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Published online: 27 Sep 2023.

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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,

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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 ratio-nales 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 multi-faceted 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 discre-tion 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 analyti-cal 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	–