Title

Studying the relation between stakeholder input and higher education policy

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; Stakeholders; Higher education policy; Hearings; Political communication

1. 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 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, Schneijderberg, Götze, Baumann and Krücken, 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 ‘democratization’ 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?

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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[i] (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 ang 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 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, Christensen and Holst, 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 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

Statement of conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest related to this paper.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous referees for helpful and encouraging and helpful advice and Rachelle Esterhazy for valuable input when writing up this paper.

References

Allern, E. H. (2010) *Political Parties and Interest Groups in Norway*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Arter, D. (2004) 'Parliamentary democracy in Scandinavia', *Parliamentary Affairs* 57(3): 581-600.

Asdal, K. (2011) 'Et verk som ikke står der: å sende en sak på høring' in K. Asdal, *Politikkens natur – naturens politikk*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 106-38.

Börzel, T. A. and Panke, D. (2013) Europeanization. In M. Cini, and N.P. Borragan, (eds.). *European Union Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 115-125.

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carstensen, M. B. (2011) 'Ideas are not as stable as political scientists want them to be: a theory of incremental ideational change', *Political Studies* 59(3): 596-615.

Coffey, A. (2014) 'Analysing documents', in U. Flick, (ed.). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. London: SAGE, pp. 367-379.

Krick, E. and Holst, C. (2018) 'Committee governance in consensus cultures: an exploration of best practice cases in Germany and Norway', in: F. Engelstad, Holst, C. and Aakvaag, G.C. (eds.). *Democratic State and Democratic Society*, Warsaw: De Gruyter, pp. 151-174.

Krick, E., Christensen, J. and Holst, C. (2019) 'Between 'scientization' and a 'participatory turn'. Tracing shifts in the governance of policy advice', *Science and Public Policy* 46(6): 1-13.

Kunnskapsdepartementet (2016) 'Innspill til stortingsmelding om kvalitet i høyere utdanning', input to white paper on quality in higher education, https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/innspill-til-stortingsmelding-om-kvalitet-i-hoyere-utdanning/id2476318/?expand=horingsbrev, accessed 6 February 2021.

Lov om endringer i universitets- og høyskoleloven (NOKUTs oppgaver, eksamen og personvern mv.). (20128), https://lovdata.no/dokument/LTI/lov/2018-06-15-43, accessed 6 February 2021.

Lundberg, E. and Hysing, E. (2015) 'The value of participation: exploring the role of public consultations from the vantage point of interest groups', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 39(1): 1-21.

Meld. St. 16 (2016–2017) *Kultur for kvalitet i høyere utdanning*, white paper on quality culture in higher education. Oslo: Ministry of Education and Research.

Nordby, T. (1999) 'Samvirket mellom organisasjoner og stat: Norge', *Makt- og demokratiutredningens rapportserie*, https://www.sv.uio.no/mutr/publikasjoner/rapporter/rapp1999/rapport4.html, accessed 10 March 2020.

NOU 2004: 25 (2004) '*Penger teller, men stemmer avgjør*.' Oslo: Moderniseringsdepartementet.

Olsen, J. P. (1988) *Statsstyre og institusjonsutforming*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Prøitz, T. (2014) 'Learning outcomes as a key concept in policy documents throughout policy changes', *Scandinavian Journal of Educational* Research 59(3): 275-296.

Prøitz, T. (2015) 'Uploading, downloading and uploading again – concepts for policy integration in education research', *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy* 1(15): 70-80.

Public Administration Act (2019) *Act relating to procedure in cases concerning the public* administration, https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/1967-02-10, accessed 19 February 2021.

Regulations concerning appointment and promotion to teaching and research posts (2019), https://lovdata.no/dokument/SFE/forskrift/2006-02-09-129, accessed 6 February 2021.

Schmidt, V. A. (2008). 'Discursive institutionalism: the explanatory power of ideas and discourse', *The Annual Review of Political Science* 11: 303-326.

Schmidt, V. A. (2010) 'Taking ideas and discourse seriously: explaining change through discursive institutionalism as the fourth 'new institutionalism'', *European Political Science Review* 2(1): 1-25.

Schmidt, V. A. (2012) 'Discursive Institutionalism: Scope, Dynamics, and Philosophical Underpinnings', in F. Fischer and H. Gottweis (eds.). *The Argumentative Turn Revisited: Public Policy as Communicative Practice*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press: pp. 85-113.

Schmidt, V. A. (2015) 'Discursive institutionalism: understanding policy in context', in: F. Fischer, D. Torgerson, A. Durnová, M. Orsini (eds.). *Handbook of Critical Policy Studies*, Massachusetts: Elgar: pp. 171-189.

Serrano-Velarde, K. and Stensaker, B. (2010) 'Bologna — Realising Old or New Ideals of Quality?', *Higher Education Policy* 23: 213-226.

Steinhardt, I., Schneijderberg, C., Götze, N., Baumann, J. and Krücken G. (2017) 'Mapping the quality assurance of teaching and learning in higher education: the emergence of a specialty?', *Higher Education Research* 74(2): 221-237.

Stemler, S. (2001) An overview of content analysis, *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation* 7(17), https://scholarworks.umass.edu/pare/vol7/iss1/17, accessed 3 March 2021.

Stensaker, B. and Prøitz, T. (2015) 'Fra en elitistisk til en demokratisk forståelse av kvalitet', in N. Frølich (ed.). *Hva skjer i universiteter og høgskoler? Perspektiver fra vitenskapelig ansatte og studenter*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 25-36.

The Manifesto Project (2019) *Coding Scheme: mp v5*. Online resource, https://manifestoproject.wzb.eu/coding_schemes/mp_v5, accessed 5 December 2019.

University of Bergen (2018) *Utredning av mentorordning i høyere utdanning*. Bergen, Norway: University of Bergen.

Vukasovic, M. (2013) 'Change of higher education in response to European pressures: conceptualization and operationalization of Europeanization of higher education', *The International Journal of Higher Education Research* 66(3): 311-324.

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**

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