to both the typology and the dimensions of living autonomy (Maassen, Gornitzka, and Fumasoli 2017), it is expected that the new DAs will lead to substantial autonomy (legitimacy and flexibility), and not affect the procedural autonomy (centralisation, formalisation, and standardisation) internally within the HEIs. Thus, the coming analysis and discussion seek to answer whether the new Norwegian DAs are governance instruments that emanate cultural-institutional or structural-instrumental governance.

Data and methods

Documents from the process leading up to new DAs between the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research and 11 of the 21 Norwegian publicly funded HEIs and interviews with key representatives from these HEIs were selected for data collection. The institutions include eight universities, two universities of applied sciences, and one specialised university.

To answer the first research question, the documents included the preliminary drafts for DAs from the institutions to the ministry, the formal feedback from the ministry to the institutional drafts, and the final DAs in the individual institutional letters of allocation were analysed (steps 6, 9, and 11 in Appendix 1). These moments in the negotiating process were selected because they represent the initial priorities of the HEIs, how the ministry reacted to these priorities, and the final DA. To study the negotiation process and how feedback from the ministry may have influenced the initial HEI drafts on goals and parameters, the methodological concept of 'modifying work' was applied, defined as transforming an issue into another issue (Asdal 2015; Asdal and Reinertsen 2022). The specific method for document analysis was to compare the goals and parameters in the preliminary agreement drafts with the final agreements. In the cases where these two features of these documents were not the same, whether the modifications were essential and/or semantic was reviewed. *Essential modifications* were changes in the fundamental content of the goals and/or parameters, for instance, whether existing goals on educational services in the drafts were erased or new parameters on educational services were added in the final versions. *Semantic modifications* were changes in the mere presentation of the goals and/or parameters, for instance, textual clarification or modifications in word classes like replacing a noun with a verb. For agreements that had been modified between the preliminary and final version, the written feedback from the ministry was reviewed to observe if the modification in the final draft was in coherence with the feedback from the ministry. Essential modification(s) in the goals and/or parameters in the final version of the DA compared to the preliminary draft that was in coherence with the written feedback from the ministry, was regarded as low regard to institutional autonomy since it indicates that the ministry had taken initiative to modify the 'what and the how of the academe' (goals and parameters) in the agreements. If there were no essential and/or only semantic modifications to the goals and/or parameters in the final DA, this was regarded as high regard to institutional autonomy when developing new DAs between the ministry and HEIs.

To answer the second research question, semi-structured expert interviews were carried out with key officials at the same 11 higher education institutions that were studied in the document analysis (Clark et al. 2021; Littig 2009). Given that the responsibility for educational quality in the new DAs is not distributed similarly among the HEIs, the experts that were interviewed held different positions in the central leadership and administration at the institutions, and include pro-rectors of education, rectors, directors of business administration and heads of office.

The first part of the interviews was relevant to address the validity of the findings in the first research question (Clark et al. 2021) and consisted of questions on how the respondents character-ised the autonomy of the HEIs in the negotiations for new DAs. The second part consisted of ques-tions on whether and potentially how the respondents expected that the new DAs may affect the internal governance at their institution, based on examples from the five operationalisations of living autonomy. If they expected that the new DAs might lead to internal change, the respondents were asked to elaborate on their expectations. Through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), the respondents' expectations of how the new DAs might affect institutional governance were cate-gorised. For instance, answers that included more or less institutional seminars on educational quality would be categorised as the dimension centralisation, with reference to the above operatio-nalisations of the dimensions of living autonomy (Maassen, Gornitzka, and Fumasoli 2017). Back-ground information from the process leading up to the new development agreements, such as the framework for the new DAs and meeting invitations (see Appendix) and an interview with staff in the Ministry of Education and Research that were involved in developing the new DAs, were used to inform the questions in the interviews.

The findings are limited to the Norwegian context and the specific HEIs included in the study. However, it is not likely that a larger sample of institutions would have produced significantly different results considering that these institutions represent a majority of Norwegian HEIs. While only one person from each institution was interviewed, these individuals held key positions with crucial responsibilities for the DAs and were considered to be capable of giving a comprehensive representation on behalf of their respective institutions. However, it is important to acknowledge a limitation of the study, which is that the focus was solely on the DAs as one component of the governance system in Norwegian higher education, and other governance instruments, such as regulatory and financial, were not studied.

Results

In the final versions of the new DAs, the formulations of the goals of seven of the HEIs had been modified (HEI # 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9 and 11), when compared to the first submission of preliminary drafts for new DAs, as Table 1 illustrates. When investigating the modified goals, all changes were semantic and none were essential. In five of these semantic cases (HEI # 2, 4, 6, 9 and 11), there was coherence between the feedback from the ministry and the modification in the final agreement in the letter of allocation. In one case (HEI # 8), the semantic modification of the goals was not coher-ent with the feedback from the ministry, and in another case (HEI # 1) only some of the modifications were coherent with the ministerial feedback. An example of a semantic modification of a goal is when the wording in a lengthy goal formulation in the preliminary draft 'An open university. XXX

Table 1. Document analysis of negotiations for new DAs. Modification type (semantic and/or essential), when comparing HEI draft, final DA and input from ministry.

HEI #	GOALS (substantive autonomy)		PARAMETERS (procedural autonomy)	
	Modification type	Coherence with ministry feedback	Modification type	Coherence with ministry feedback
# 1	Semantic	Y/N	Semantic	Y/N
# 2	Semantic	Yes	Semantic	No
# 3	None	–	Semantic	Y/N
# 4	Semantic	Yes	Semantic	Yes
# 5	None	–	None	–
# 6	Semantic	Yes	Both	No
# 7	None	–	Semantic	Yes
# 8	Semantic	No	None	–
# 9	Semantic	Yes	Semantic	Yes
# 10	None	–	Both	No
# 11	Semantic	Yes	Semantic	Yes

[the institution] will in the period work towards more flexible and attractive educational programs that meet the demands for competence in working life', was modified to 'Be an open university with flexible and attractive educational programs' in the final agreement, i.e. the content of the goal is not changed.

There were also modifications of the parameters between the first draft for DAs submitted by the institutions and the final DA versions in the letters of allocation, as Table 1 illustrates. Nine institutions had modified the text in the parameters, and of these modifications, two were both essential and semantic (HEI # 6 and 10), and seven were only semantic (HEI # 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9 and 11). However, none of these essential modifications were in coherence with the feedback from the ministry. Additionally, four of the semantic modifications were in coherence with the feedback from the ministry (HEI # 4, 7, 9 and 11), two were partly in coherence with the feedback (HEI # 1 and 3), and in three cases there was no coherence with the feedback from the ministry (HEI # 2, 6 and 10). An example of semantic modification of a parameter is when the parameter 'Assignments and internships on BA/MA/Ph.D. levels are results of cooperation with employers' in the preliminary draft was modified to 'More study programs offered with internship' in the final agreement. Also, in one case some parameters that in the preliminary DA version were qualitative had been quantified, and this change was related to general feedback from the ministry to this institution that the parameters should strike a good balance between being quantitative and qualitative. In general, the most frequent feedback from the ministry was the recommendation to revise the text in specific parameters to 'express direction', which by the institutions was interpreted as semantic modifications of the texts of the parameters by introducing verbs like develop, strengthen, reduce, promote, etc.

Hence, the document analysis shows that both substantive and procedural autonomy were evident during the negotiation process for the new agreements, with no essential modifications to the goals and parameters resulting from the feedback from the ministry to the initial DA drafts, as Table 1 illustrates. Although some goals and parameters in the preliminary agreements had been modified in the final agreement, only the semantic (and not the essential) modifications were in coherence with feedback from the ministry. This finding from the document analysis is confirmed in the interviews, where the main impression of the institutional representatives was that the feedback from the ministry was brief and concerned the textual presentation of the draft agreements, motivating only minor modifications to their preliminary drafts for new DAs. A quote exemplifying this perception was, '*The only suggestion we received concerned the form and not the content in itself*'. In consequence, the respondents perceived that the DAs had been developed autonomously by themselves, both in terms of goals and means to achieve these goals. Hence, the institutional autonomy in the negotiations for new DAs between the Norwegian public authorities and the HEIs is characterised by both substantive (goals) and procedural (parameters) institutional autonomy.

Furthermore, the interviews reveal low expectations of how the new DAs affect the internal institutional governance, i.e. the 'living autonomy' at the HEIs, with exception of the dimension legitimisation. When asked about what internal changes the DAs might lead to, very few of the respondents answered that they expected the new DAs to lead to change at their institution. Regarding the dimensions centralisation, standardisation, and flexibility, none of the institutions expected that the new DAs would lead to internal change. A typical response regarding these dimensions was,

> No, we don't expect any internal changes, at least we have not anticipated or arranged for internal changes on the basis of the new DA. We have our strategy, and that is what is important for the top management. The DA is only a subgroup under the strategy.

Only two respondents expected that the DAs would affect the level of formalisation at their institution, by expecting to report less on indicators of educational quality, due to the tight coupling between the DAs and institutional strategies. When asked why the institutions expected few internal changes as a result of new agreements, three respondents replied that this was due to the lack of connection between the financing of the institutions and the DAs.

However, regarding the dimension legitimisation, a clear majority (ten institutions) expected that the new DA would aid in internal, strategic decisions and developments on educational quality. When asked to elaborate on this expectation, the respondents mentioned that the DAs were tightly coupled to the institutions' long-term strategy. The goals and parameters in the DAs had to a large extent derived from or were mere blueprints of the institution's strategic plan, illustrating great coherence between these two documents. The following quote on the connection between the new DA and the institutional strategy is typical for the institutions' approaches to how the new DA might affect the legitimisation dimension,

> We have matched the new DA tightly with our institutional strategy, actually it is our strategy. In essence, the ministry could have governed us based on our strategy. […] Internally, we will govern based on our strategy, which essentially is the same as the DA.

Furthermore, one of the respondents at the institutions described how they expected that the match between the DA and the strategy might work in practice,

> Internally, we can convey that this is not only our strategy, but also that our owner has 'proofed' our strategy and that we need to report on our priorities in the annual report to the ministry, and the rest of the governance dialogue with the ministry. So the DA will be an internal amplifier for strategic work

The main finding on living autonomy is therefore that the respondents did not expect that the new DAs would lead to substantial internal change on the issue of educational quality at their institutions. There is an exception for the dimension legitimisation, where all but one respondent expected that the tight connection between the DA and the institutional strategy would aid internal governance on matters of educational quality. Concluding, the new DAs are expected to have limited effect on institutional autonomy, with the exception of that they were expected to increase the legitimisation of strategic internal work.

Discussion

The expectation to the first research question was that the negotiation process for new development agreements (DAs) between the Ministry of Education and Research and HEIs in Norway would be characterised by procedural rather than substantive autonomy for the HEIs (1990). The findings, nevertheless, show that the HEIs experienced both substantive and procedural autonomy during the negotiations, and have extensive influence over the content and direction of the agreements. Yet, these findings are pertinent to discuss because the ministry already had established the political and regulatory framework and contextualised the negotiations for the DAs, including white papers and sectoral goals. Arguably, the ministry had conditioned the DAs to function as governance instruments dedicated to specific political purposes, and thereby steered the negotiations to reach defined sectoral goals such as quality and diversification which was favourable for the public authorities (Olsen 2009). Following this argument, the autonomy of the HEIs in developing the new DAs is questionable as their initial drafts may be regarded as mere responses to the politically set frames for the negotiations. However, despite the evidently political context of the negotiations, the findings document that the HEIs possessed the ability and capacity to set their own goals, and the means to pursue them, and the ministry did not introduce essential changes during the negotiation process. Also, the HEIs perceived the DAs to be autonomously developed by themselves, and the respondents did not appear to be overly concerned with addressing the national priorities for the sector in the DAs. In other words, the negotiations of these DAs highly reflected both substantive and procedural institutional autonomy in determining the 'what and the how of the academe' (Berdahl 1990, 172). Therefore, it is plausible to argue that while the DAs were not developed in a political vacuum (Neave 1988), they were still autonomously developed by the HEIs. The possible influence of the political context does not negate the fact that the institutions had the agency and capacity to shape the agreements according to their own priorities. Concluding, although the negotiation process was a dynamic interaction between the HEIs and the ministry within a political

setting, the HEIs exercised substantial autonomy in defining their objectives and approaches on educational quality.

The anticipation to the second research question in this study was that the DAs were expected to lead to substantial autonomy at the HEIs in terms of legitimacy and flexibility, representing a cultural-institutional perspective, while leaving procedural autonomy unaffected (centralisation, formalisation, and standardisation), representing a structural-instrumental perspective (Berdahl 1990; Christensen 2019; Maassen, Gornitzka, and Fumasoli 2017). While the findings illustrated that the DAs were expected to impact the dimension of legitimisation, exemplifying a cultural-institutional perspective and enabling substantive autonomy for the HEIs, the dimensions associated with the structural-instrumental perspective and procedural autonomy (centralisation, formalisation, and standardisation) were not expected to be affected by the new DAs. Hence, the findings only partially support the anticipation to the second research question. However, these findings on the expected effects of the new DAs on the 'living autonomy' of the HEIs are also open to discussion. The respondents placed a strong emphasis on their strategic institutional goals when developing the DAs for their respective institutions. This suggests a possible pre-existing alignment between the institutional long-term strategies and the national policies for the higher education sector (Christensen 2019, 246; Maassen, Gornitzka, and Fumasoli 2017). However, and counter to this argument, the respondents appeared to be only moderately concerned with national priorities for the sector during the interviews, and instead, they demonstrated determination to pursue their already established institutional strategies and to harmonise the new DAs with them. Furthermore, it can be argued that the considerable substantive and procedural autonomy enjoyed by the HEIs in the negotiations of the DAs explains why mainly only one dimension of substantive autonomy, namely legitimisation, is expected to be affected by these agreements. In other words, when the HEIs are granted significant autonomy to develop their own governance documents, the resulting process and outcomes primarily impact expectations representing a cultural-institutional perspective on living autonomy in terms of legitimacy. The structural-instrumental dimensions of living autonomy, such as centralisation, formalisation, and standardisation appear to remain largely unaffected by the new DAs (Christensen 2019). Overall, this discussion illustrates that while national policies and the predefined political signals provide a context for the negotiations for new DAs, the HEIs still exercise a great level of autonomy in defining their objectives and approaches in the agreements. However, it is challenging to fathom how these agreements are expected to exercise internal impact.

The preceding discussion also gives rise to concerns regarding the fundamental concept of legitimacy within the cultural-institutional approach (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Olsen 2009). Given the limited expectations regarding the internal impact of the DAs, it is relevant to query their ability to fulfil external expectations and provide both internal and external legitimacy. The findings illustrate that the DAs manifest internal legitimacy by aligning with institutional strategies. However, the extent of ministerial involvement in defining goals or parameters within the DAs is minimal, and the modest anticipations of their internal effects cast doubt upon the potential for new DAs to confer external legitimacy. Yet, had the ministry taken a more active role in shaping substantial goals and parameters within the agreements, such intervention might be perceived as encroachment upon internal governance, undermining institutional autonomy and thereby compromising the internal legitimacy of the new DAs. In light of the contemporary emphasis on dialogue in the governance of public organisations (Knutsen 2017; Peters 2001), such as HEIs, DAs that are autonomously developed by HEIs may emerge as the most viable and legitimate option for both the ministry and the HEIs.

As previously described, a pivotal aspect of higher education governance revolves around how authorities steer both the higher education sector and institutions towards shared objectives and the state's preferences (Ansell and Torfing 2016; Krüger et al. 2018). This dynamic reinforces an underlying hierarchical relationship between state authorities and HEIs (Neave 1988; Olsen 2009). Consequently, DAs have been deliberately crafted to strike a delicate equilibrium between maintaining a degree of governmental control over the institutions while preserving institutional autonomy

(Elken and Borlaug 2020; Krüger et al. 2018). However, the outcomes of this study raise inquiries into how the present setup of DAs contributes to align HEIs with the collective objectives for the Norwegian higher education sector, thus upholding governmental influence. Moreover, the findings indicate that the process of developing new DAs prioritises institutional autonomy over system-wide governance, with the agreements primarily functioning as tools to validate internal strategic initiatives within the institutions. Notably, in the crafting of DAs the HEIs avoid introducing supplementary goals or parameters beyond those already stipulated in their respective institutional strategies. Consequently, this approach might not offer a comprehensive overview of the national institutional landscape, potentially hindering the assurance of inter-institutional diversity. Furthermore, the limited involvement of the ministry in shaping the strategic goals of institutions during the negotiation phase raises questions about the alignment of DAs with the initial objectives of fostering high quality and a diverse sector characterised by distinct institutional profiles and division of labour.

Hence, while the ministry consistently emphasises the pivotal role of DAs within the Norwegian governance system, asserting their contribution to the shared objectives of Norway's higher education sector (M.o.E.R. 2021b; 2021c), the actual effectiveness of DAs in fulfilling this purpose remains unclear. Although DAs appear to play a role in the internal governance of Norwegian HEIs, this study casts doubt on whether autonomously developed agreements by institutions truly serve as potent governance instruments at the national level. This prompts the inquiry into the specific governance function these agreements fulfil if their capacity for governance through autonomous development is constrained. Do DAs primarily function to legitimise other governance tools, such as financial and regulatory?

Consequently, this study highlights how autonomously developed DAs can potentially foster a governance dialogue within a sector increasingly regulated through measures aimed at enhancing institutional accountability and reporting (Christensen 2011; Olsen 2009). While autonomously developed DAs might not inherently operate as direct instruments of governance, they exemplify a form of governance that accentuates bilateral discourse between the state and HEIs (Ansell and Torfing 2016; Knutsen 2017; Peters 2001). Within this framework, the hierarchical relationship between public authorities and institutions persists, upheld by a governance dialogue that is mutually recognised as legitimate by both the public authorities and HEIs.

Conclusion

This article undertakes a study delving into the nuances of autonomy in the negotiations for new DAs between public authorities and HEIs, as well as the anticipated impact of these agreements on internal institutional governance on educational quality. The backdrop of this study is Norway, a context where DAs between the public authorities and HEIs are currently undergoing change.

The findings reveal notable substantive and procedural autonomy (Berdahl 1990) granted to HEIs during the negotiation process, empowering them to independently formulate the goals and parameters for the agreements. However, a contrasting aspect emerges as the study highlights the projected limited influence of DAs on the internal governance of the HEIs (Maassen, Gornitzka, and Fumasoli 2017), apart from their designated role as internal governance instruments aimed at legitimising institutional strategies. The DAs appear to align more closely with the internal priorities of HEIs rather than the broader national strategic priorities on educational quality, prompting inquiries into the actual governance function of these autonomously developed agreements.

The key messages from this study are as follow. Firstly, the existing format of Norwegian DAs seems to bolster institutional autonomy while acting as potent mechanisms for enhancing governance legitimacy in a sector where the state's influence may increasingly rely on financial and regulatory measures for steering, thereby exemplifying a cultural-institutional perspective on autonomy. Secondly, although the DAs might not exemplify efficacious governance tools, they prepare ground for a discourse on how to enhance quality in higher education between the authorities and HEIs, as they are not perceived as intrusive governance instruments that jeopardise institutional autonomy.

Future studies could explore expectations associated with diverse types of formal agreements, for instance those with and without linked funding, and offer insights into their perceived efficacy as governance instruments. Additionally, delving into the rationale behind the ministry's approach to DAs and investigating alternative governance instruments made possible through the autonomous development of DAs would contribute valuable perspectives.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1

Overview over interviewees' respective staff group and organisational level in Article 2.

Level	ACADEMIC STAFF (ACA 1-7)	ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF (ADM 1-7)	LEADERSHIP STAFF (LEAD 1-5)
Institutional	-	1, 3, 4	1, 3
Faculty	2	5, 6	2, 4, 5
Department	1, 4	7	-
Study programme / course	3, 5, 6, 7	2	-

Appendix 2

Interview guide for Article 2.

The following questions guided the interviews with the representatives of the institutions during autumn 2021. The interviews lasted for between 45 and 90 minutes.

INTRODUCTION (RESEARCHER)

- On the topic of the thesis and article, how the data is handled and anonymity. Time frame and procedure for interview (RESEARCHER).

BACKGROUND (RESPONDENT)

- What is your position? Would you describe your job as academic, administrative or management?
- How would you generally characterise your institutions' work with educational quality?

DESCRIPTIONS OF QUALITY WORK (RESPONDENT)

- How do you work with quality in your position?
- Can you give any examples of how you work with educational quality?
- How do you report on this work?

RATIONALES FOR QUALITY WORK (RESPONDENT)

- Can you elaborate on your rationales for quality work in your position – for what purpose do you conduct quality work?
- If you explain to others why you work with educational quality, what reasons do you give?
- Who benefits from the quality work that you do?
- Who do you cooperate with in your quality work?
- How and why is your work with educational quality valued and by whom?
- What quality work do you (not) value yourself?
- How do you regard other types of quality work, for example academic, administrative, and managerial work with educational quality (depending on the position of respondent)?

Appendix 3

Document flow in the negotiation process for new development agreements (DAs) between the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research and higher education institutions.

Documents and meeting points	Time	Sender > Receiver	Amount	Pages
1. Framework for DAs	December 2021	Ministry* > HEIs**	1	7
2. Comments on DA framework	January 2022	HEIs > Ministry	15	36
3. Invitation to meeting on DA framework	February 2022	Ministry > HEIs	1	4
4. Common meeting with feedback to ministry on framework (with summary)	March 2022	HEIs > Ministry	1	2
5. Invitation to common meeting on preliminary institutional goals in DAs	April 2022	Ministry > HEIs	1	2
6. Preliminary drafts for institutional goals in DAs	May 2022	HEIs > Ministry	20*	57
7. Common meeting on preliminary institutional goals in DAs (with summary and ned deadline)	June 2022	Both	1	4
8. HEIs submit DA drafts	September	HEIs > Ministry	20	56
9. Dialogue meetings per institution on DA drafts with written feedback from Ministry	September 2022	Ministry > HEIs	21	20
10. HEIs send final DA text	Nov 2022	HEIs > Ministry	20	56**
11. Final DA text in letter of allocation for 2023	December 2022	Ministry > HEIs	20	

* One institution was exempt from submitting DA drafts according to the given deadlines, due to being in the midst of developing a strategic plan for the institution.
** These documents were not publicly available in total, but available examples show that the revised DAs were approximately of the same length as the documents in step 8.

Appendix 4

Document analysis of negotiations for new development agreements for Article 3.

Explanation: Count and analysis of changes whether semantic and/or essential changes in draft and final DA can be explained by input from Ministry of Education and Research.

Institution	GOALS (substantive autonomy)				PARAMETERS (procedural autonomy)			
	Preliminary draft (Step 6)	Final contract (Step 11)	Modification type	Coherence with ministry feedback (Step 9)	Preliminary draft (Step 6)	Final contract (Step 11)	Modification type	Coherence with ministry feedback (Step 6)
# 1	3	3	Semantic	Y/N	12	12	Semantic	Y/N
# 2	2	2	Semantic	Yes	9	9	Semantic	No
# 3	2	2	None	-	12	12	Semantic	Y/N
# 4	3	3	Semantic	Yes	9	11	Semantic	Yes
# 5	3	3	None	-	12	12	None	-
# 6	5	5	Semantic	Yes	13	15	Both	No
# 7	3	3	None	-	12	13	Semantic	Yes
# 8	3	3	Semantic	No	12	12	None	-
# 9	3	3	Semantic	Yes	12	11	Semantic	Yes
# 10	3	3	None	-	10	12	Both	No
# 11	3	3	Semantic	Yes	11	11	Semantic	Yes

Appendix 5

Interview guide for Article 3.

The following questions guided the interviews with the representatives of the institutions during autumn 2022. The initial interview guide was modified, due to changes in the project, as described in Chapter 4. These interviews were generally short, given that the respondents were on a tight schedule. The average interview lasted for about 40 minutes.

INTRODUCTION (RESEARCHER)

- On the topic of the thesis and article. How data is handled. Time frame, interview procedure.

BACKGROUND (RESPONDENT)

- How are you involved in the governance dialogue on educational quality between the Ministry of Education and Research (ministry) and your institution?
- What is your experience with this dialogue?

ON THE NEW DEVELOPMENT AGREEMENTS (DAs)

- How have you been involved in negotiating the new development agreements (DAs) between the ministry and your institution?
- How has the process with new DAs been organised at your institution?
- What feedback have you obtained from the ministry to the institutional drafts?
- How has the feedback from the ministry influenced the successive drafts of the DAs?
- How do you perceive that the regard to institutional autonomy has been accounted for in this process?

EXPECTATIONS TO NEW DAs

- What expectations do you have to how the new DAs might affect your institutions work on educational quality? Please elaborate…
- Do you have any expectations to that the new DAs might affect centralisation (for instance, delegation of authority), formalisation (for instance, reporting), standardisation (for instance, routines), legitimisation (for instance, legitimisation of internal governance) or flexibility (for instance, adaptation to changing circumstances). Please elaborate…
- How committed do you expect that your institution is to comply with the goals and parameters in the new DA?
- How will the institution organise internal work in order to meet the goals in the new DA?

Appendix 6

<p style="text-align:center">Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet</p>

Quality at work in higher education institutions?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å kartlegge hvordan ansatte ved universiteter og høyskoler jobber med utdanningskvalitet. I dette skrivet får du informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål
Dette er del av datainnsamlingen til en doktorgradsstudie tilknyttet forskningsgruppa Knowledge, Learning and Governance: Studies in higher education and work (HEDWORK) ved Utdanningsvitenskapelig fakultet ved Universitetet i Oslo. Målet med doktograden er å beskrive hvorvidt og hvordan eksterne interesser er relatert til kvalitetsarbeidet og hvordan ulike institusjoner og ansattegrupper ved institusjonene jobber med utdanningskvalitet.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?
Du blir forespurt om å delta på intervju fordi du jobber med kvalitetsutvikling av utdanningen ved en høyere utdanningsinstitusjon i Norge. Gitt at utvalget er begrenset og det er relativt få som jobber md kvalitetsarbeid ved institutt/fakultet/på institusjonsnivå, kan dine uttalelser i et eventuelt intervju muligens knyttes til deg som person.

Metoden er semi-strukturerte intervjuer, hvor stipendiaten noterer fortløpende det som blir sagt. All informasjon du oppgir vil du gjøre anonymt og ditt navn og andre karakteristikker som kan knyttes til deg vil ikke være end el av datainnsamlingen. Sentrale uttalelser vil bli sitert ordrett, men da som nevnt anonymisert

Hvis du velger å delta på intervjuet, innebærer det at vi møtes fysisk eller digitalt (etter avtale) til en 30-45 minutters samtale. Intervjuet vil omhandle hva slags kvalitetsarbeid du gjør, bakgrunnen for dette, hvor du henter informasjon om kvalitetsarbeidet med videre. Dine svar fra spørreskjemaet blir registrert elektronisk.

Ved prosjektslutt i desember 2021 vil personopplysningene slettes.

Det er frivillig å delta
Det er frivillig å delta på intervjuet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle opplysninger som kan knyttes til deg vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg. Det vil ikke påvirke ditt forhold til arbeidsplassen din om du deltar.

Ditt personvern – hvordan dine opplysninger blir brukt og oppbevart
De opplysningene du oppgir vil kun bli brukt til de formålene som er omtalt i dette skrivet. Opplysningene blir behandlet konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket. Det er kun doktorgradsstipendiaten som vil ha tilgang til opplysningene.

Målet er å publisere en vitenskapelig artikkel med bakgrunn i opplysningene fra intervjuene i prosjektet. Eventuelle sitater vil som nevnt bli anonymisert og eventuelle beskrivelser av respondenter som har uttalt seg vil kun knyttes opp til deres beskrivelser av kvalitetsarbeid.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene,
- å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg, og
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke. På oppdrag fra Universitetet i Oslo har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Hvor kan jeg finne ut mer?

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med Universitetet i Oslo ved prosjektansvarlig Elisabeth Lackner (e.j.lackner@iped.uio.no / 97734619) og/eller UiOs personvernombud (personvernombud@uio.no / 90822826).

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost (personverntjenester@nsd.no) eller på telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

Elisabeth Josefine Lackner
Stipendiat, IPED/UiO

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet Quality at work in higher education institutions, og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

☐ å delta på intervju á 30-45 minutter

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

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(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Meldeskjema

Referansenummer
881570

Hvilke personopplysninger skal du behandle?

- Andre opplysninger som vil kunne identifisere en fysisk person

Beskriv hvilke andre opplysninger som vil kunne identifisere en person du skal behandle
Skal snakke med ansatte ved to UH-institusjoner   på utvalgte fakulteter, institutter og studieprogram. DEt er mulig at jeg skal beskrive hva slags stilling de har og i og med at dette er stillinger som gjerne kun en person på de nevnte enhetene har, kan informasjonen respondentene gir muligens føres tilbake til dem.

Prosjektinformasjon

Tittel
Quality at work in higher education institutions

Sammendrag
Beskrive hvordan ansatte i universitets- og høyskolesektoren jobber med kvalitetsutvikling i studiene.

Hvorfor er det nødvendig å behandle personopplysningene?
Jeg skal kun samle inn opplysninger om hva slags jobb informanten har, altså om stillingen er administrativ/vitenskapelig, hvilket nivå i organisasjonen vedkommende er ansatt i.

Ekstern finansiering
- Offentlige myndigheter

Type prosjekt
Forskerprosjekt

Behandlingsansvar

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon
Universitetet i Oslo / Det utdanningsvitenskapelige fakultet / Institutt for pedagogikk

Prosjektansvarlig
Elisabeth Lackner, e.j.lackner@gmail.com, tlf: 97734619

Skal behandlingsansvaret deles med andre institusjoner (felles behandlingsansvarlige)?
Nei

Utvalg 1

Beskriv utvalget
Ansatte ved   som jobber med kvalitetsutvikling av studiene.

Beskriv hvordan rekruttering eller trekking av utvalget skjer
Opplysninger på hjemmeside om hvem som innehar disse stillingene

Alder
25 - 70

Hvilke personopplysninger skal du behandle for utvalg {{i}}? 1

Hvordan samler du inn data fra utvalg 1?

Personlig intervju

Vedlegg

[Interview guide.docx](#)

Grunnlag for å behandle alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger
Samtykke (Personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a)

Informasjon for utvalg 1

Informerer du utvalget om behandlingen av personopplysningene?
Ja

Hvordan informeres utvalget?
Skriftlig (papir eller elektronisk)

Informasjonsskriv

Informasjonsskriv_Lackner_AUG 2021.doc

Tredjepersoner

Skal du behandle personopplysninger om tredjepersoner?
Nei

Dokumentasjon

Hvordan dokumenteres samtykkene?
- Elektronisk (e-post, e-skjema, digital signatur)

Hvordan kan samtykket trekkes tilbake?
Vedkommende kan sende en epost til prosjektleder, da vil all informasjon vedkommende har gitt slettes.

Hvordan kan de registrerte få innsyn, rettet eller slettet personopplysninger om seg selv?
Sender dem oppsummeringer av intervju i etterkant av intervjuet.

Totalt antall registrerte i prosjektet
1-99

Tillatelser

Skal du innhente følgende godkjenninger eller tillatelser for prosjektet?
Ikke utfyllt

Personverntiltak

Oppbevares personopplysningene atskilt fra øvrige data (koblingsnøkkel)?
Ja

Hvilke tekniske og fysiske tiltak sikrer personopplysningene?
- Personopplysningene anonymiseres fortløpende

Hvor behandles personopplysningene?
- Mobile enheter tilhørende behandlingsansvarlig institusjon
- Ekstern tjeneste eller nettverk (databehandler)

Hvem behandler/har tilgang til personopplysningene?
- Prosjektansvarlig
- Databehandler

Hvilken databehandler har tilgang til personopplysningene?
Zoom

Tilgjengeliggjøres personopplysningene utenfor EU/EØS til en tredjestat eller internasjonal organisasjon?
Nei

Varighet

Prosjektperiode
01.09.2021 - 01.02.2022

Hva skjer med dataene ved prosjektslutt?
Data anonymiseres (sletter/omskriver personopplysningene)