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How Policy Makers Employ the Term Quality in Higher Education Policymaking

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ABSTRACT

Quality in higher education (HE) can be considered a floating signifier that lacks a stable meaning due to the many possible interpretations different actors may ascribe to it in different contexts. We investigate how policy makers employ the term quality in HE policymaking attempting to legitimize policy reforms and find that it is employed in two ways: as “future-proofing tool” and as “relevance-increasing tool”. Furthermore, we show that policy makers employ the term quality when trying to legitimize both overall policy reforms as well as concrete policy design choices that represent politically contested goals and strategies. Our empirical cases are five Danish HE policies adopted since 2003. Our study contributes to existing knowledge with a new understanding of the role and function of quality referral in HE policymaking.

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1. Introduction

Quality in higher education (HE) is an inherently ambiguous research topic and a multitude of concepts and terminology have been proposed to capture it (Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Harvey, 2004–2020). Quality assurance mechanisms and quality systems seem to have found somewhat mechanistic, unanimous and internationally transferrable formats, i.e., as accreditation criteria. However, these may conflict with the institutional quality practices (quality work, Elken & Stensaker, 2018) as findings of academic resistance to quality assurance systems indicate (Anderson, 2008; Deneen & Boud, 2014; Seyfried, 2019). Even though – or maybe exactly because – quality is also a contemporary political buzzword, it has yet successfully eluded attempts to be defined clearly (Dahler-Larsen, 2008; Filippakou, 2011; Harvey & Green, 1993). While the meaning of quality in HE and other educational sectors remains a topic of interest for many, Wittek and Kvernbekk (2011) argue that it is impossible to answer Ball’s famous question “What the hell is quality?” (Ball, 1985). According to Wittek and Kvernbekk, the reason for that is that the “what is”-question asks for the essence of quality and in doing so creates demands that the concept itself cannot fulfil. It is the discursive construal of “quality” of HE as it is being promoted in policymaking that forms our field of research.

While attempts to define quality in HE have been manifold, there remains a gap in research concerning how quality is employed in HE politics. The purpose of our paper is therefore not to make yet another attempt at defining what quality in HE is. Instead, we investigate the role of quality referral in politics – i.e., the more or less conflictual process in and through which actors with different, sometimes opposing interests and beliefs and with varying resources and power define and

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argue for their political goals – and in the concrete, legislative making of HE policies. We ask the following research question: *How do policy makers employ the term quality in HE policymaking when they try to legitimize policy design choices?*

Empirically, we investigate whether and how policy makers employ the term quality in the pursuit of their political interests and goals in selected HE reforms when arguing for and attempting to legitimize the overall reforms and concrete policy design choices. We do so by conducting a textual analysis of HE policy documents that complements HE research with political science approaches and draws on concepts and tools from both discourse analysis and policy feedback studies. Our empirical cases are five HE reforms in Denmark, where a high level of reform activity has transformed the HE sector substantially since 2003 (Maassen, 2008; Pinheiro & Stensaker, 2014; Pinheiro & Young, 2017).

Our analysis contributes to existing knowledge by uncovering, first, two distinct types of quality referral in HE policymaking, namely referral to quality as “future-proofing tool” or as “relevance-increasing tool”, that can serve as a template for further empirical studies of the strategic employment of quality in HE politics. Second, we show that policy makers employ the term quality trying to legitimize both overall policy reform as well as concrete and contested policy design choices. Furthermore, we contribute to HE research by using policy feedback theory to shift the focus from defining what quality is towards investigating how policy makers’ employ the term quality trying to legitimize reforms and policy design choices. Lastly, we also contribute to HE policy practice enabling policy practitioners to better understand the role and consequences of quality referral in HE policymaking.

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents our approach and discusses the current literature. Section 3 provides an overview of the cases, methods and data used in our study. Section 4 presents our analysis and results. Section 5 offers concluding reflections on our findings.

2. Approach

Our approach to investigating how policy makers employ the term quality in HE policymaking is to draw on concepts and tools from, first, discourse analysis and, second, policy feedback theory in a textual analysis of policymaking documents such as parliamentary debates, law proposals and parliamentary committee proceedings.

First, we borrow from discourse analysis the concept of floating signifiers (Hjelmslev, 1943; Saussure, 1991) and chains of equivalence (Fairclough, 2003) that allow us to understand the “multi-purpose” nature of quality, i.e., why policy makers are able to employ the term quality in substantively different policy contexts and with different meanings without further ado. Second, we borrow from policy feedback theory the focus on the material and interpretive consequences of policies on politics and policy makers’ ability to attempt to shape these consequences. This allows us to understand what outcomes of HE policies policy makers may attempt to bring about when employing the term quality in policymaking.

2.1. Discourse Analysis

In discourse analysis, the concept of floating signifiers describes signifiers that are not linked to content in a structurally stable way, as is normally the case. Floating signifiers can therefore become objects of contestation when actors try to fill their void with contested ideological or political meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 2002). The term is also used to denote a positively valued signifier that can be used to lend positive value to other signifiers to which it is linked (Fairclough, 2003; Laclau & Mouffe, 2002).

While quality assurance systems regimes, pushed e.g., by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), have led to a certain harmonization of HE institutions’ approach to “ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure

that the desired quality, however defined and measured, is delivered” (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 19), quality in HE remains a floating signifier since it “means different things to different people” (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 10; cf. Krejsler, 2013b) in different contexts. For HE institutions, quality may mean high employment rates after graduation. For teachers, it may mean that students advance in their learning irrespective of their starting point. For students, it may mean an opportunity for self-fulfilment. That quality is a floating signifier means that policy makers can tap into different quality discourses in different situations when employing the term quality. Furthermore, quality can be addressed on different levels and in different domains of HE, e.g., the quality of teaching, the quality of educational programmes, or the quality of the educational system. Consequently, a “considerable number of concepts have been developed to capture the specific aspects of quality in higher education” (Elken & Stensaker, 2018, p. 189; cf. Harvey, 2004–2020; Harvey & Green, 1993; Schindler et al., 2015). Generally, everybody can agree that quality is a good thing, but quality means many different things to different actors in the empirical setting and disagreement arises when quality is made concrete (Krejsler, 2013b, pp. 25–26).

Relatedly, we draw on the concept of chains of equivalence (Fairclough, 2003). Chains of equivalence link signifiers to each other and thereby give meaning to each other. As we will show below, quality can, for example, be linked to relevance, producing a chain of equivalence where “a *quality* education” comes to be equivalent with “a *relevant* education”. In identifying chains of equivalence in our textual analysis and policy makers’ argumentation, we also use Toulmin’s model of argumentation to help us identify how actors make claims, give grounds for their claims, and back these grounds with a warrant (Karbach, 1987; Toulmin et al., 1979).

2.2. Policy Feedback Theory

In policy feedback studies, the central claim is that “new policies create a new politics” (Schattschneider, 1935, p. 288). Public policies are “rules of the game that directly help to shape the lives of citizens and organizations in modern societies” (Pierson, 2006, p. 115). They are not only the result of politics and policymaking, they also shape politics and policymaking via interpretive consequences (when policies structure meaning and information) and material consequences (when policies confer resources and/or create incentives) on interest groups, political elites and the public (Pierson, 1993). For example, by defining modes and levels of university funding, policy determines the amount of resources available to universities and whether and how universities compete for these resources. In consequence, policy shapes universities’ ability to participate in policymaking as an either strong and united or weak and fragmented actor. In recent policy feedback studies, the focus is on the role of agency in these processes as well as political actors’ capacity to design the consequences of policies (Anzia & Moe, 2016; Mettler & Soss, 2004; Pechmann, 2018) that “feed forward into subsequent political processes” (Schneider & Sidney, 2009, p. 105). Hence, policy feedback theory allows us to gain insights into what effects HE policies have on HE politics and whether policy makers attempt to bring about certain effects instead of others.

2.3. Summary

In sum, our approach draws on tools and concepts from both policy feedback theory and discourse analysis in order to investigate how policy makers employ the floating signifier quality in attempts to legitimize policy and policy design choices when pursuing political interests and goals. We do not put forth general laws of HE policymaking, but explicate the analytical lessons to be learned from our study of Danish HE in order to inform subsequent research and improve our understanding of the role of quality in HE policymaking. Our approach is in line with a growing literature that complements HE research with political science approaches, which have been underutilized in higher education research previously since they do not primarily contribute to a better understanding of substantive issues in HE like teaching and learning, course design or student experiences

(cf. Garritzmann, 2017; Tight, 2015; Umbricht et al., 2017). Yet, political science, which recently has discovered HE as a field of study particularly in relation to the Bologna process (cf. Huisman et al., 2015; Sykes et al., 2009), can illuminate how HE policies change or remain stable, how new circumstances bring about new policies, and how these new policies influence the HE sector (McDonnell, 2009).

3. Cases, Methods and Data

We applied our approach in an analysis of Danish HE. Denmark is an interesting background for investigating how policy makers employ quality in attempts to legitimize HE policy since the intensity of policy reforms in the last two decades provides rich empirical material. Denmark has become a frontrunner regarding political interventions in the internal structures of HE institutions (HEIs) and Degn (2014, p. 20) highlights that Denmark has – compared to other Scandinavian countries – gone “very far in its attempts to ‘modernize’ or mobilize universities in the knowledge economy” and that the Danish HE system has “undergone massive transformations over a short period of time” (ibid.; cf. also Maassen, 2008; Pinheiro & Young, 2017). A range of reforms have been implemented in the Danish HE system with a large international inspiration and focus on the enablement of cross-country mobility. The reforms have moved away from a Humboldtian ideal type towards professionalisation, autonomy and accountability in a New Public Management-oriented wave commencing in the 90’s (Schmidt, 2014.) Quality assurance systems have been introduced in this period as internal steering devices reflecting an ascendancy of managerialism in higher education (cf. i.e., Anderson, 2008; Frølich et al., 2013; Manatos et al., 2017; Williams, 2012).

We analyzed five key HE policies proposed and adopted since 2003 (see Table 1). The five policies are “instrumental cases” (cf. Grandy, 2010; Pechmann, 2018; Stake, 1995) that provide insights into policy makers’ employment of the term quality in HE policymaking. They were selected because they represent major interventions in the Danish HE sector, span over almost two decades of HE policymaking and cover a broad range of issues in HE (management, funding, accreditation) and different institutional domains (universities, university colleges, accreditation system). As common for policymaking in Denmark, all selected acts rested on a multi-party agreement on the basic reform goals and elements between government and opposition parties.

Our analytical approach was first idiographic, although, next, we focused on recurring regularities and pursued possible explanations (Danermark et al., 2002). A transparency of the steps of data gathering, data analysis and data interpretation was aimed for as well as a search for

Table 1. Selected HE policies in Denmark since 2003 and collected and analyzed data.

Year of adoption	Title	Key elements	Collected and analyzed data	
			Written introduction of:	First parliament debate on:
2003	University Act	Reform of university management, introduction of bachelor and master degree structure	Act no. 125, 15.01.2003 Additionally: Committee for Science and Technology Report on Act no. 125, 10.04.2003	Act no. 125, 24.01.2003
2007a	Accreditation Institution Act	Establishment of an accreditation agency for HE	Act no. 111 and 112, 15.12.2006	Act no. 111 and 112, 19.01.2007
2007b	University Colleges Act	Establishment of a two-tiered HE structure/ introduction of university colleges as new type of profession-oriented HEI	Act no. 188, 14.03.2007	Act no. 188, 30.03.2007
2013	Revision of University Colleges Act	Granting of research rights/obligations to university colleges	Act no. 63, 13.11.2013	Act no. 63, 21.11.2013
2018	Revision of the University Act	Introduction of a new funding system in HE	Act no. 183, 14.03.2018	Act no. 183, 23.03.2018

contradictory results (Danermark et al., 2002; Ricoeur, 1971). During the qualitative data analysis, we continually looked for results that point in other directions than what temporary findings seem to do (refutability, Olsen, 2002) to increase the quality of the document analysis and the consistency and level of detail of the patterns and results. Furthermore, theoretical back up of our empirical findings and their wider implications is pivotal (Bhaskar, 2008; Flick, 2002). Our analysis proceeded in two steps: First, we analyzed the introduction of the five acts in parliament to investigate whether, when, in which contexts and how policy makers mention quality or invoke the term argumentatively. For each act, we analyzed the introductory speech of the responsible minister, which is usually delivered in writing in a concise, rather standardized form, highlights key elements of the act, comments on the need for the proposed act and justifies the chosen policy design. Additionally, we analyzed speeches by the spokesperson of the leading government party, the biggest opposition party (in cases where the biggest party supporting the reform is not part of the government coalition) and the responsible minister in the first parliamentary debate on each act. We selected these texts as key markers for how policy makers backing the respective policy argue for and attempt to legitimize the reform. Furthermore, the broader parliamentary debates give insight into the context of each reform debate, the process and discussions leading up to each proposed act as well as the general political, economic and societal context.

We read the selected texts closely to identify whether policy makers employ the term quality in their argumentation and in attempts to legitimize the reforms. We looked openly and without a priori defined codes at what “problem(s)” politicians formulate in the text as well as how they claim the proposed act is solving the alleged problem/s, and whether or how quality figures in that argument. We looked for different direct and indirect uses of quality in attempts to legitimize a policy, and our analytical strategy also included text searches for the Danish word for quality, *kvalitet*, or derivations thereof to identify relevant text passages.

We began with an inductive reading of the selected texts, developing inductively emerging codes and discussing and systematizing these afterwards and returned to the selected texts using the systematized codes for a more focused discourse analysis of the material in context. We discussed the results of this second coding and agreed on a final interpretation of each act individually and in context.

Second, we chose the 2003 University Act for an in-depth analysis of how policy makers employ quality attempting to legitimize not only policy reforms as a whole but also concrete policy design elements representing politically contested goals and strategies. In addition to the above described procedure, we analyzed the complete, first parliamentary debate of the act and focused on which concrete policy design elements policy makers linked to quality and which potential subsequent consequences of the policy design elements in HE politics figured in the debates (Pechmann, 2018, ch. 4). We chose the 2003 University Act for the in-depth analysis because the reform is an important marker in the profound restructuring of the Danish University sector and HE governance with meaningful consequences for Danish HE (Pinheiro & Stensaker, 2014). Despite considerable attention to the reform in the literature (e.g., Degn, 2014; Krejsler, 2006, 2013a; Wright & Ørberg, 2008), to our knowledge no similar analysis has been conducted so far.

4. Analysis and Results

In the first part of our analysis, we find that policy makers employ quality in two ways. First, policy makers may argue that quality helps *future-proof* HE and that it enables the HE system to confront coming challenges. Second, they may argue that quality increases the *relevance* of HE and helps HEIs produce those graduates sought after by employers. In future-proofing arguments, it is characteristic that policy makers do not define what quality is or means but instead invoke quality as an all-purpose problem solver or *carte blanche*, i.e., an argumentative twist that is hard to argue against for political opponents since quality is – while an undefined floating signifier – uncontested as a positive, desirable goal in HE. On the other side, in relevance-increasing arguments quality

becomes almost synonymous with relevance. While the floating signifier lends positive value to relevance, relevance takes over its meaning and quality comes to mean the fulfilment of businesses' labour demands.

The two ways in which policy makers employ quality, or relations of equivalence between quality and future-proofing/relevance, can occur in mixed forms, but can be distinguished analytically. For example, in the debate on the 2007b University Colleges Act, policy makers mixed both arguments arguing the reform goal was to increase the number of HE graduates (relevance-increasing) by strengthening the capacity and quality of profession-oriented HE in order to meet the future demands of the labour market (future-proofing). In the second part of the analysis, we show that policy makers employ quality not only in attempts to legitimize policies as a whole, but also to legitimize concrete choices of politically contested policy design elements.

4.1. Two Types of Quality Referral

4.1.1. Future-proofing

We find the first type of quality referral when policy makers employ quality in attempts to legitimize HE policies by arguing that quality (or quality assurance, enhancement or improvement) will help future-proof HE. Across the five analyzed policies, we identify future-proofing arguments in four cases (see Table 2). While there are context-specific and linguistic variations in how policy makers make the argument, we can identify three steps future-proofing arguments typically consist of. First, policy makers sketch out a coming challenge or problem for HE (A). Then, they present the proposed policy as a solution to the described problem or challenge (B). Lastly, they argue that this is because the proposed policy would enhance, ensure or improve the quality of HE (C). These three steps can be described in terms of Toulmin's (Toulmin et al., 1979) model of argumentation as claim (the proposed policy will advance HE), grounds (because it will ensure, enhance or improve the quality of HE) and warrant (which is necessary due to the alleged challenge or problem HE faces). They do not need to be expressed in direct, consecutive order, but their argumentative relation can lie implicitly in the broader text.

We can exemplify this type of quality referral with examples from our empirical analysis. In the debate on the 2007a Accreditation Institution Act, policy makers argued that establishing a sector-wide accreditation institution will help the HE sector to live up to international quality standards and compete in a globalized world. The act was proposed as a follow-up on the "Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)" adopted in 2005 as part of the Bologna process. According to the act, an accreditation institution responsible for accrediting both existing and new HE programmes was to be established. Accreditation was argued to be an important tool for ensuring the quality and relevance of HE programmes (Folketinget, The Danish Parliament: Written introduction of Act no. 111 and 112, 15.12.2006), but policy makers did not define quality when debating the act. Instead, policy makers invoked quality as something desirable that needed to be achieved, assured or enhanced in order to make HE ready for the future. The responsible minister put this concisely in the first parliamentary debate summarizing that

Table 2. Two types of quality referral.

Type of quality referral	Future-proofing	Relevance-increasing
Structure of the argument	[A] HE confronted with a challenge or problem [B] Proposed policy as solution [C] Quality enhancement/improvement/assurance allows problem solution	[A] Needs of businesses crucial for welfare and prosperity [B] Policy helps HE to supply businesses with sought-after candidates [C] Quality as crucial means to allow HEIs produce relevant candidates
Incidents	2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2013a	2007a, 2007b, 2013a, 2013b, 2018

it is, I believe, of utter importance for Danish higher education, that we this way [by passing the act and establishing an accreditation institution] ensure the highest international quality. Because this is an unquestionable precondition if we want to be able to confront the challenges of globalization (Folketinget, The Danish Parliament: First debate on Act no. 126, 24.01.2003).

In other words, the minister used the alleged, inevitable challenges of a globalized world [A] to frame the debate and argue that these challenges could only be confronted by passing the proposed act [B] because this will ensure that the quality of Danish HE will be at the highest international level [C].

Another example for future-proofing quality referral is the 2007b University Colleges Act, which formally established a two-tiered HE system in Denmark with seven university colleges (corresponding to universities of applied sciences) and seven universities. While the general focus of the reform was to increase the number of graduates especially in profession-oriented HE, policy makers also argued the act would prepare Danish HE for future challenges by increasing HE quality. The responsible minister said

[...] the increasing complexity of society will put greater demands on profession-oriented educations. Therefore, the quality of first-degree programs needs to be enhanced and educations continuously improved in order to keep up with new and changing demands. The challenges for profession-oriented educations necessitate the establishment of a strong [university college] sector with a clear profile and division of roles [through the University Colleges Act] (Folketinget, The Danish Parliament: Written introduction of Act no. 188, 14.03.2007).

In other words, the minister argued that the challenging complexity of society [A] demanded an answer in the form of the proposed act [B], which would strengthen the quality of profession-oriented HE programmes and the profession-oriented HE sector [C].

4.1.2. Relevance-increasing

We find the second type of quality referral when policy makers employ quality as alleged tool to increase the relevance of HE. Argumentatively, relevance-increasing arguments take three steps as well: First, policy makers identify the knowledge and competences of graduates sought after by businesses or – more generally – the labour market as crucial for the weal and woe of Danish society (A). Second, HE policy therefore needs to help HEIs supply businesses with graduates that have the sought-after competences and knowledge (B). Third, policy makers argue that quality is the crucial tool with which it can be ensured that businesses will be able to find able and sought-after graduates (C). In Toulmin's terms, policy makers argue that HE needs to produce able graduates (claim) because business demand so (grounds), and meeting these demands is crucial for the weal and woe of the country (warrant). We find relevance-increasing quality referral in all five analyzed policies (see Table 2). Similar to future-proofing quality referral, policy makers do not define what the floating signifier quality means when making relevance-increasing arguments.

The debate on the 2013a Revision of the University Colleges Act, which was to support the development of practice – and business-oriented HE programmes, exemplifies relevance-increasing use of quality referral. Supplying businesses with well-abled graduates was a central goal of the reform, and policy makers argued that quality was a crucial means for achieving this goal. For example, the Social Democrats' spokesperson asserted that profession-oriented HEIs

play an important role when it comes to supplying society and businesses with relevant and high professional competencies for the benefit of Danish prosperity and welfare. Denmark cannot always compete in terms of its size and we therefore need to compete in terms of quality. It is therefore important to establish strong professional environments and educations [...], a development we wish to continue with this reform (Folketinget, The Danish Parliament: First debate on Act no. 63, 21.11.2013).

In other words, the MP argued that the act will, by ways of strengthening the quality of profession-oriented HE, ensure that HEIs 'produce' the right candidates for businesses and the labour market, which will secure Denmark's wealth and prosperity.

The 2018 Revision of the University Act is another example of relevance-increasing quality referral. The act had the explicit goal to strengthen HE quality by making quality an allocation criterion in university funding. Several MPs underlined that the act would shift the focus in HE policy from quantity (i.e., producing many graduates) to quality. The introductory debate on the act focused more on the economic benefits of HE rather than on the substantive question of what quality in HE is or should be. The argument legitimizing quality focused on the production of the “right”, employable candidates fit for work life. The spokesperson of the Social Democrats argued that the act would “ensure a good match between education and society, where educations are a crucial contributor to growth and welfare in Denmark” and deemed it “absolutely fundamental [...] that education must lead to a job and help ensure that we continue to have competent employees, in the private as well as in the public sector” (Folketinget, The Danish Parliament: First debate on Act no. 183, 23.03.2018). Hence, quality in HE was turned into a competition parameter that helped HEIs produce the “right” candidates [C], i.e., those that find employment and which are sought after by businesses [B]. This in turn would contribute to the country’s wealth and welfare [A].

4.2. In-depth Study of Policy Makers’ Attempts to Legitimize Policy Design Elements of the 2003 University Act

Being able to distinguish between future-proofing and relevance-increasing quality referral allows for valuable insights into how the term quality enters HE policymaking and how policy makers aim to legitimize HE policies by employing quality. In the in-depth-analysis of the 2003 University Act, we find that policy makers employ quality not only attempting to legitimize policies as a whole, but also attempting to legitimize concrete policy design choices that are contested by political opponents due to the meaningful consequences policy makers expect these policy design choices to have on subsequent HE politics.

We briefly sketch out the context of the 2003 University Act before presenting the results of our analysis. The 2003 University Act was based on a broad parliamentary agreement between the conservative-liberal government and two opposition parties. It introduced governing boards with external majority as superior authority of universities, prescribed appointed rather than elected leaders, added knowledge exchange, technology transfer and staff mobility to universities’ mission and it emphasized that universities ought to make strategic prioritizations in their research and education activities in the coming years. The political objective of these measures was to sharpen the profile of individual institutions, increase collaboration between various actors in the research sub-system and the effectiveness and relevance of national research efforts (Pinheiro & Stensaker, 2014; Wright & Ørberg, 2008).

The government argued that the reform would set universities free from the state, increase their decision-making capacity and facilitate cooperation with the surrounding society (Folketinget, The Danish Parliament: Draft Act no. 125, 15.01.2003). In the opening debate on the act, the government attempted to legitimize the proposed policy as a whole by linking future demands universities will face to the quality and relevance of HE, which the reform will improve. It stated “the proposed bill presents a unique opportunity to future-proof universities’ role as research and educational institutions in the knowledge society, where competition around knowledge development and demands towards educations’ quality and relevance becomes fierce” (Folketinget, The Danish Parliament: First debate on Act no. 126, 24.01.2003).

The introduction of governing boards as universities’ superior authority and with a majority of external members was one of the most intensely discussed aspects of the act (Wright & Ørberg, 2008, pp. 35–36). Even more, the government aimed to link this concrete element of the policy directly to the quality demands that confronted HE. It argued that “board members shall with their combined experience and insights help strengthen universities strategic operations, amongst those quality and relevance in handling universities’ key tasks” (Folketinget, The Danish Parliament: First debate on Act no. 126, 24.01.2003). Hence, policy makers employed quality

argumentatively not only attempting to legitimize the act as a whole, but also attempting to legitimize concrete – and contested – policy design choices like the introduction of a new governance structure in universities.

That the government invoked quality in attempts to legitimize the introduction of governing boards is especially important since this element of the act was intensely contested between policy makers. As previous research has shown, analyzing policy makers' conflicting positions on policy design elements in parliamentary debates gives valuable insights into what consequences policy makers anticipate will emerge from their choices and thus allows drawing conclusions regarding policy makers' strategic goals in policymaking (Pechmann, 2018).

In the debate on the 2003 University Act, opposition parties' concerns regarding the introduction of governing boards with an external majority were clear. Primarily, they concerned the abolishment of democratic structures to the benefit of market principles in HE. For example, opposition members asked government what concrete examples they could give “that dedemocratization and corporate governance of higher education institutions would lead to better educations” (Folketinget, The Danish Parliament: First debate on Act no. 126, 24.01.2003) and wondered “what it was that made a liberal party [i.e., the leading government party] take the lead in binding universities to market forces” (ibid.). A member of Danish People's Party highlighted the oppositions' concerns by inquiring what the “true meaning” of the introduction of governing boards was. He stated that

there are no arguments, no explanation for why one needs governing boards with external majority. There is probably a different purpose. Is the purpose not that tough guys with hair on their breast [...] should enter the scene and tell the academic wusses which way to go? It is obvious that the idea is to have goal-oriented, result-oriented research (ibid.).

Another opposition MP backed him up arguing “there cannot be talk of co-operation [between universities and external stakeholders] when there is an external majority in governing boards. In that case, we have a dictate [...] where certain strategies can be imposed upon universities” (ibid.).

The analysis of the parliamentary debate demonstrates that policy makers had concrete conceptions of how the introduction of governing boards with external majority, which the government attempted to legitimize with reference to HE quality, would come to affect the HE sector.

An analysis of the summarizing report of the internal committee debates on the act points in a similar direction. Despite the rhetorical fanfare of public parliament debates, the analysis shows that policy makers anticipated the reform to have important consequences for the HE sector. For example, representatives of Danish Peoples Party, the biggest party in opposition to the act, found that the act would cause an “irreversible break with Danish university tradition” (Committee for Science and Technology Report, 10.04.2003) since universities' research and teaching would have to conform to societal or business interests instead of following professional, academic incentives (ibid.). The act would furthermore “reduce employees', researchers' and students' influence on university matters” (ibid.) and governing boards with an external majority would “harm universities' abilities to develop independently from political and business interests” (ibid.). Other opposition MPs also suspected the government of having intentions differing from those publicly mentioned, namely stronger and more centralized control over universities, and criticized that the act would transfer power to external business representatives (ibid.).

Word choice is especially important here since statements on an irreversible break, changed incentives for universities' research and teaching activities and a transfer of power underline that policy makers not only criticized immediate short-term consequences of the act. Rather, policy makers opposed anticipated long-term outcomes of the act since changed incentive structures and a transfer of power were expected to feed-forward into HE politics and irreversibly alter the dynamics in the HE policy field and the freedom of action for different actors in the sector. Hence, our analysis demonstrates that the government argued for and attempted to legitimize 2003 University Act by employing quality and that policy makers were well aware of the potential consequences of the reform and its particular elements.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Our analysis of quality referral in HE policymaking produces two main results that help us understand how policy makers employ quality in policymaking and what role quality plays in HE politics.

First, we find that policy makers, when referring to quality attempting to legitimize HE policy, do so in two ways and employ quality as a future-proofing tool or as a relevance-increasing tool. Policy makers may argue that HE quality helps future-proof HE and enables the HE system to confront coming challenges. Alternatively, they may argue that quality increases the relevance of HE and helps HEIs produce those graduates sought after by employers. While quality remains a floating signifier and undefined all-purpose problem solver in future-proofing arguments, its meaning is taken over by relevance in relevance-increasing arguments, where HE quality almost becomes synonymous with the relevance of HE.

Second, we find that policy makers employ quality not only to argue for policy reforms as a whole, but also in attempts to legitimize concrete policy design choices for politically and ideologically contested policy elements that are contested between political opponents due to the consequences policy makers expect these instruments to have on subsequent political processes and outcomes.

Our typology of quality referral in HE policymaking will be a useful springboard for further research addressing the research gap that concerns not how quality in HE can be defined, but how quality is employed in HE politics. Such research will increase our understanding of the strategic dimension of quality referral in HE politics and, not least, also have the potential to inform HE policymaking practice and support more informed policymaking in HE.

The broader implications of our study are, first, that the quality discourse in Danish HE is not a discourse of substance, but a rather rudimentary one. Quality – when invoked in policymaking – remains a floating signifier that is undefined or borrows meaning from other key concepts, in particular the relevance of HE. Policy makers employ quality in attempts to legitimize different HE policies, policy goals and instruments, but do not engage in substantive, explicit and transparent discussions about what HE quality is. While policy makers are not to give a final answer to what the meaning of quality in HE is, the Danish HE policy discourse lacks clarity and explicitness about political parties' political stance on HE quality in policy debates on concrete HE policies.

Second, our study implies that the lacking clarity and explicitness in the political discourse about quality in HE may not be due to lacking knowledge or competence. Instead, policy makers may avoid making quality concrete because there are political benefits to this strategy. While the blurry nature of the concept of quality frustrates HE researchers, policy makers can draw benefits from being able to use quality as an all-purpose problem solver or *carte blanche* in different contexts and to achieve different political goals and legitimize different policy reforms. Hence, while the Danish HE policy discourse might benefit from more substantial reflections on and more explicit arguments about what quality in HE is, e.g., in order to avoid rhetoric short-circuits like the coincidence of quality *and* relevance in HE from becoming self-evident and unquestioned in policy discourse, such a development seems unsure.

In this regard, it is particularly interesting to investigate further the interpretive effects of relevance-increasing quality referral in HE. In the Danish case, the coincidence of quality *and* relevance has been very prominent in HE policy debates in recent years and one may speculate how this may bias political attempts to improve quality in HE and steer HE policy in a particular direction. Further studies on the interpretive consequences of HE policies are necessary here.

Such studies can take into account the positive developments we can see in regards to a more explicit engagement with the substantive meaning of HE quality in the recent debate on the reform of university funding, where HE quality was more explicitly articulated as good teaching and transfer to work after studies. While there are reasons to doubt whether the policy discourse and context-dependent understanding of HE quality will become more explicit in HE politics, such a development would be welcome since policy discourse on quality wields strong definitional power regarding the purpose and goals of HE.

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