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Does quality work work? A systematic review of academic literature on quality initiatives in higher education

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Abstract

Quality in higher education is – and has been for many years - at the top of the political agenda. The concept of quality has been explored extensively in the literature as has the means to measure and monitor quality. Connected to these two bulks of literature is a widespread and somewhat fragmented literature on what might initially be termed quality work. This article reviews this literature on quality work in higher education. We characterize the work in this field, its main themes, issues, and questions, and discuss what this literature has to say on the effects of quality work. Based on systematic search for the period 2008-2018, we review in all 68 publications. The review shows that the literature on quality work can be categorized into three major areas: the role of institutional conditions for quality work, types of quality work practices, and notions of quality and quality outcomes. The review demonstrates that there is a need for more inclusive methodologies and longitudinal studies, particularly more rigorous quantitative analysis of the effects of quality work to supplement other methods.

Keywords: Quality work, higher education, educational quality, quality improvement

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Introduction

For the past decades, quality in higher education has been at the very top of the political agenda in many countries across Europe and beyond, and has also – perhaps as a consequence - received a considerable amount of academic attention. A substantial part of this attention has been directed towards defining the concept of higher education quality. However, higher education quality has proven very difficult to define, and the general agreement seems to be that quality is a multi-faceted notion that cannot be defined or measured in absolute terms. Harvey and Green (1993) argue for example that the conceptualization of quality needs to be seen in relative terms both with respect to the stakeholder in question and towards some form of standard or benchmark.

A key point of this is that, since we are unable to define or measure quality directly or in absolute terms, quality is conceptualized in relation to a variety of factors that are considered (by different stakeholders) to provide an indication of quality and quality improvement. These can include a wide range of measures related to labor outcomes, learning outcomes, student satisfaction, or democracy and citizenship. How quality is conceptualized is thus closely related to the design of quality work practices and their intended outcomes (Danø and Stensaker, 2007).

Alongside the vast literature on quality definitions and conceptualizations, an increasing amount of academic literature focuses on higher education quality systems, and of monitoring and management of quality in higher education. This focus on quality assurance as part of the development of quality in higher education, can be seen as driven forward by the Bologna process, where an explicit goal was the development of comparable criteria and methodologies for quality assurance across Europe (Brøgger and Karseth, 2020). This development has led to increases in studies of e.g. internationalization and harmonization of quality assessment procedures of educational programs and of quality assurance systems (Brøgger, 2019). These efforts to monitor and evaluate higher education performance are often viewed as both containing elements of focus on accountability and development. And in doing so, they can be seen as influencing (or promoting) a certain concept of

what quality is and what should be promoted. While these strands are ostensibly concerned with the improvement of quality, they do not actually look at the processes and practices behind quality improvement.

Connected to these two bulks of literature on quality conceptualizations and quality assurance/management is a widespread and somewhat fragmented literature on what might be termed quality work, i.e. the implementation and performance of activities to improve quality (in whatever sense) in higher education. This relates then to *the practice of quality* and how individuals and institutions work towards developing and improving quality in their educations. Quality work has recently been described by Elken and Stensaker (2018) as situated between quality culture, encompassing the shared values and beliefs on what quality is and commitment to its improvement (linked to the conceptual literature described above), and quality management, encompassing the managerial structures and routines designed to monitor and enhance quality (linked to the assurance literature above). Elken and Stensaker also point out that a "*quality work perspective acknowledges that individuals and academic staff in particular still have considerable influence over their own work: an influence that may be less visible both with respect to formal designs of quality management systems and in changing quality cultures but is highly relevant concerning the specific practices and activities conducted in teaching and learning processes*" (Elken and Stensaker 2018, p. 199).

In the present article, we attempt to follow this line of thought and present a review of the literature on quality work, which does not initially or solely focus on the definitional, nor the system-focused perspective, but rather on what we know about actual initiatives to enhance higher education quality and their outcomes. In this way, the aim of the paper is to present a practice-oriented review, which takes its starting point in how quality work takes place in higher education systems. This means that we implicitly cover aspects of a quality definitional perspective – implied in the intentions guiding higher education quality practices analyzed in academic literature – and aspects that are sometimes

present in the system-focused higher education quality literature, namely the focus on outcomes or results of quality initiatives. We thus follow an inclusive quality conceptualization, coupling quality practice or quality work with political, systemic and academic terminology in a bottom-up approach using the explicit intention to promote higher education quality as an underlying premise of our review.

Research questions

This review thus aims to provide an overview of what we know about initiatives that work to promote quality in higher education. In order to do this, two overall research questions have been formulated to guide the review process and analysis.

First, this review aims to explore and characterize the 'knowledge base' more substantially:

What main themes, issues and central questions can be identified in the literature?

Second, the overall question of outcomes or effect is posed to illuminate how quality work works:

What does the literature have to say about the effects or impacts of initiatives to promote higher education quality?

These overarching research questions have both structured the design of the review and our analyses of the literature, and have also structured how the analysis and results are presented in this review.

Review methodology

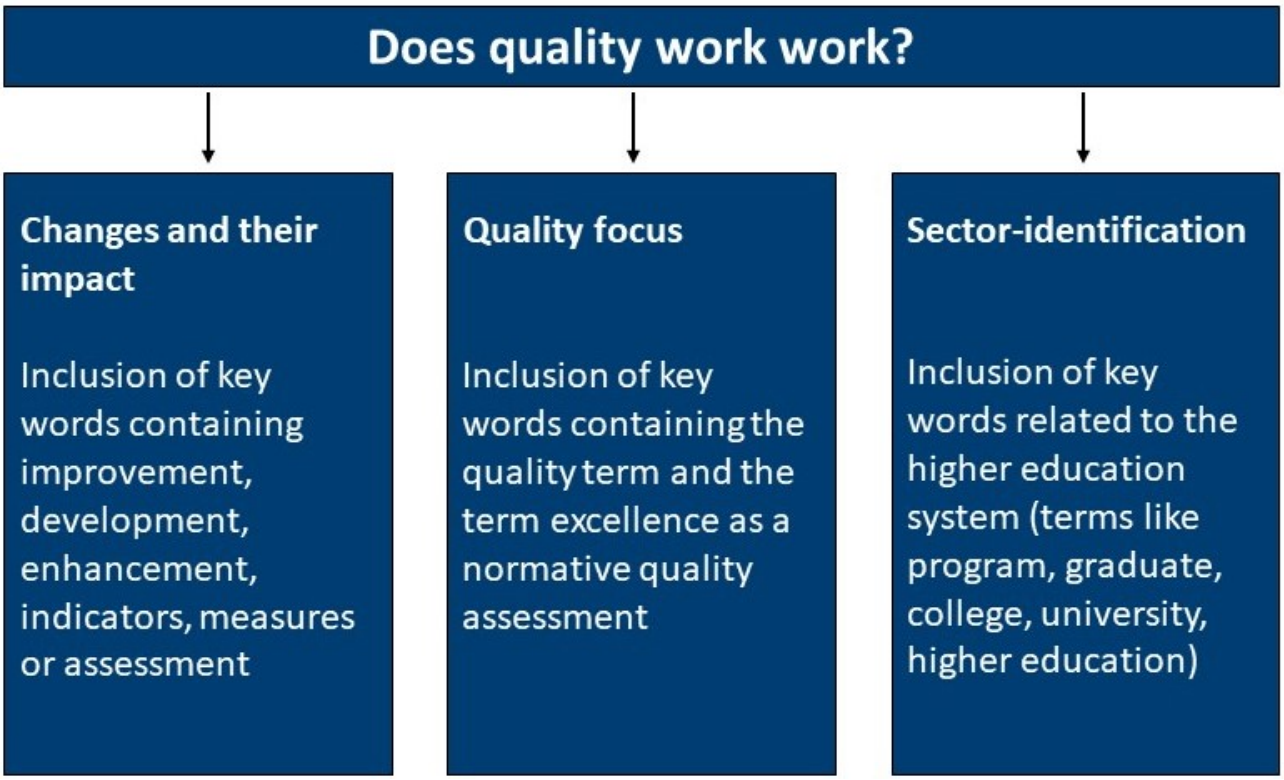
As mentioned in the introduction, quality work is conceptualized as the implementation and performance of activities to improve quality (in whatever sense) in higher education. And as the research questions above imply, this review seeks to explore the key themes and factors that the literature identifies and how quality promotion initiatives work. Our search strategy and selection process were designed to identify literature that was relevant to these objectives.

The review combined three aspects in the search. First, the review focused on the change aspect, searching specifically for studies focusing on *improvement* in some way. Second, the search included

a focus on quality – even if quality as mentioned is very hard to define. Our aim was to gain an understanding of what notions of quality were used in quality work and which specific quality outcomes these initiatives seek to promote. It might be argued that there is an inherent weakness in including 'quality' as an explicit parameter in our search string, given that we potentially miss studies on practices that aim to improve teaching in higher education, but do not draw a link with 'quality' or quality processes. While this is indeed a risk, we argue that given our aim of exploring quality practices can be viewed as inherently political and embedded in a political discourse, we need to target our search to studies engaging in this discourse. Third, the focus is narrowed to the systems of higher education.

Our search string thus incorporates these three aspects, as also shown in the figure below.

Figure 1. Identifying literature on quality work – main search criteria



After preliminary exploration of possible search string combinations that capture the three aspects above, we arrived at the following string:

(DE "Educational Quality" OR DE "Quality Assurance" OR DE "Quality Circles" OR DE "Excellence in Education") AND (DE "College Programs" OR DE "Higher Education" OR DE "Graduate Study" OR DE "Undergraduate Study" OR DE "Colleges" OR DE "Universities" OR DE "Undergraduate Study") AND (AB improvement OR AB development OR AB enhancement OR DE "Educational Improvement" OR DE "Educational Indicators" OR DE "Outcome Measures" OR DE "Educational Assessment")

The search was limited to the period 2008-2018, and was limited to the ERIC database. While ERIC (Education Resources Information Center, www.eric.ed.gov) is comprehensive within the area of quality in higher education, there are potential concerns on its coverage of non Anglo-Saxon countries. However, our review of the full sample of publications found that publications came from a very wide range of countries. Hence, we chose not to include multiple databases in our search strategy. The search resulted in a total of 1863 publications for screening. The initial search and extraction of publications was conducted in June 2018.

Our initial screening process was designed to follow the three dimensions mentioned above (see Figure 1). The search revealed literature from a number of areas, meaning that a number of criteria had to be defined for inclusion and exclusion. For example, for the quality assurance literature, publications that explicitly addressed the relation between quality assurance systems and quality practices were included. In contrast, publications that solely focus on quality assurance systems themselves (their design, perceptions of them, how they function as monitoring or assessment tools) were excluded. We included literature on the use of new learning technologies in face-to-face courses, but excluded work covering purely online teaching and learning. Furthermore, for inclusion, we required that these publications deal with some form of change in e-learning with the objective of improving quality. We also excluded a number of high-level analyses, for example dealing with

supranational policy, higher education systems as a whole, university rankings, national level analysis of reform that were not linked to changes in quality practices, or where this possible link was very far removed. We also exclude documents by or for government agencies (such as US states) covering e.g. regulations, standards, specific practices.

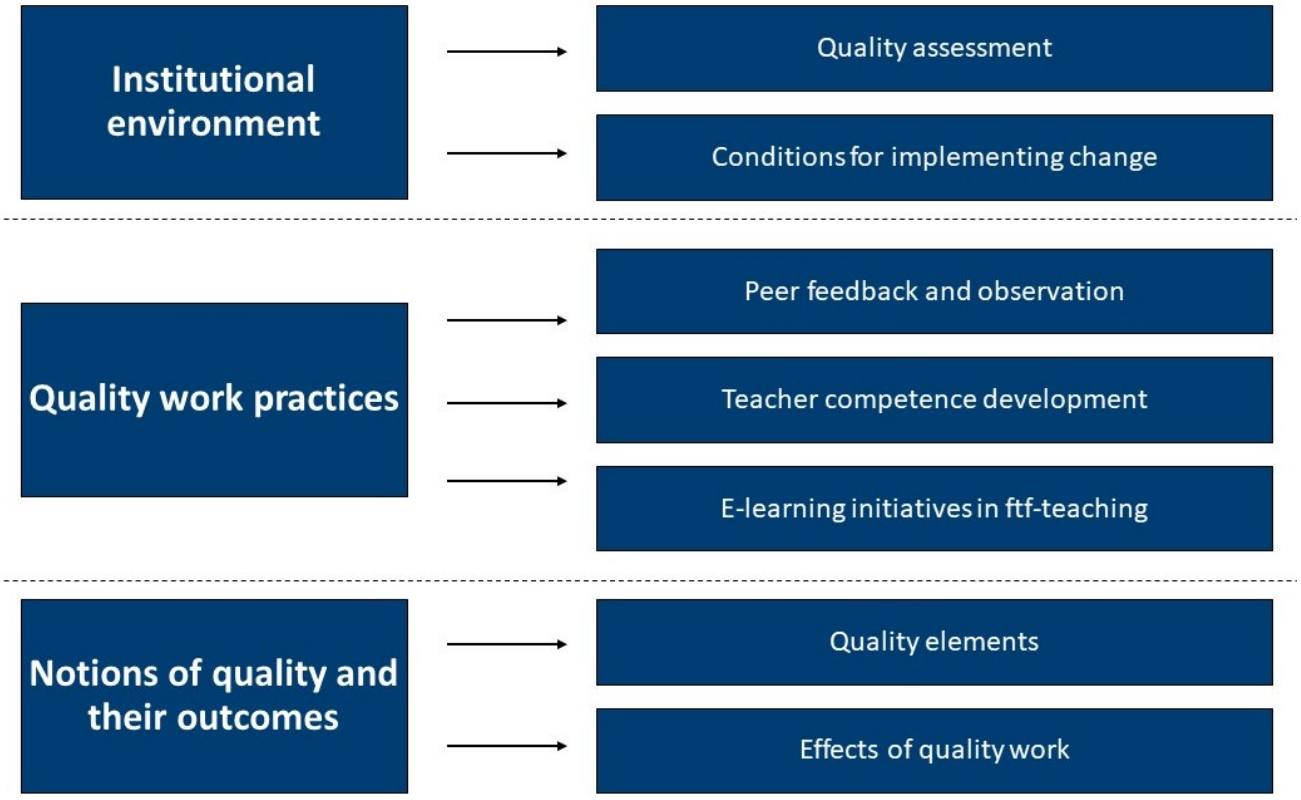
The initial screening of publication titles and abstracts was conducted in Covidence (www.covidence.org). The full list was screened by two reviewers independently of each other. All disagreements were discussed to reach consensus. Out of the 1863 publications, 1397 were excluded based on this first round of screening. A second round of screening was conducted on this reduced sample, where the full text was briefly reviewed by two reviewers. An additional 398 publications were excluded based on this second round, leaving 68 publications selected for inclusion in the review. However, over the course of review work, it was judged that an additional 12 publications were outside the scope of review and were excluded. Among the reasons for late exclusion were: that publications gave an initial impression of examining relation between quality assurance and quality work, but in actuality were solely concerned with the quality assurance system itself; the focus was on K-12 and not higher education; the report of survey results (eg student satisfaction) without any link to quality practices; very narrow studies dealing with a specific model that was not generalizable to other studies; high level analysis without any link to quality practices. At the same time, our review work identified an additional 12 publications (that were included as references in the 56 publications) that were found to be within the scope of the review, leaving us with the final set of 68 publications that are covered in this paper.

Review

Drawing on both our review methodology that focused on quality work practices, quality, improvement and higher education, and on the topical review of the papers, themes in this review are structured around three broad arenas. The first is the institutional environment that can help to shape quality work. This includes managerial practices to promote quality work, assessment activities and

procedures for acting on assessment results, strategies and efforts concerning the implementation of new initiatives. The second concerns quality work practices or initiatives themselves. The literature within this arena is particularly focused on a variety of forms of feedback, building teacher and/or student competences, and disseminating experiences and good practice. The third arena concerns notions of quality and their outcomes; i.e. how quality is conceptualized or what types of quality are focused on, and data and methods used to measure how initiatives work and their effects. Figure 2 below displays the three arenas.

Figure 2. Themes from the review of quality work literature



Institutional environment

The institutional environment comprises the institutional conditions, governance, and other measures that seek to promote developments in educational quality. In particular, two themes emerged from the review concerning institutional environment. The first is quality assurance activities and how

they influence quality work practices. While quality assurance is often used as a general term, it can cover a variety of different monitoring and assessment activities. This includes external quality assurance systems, for example to achieve accreditation, which involve both a number of assessment measures and a reporting process. These systems can have varying focus on accountability and development (Danø and Stensaker 2007; Brady and Bates 2016). Assessment exercises can also be internal, ranging from reporting processes that require responses to assessments, to various measurement activities that in principle do not require action. To help note this diversity, we refer to them as quality assessment activities. The second theme concerns the factors behind the successful implementation of new quality work initiatives.

Quality assessment

Literature on the role of quality assessment for quality work revolves in particular around three themes: perceptions of quality assurance systems and how they influence quality work; actual filtering down of quality assessments to concrete changes in practices; and the use of quality assessment results by management to implement change.

In a study of the perceptions and influence of quality assurance systems, Brady and Bates (2016) find that while the stated focus of the quality assurance process is both accountability and enhancement, the process tends to focus on accountability. In addition, efforts to enhance quality based on the evaluations were perceived by staff as being very high level and detached from the development of actual teaching practice, which were perceived by staff as demotivating individual efforts to improve teaching quality. Tavares et al. (2017) find that, typically, teaching staff see results of quality audits as very high level, often implying that systematic changes made on the basis of these will be correspondingly high level.

Tavares et al. (2017) find that there is some agreement among teaching staff that internal quality assessment systems result in increased awareness of teaching quality issues, but less agreement that it leads to greater focus on innovation, experimentation, or improvements in the quality of teaching.

Cardoso, Rosa, and Santos (2013) find that teachers are generally supportive of assessment that seeks to promote reflection and continual improvement of teaching and learning. Steslow, Lasher, and Kong (2016) surveyed teaching staff on perceived impacts of assessment and found that around 36% of the staff found that learning outcomes had improved.

Connected to staff perceptions and motivation is the question of how, or to what extent quality assessments are useful for quality work. El-Khawas (2014) uses award applications for "Outstanding Institutional Practice in Student Learning Outcomes" from the US Council for Higher Credit Accreditation to examine how institutions use quality assurance systems in quality development processes. What appears to constitute a significant part of the changes is refinement of both targeted learning outcomes and procedures for monitoring and assessing teaching. However, at the same time, a review of results identified gaps or potentials for improvement, with subsequent adjustments in both teaching methods and curriculum.

Haapakorpi, Geirsdóttir, and Jóhannsdóttir (2013) find that university management and teaching staff in Finland and Iceland are able to make use of quality evaluation processes during the implementation process of the quality assessment, which prompted learning and reflection during preparations. However, the actual evaluation results were not found to be useful by low-level management and teaching staff, who viewed the external reports as too superficial and non-specific. This same pattern was found by Brady and Bates (2016).

Student evaluation data is used extensively as part of external quality audit reporting, however it is less clear how this evaluation data is used to inform quality development activities. Shah, Cheng, and Fitzgerald (2017) argues for "closing the loop" by both engaging students and teachers in dialogue on results and how to act on them. Tucker (2013) argues that the online reporting of results both creates more transparency on student evaluation results and prompts individual units to respond to the results and how they can be addressed.

Despite the extensive focus on both external and internal quality assurance systems, little work has been done to study the impacts of quality assurance systems and measures on quality development work. Leiber, Stensaker, and Harvey (2015) argue that impact analysis should be grounded in thorough analysis of the quality assurance procedure itself and potential causal social mechanisms, using surveys among various stakeholder groups, document analysis and longitudinal studies.

Conditions for implementing change

A number of papers identify the role of culture or management in the implementation of changes based on assessment results (or simply in motivating quality work on their own). Kleijnen et al. (2014) found that the most effective departments had clear objectives, reflection and implementation of improvement plans based on evaluations, and the involvement of staff and students in development processes, whereas less effective departments were characterized by poor communication, top decision making without the involvement of staff, and aversion to change. Mårtensson, Roxå, and Stensaker (2014) examine what they call "strong microcultures" and find that these units will typically only take up quality assurance recommendations if they resonate with the unit's own plans and ambitions.

Kember (2009) argues that a key factor influencing the adoption of new teaching approaches are the teachers' own beliefs about teaching. Hence, efforts to promote quality improvement should place initial focus on influencing teachers' conceptions of teaching, which can then spur developments in teaching and learning forms. Scott and Scott (2016) also stress the importance of motivating researchers to engage in the development of teaching competences and approaches, and the need for dialogue between university and faculty management and teachers in promoting quality development.

A number of studies focus on challenges in the implementation of ICT-based technologies in face-to-face courses (i.e. blended learning), including both necessary conditions for success and challenges connected with implementation (Garrison and Vaughan 2013; Graham, Woodfield, and Harrison

2013). Many of the studies points out that using or having e-learning or blended learning tools is not enough to ensure that they work effectively (Adekola, Dale, and Gardiner 2017). Successful implementation of blended learning depends on planning and dialogue to ensure that the goals of students, faculty and institutions are aligned with each other (Moskal, Dziuban, and Hartman 2013; Porter et al. 2014; Almpanis 2015; Vaughan and Cloutier 2017).

There are however a number of challenges in achieving this, such as costs, increased staff workload and student difficulties with use (Usoro and Abid 2008), in addition to needs for upgrading staff skills (Jenkins, Browne, Walker and Hewitt 2011). Laurillard argues that technology can be seen as the 'misunderstood anti-hero' that has the potential to improve formal learning. But to do so, educations need to determine what they hope to gain from technology or else the danger is that education will continuing to just follow the technology, instead of leading innovation (Laurillard 2012).

Quality work practices

While the previous section reviewed work on a number of conditions that can influence quality work, this section reviews studies of quality work practices themselves. Empirical research on different forms of quality work are solidly focused on two intertwined aspects, feedback and teacher competence development. This encompasses a number of different forms of feedback, including interaction between teachers and students (Poppitt and Iqbal 2009; Healey, O'Connor, and Broadfoot 2010; Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011; Dekker-Groen, van der Schaaf, and Stokking 2013; Jensen and Bennett 2016), student peer assessment and feedback (Landry, Jacobs, and Newton 2015; Collings, Swanson, and Watkins 2016), and teacher peer feedback and observation (Huston and Weaver 2008; Byrne, Brown, and Challen 2010; Shortland 2010; Hendry and Oliver 2012; Gormally, Evans, and Brickman 2014; Yiend, Weller, and Kinchin 2014; Fletcher 2018). While the objects of these studies are thus quite diverse, these different forms of quality work practices have in common that they seek to promote the transfer of knowledge and reflection among teachers and/or

students. Competence development programs range from single workshops to programs that run over longer periods, focusing on teaching practices, assessment and course design. A third strand of literature on quality work practices is e-learning initiatives. While this work is very much distinct from other literature on quality work, e-learning initiatives share the goals of enhancing interaction and also of promoting student centered learning.

Peer feedback and observation

Teacher peer feedback and observation seeks to promote dialogue, reflection and the development of teaching practices. Gormally et al. (2014) reviews issues concerned with the dissemination and adoption of "evidence based teaching practices", where they argue that while learning to teach requires training, feedback and monitoring are essential for teaching development. Based on a review of the literature, they identify the following elements of best practice: feedback should be provided immediately and on multiple occasions; it should be voluntarily solicited, constructive and provide examples of how to improve (Gormally et al. 2014).

Collaborative peer observation by fellow teachers and colleagues can be contrasted with other forms of peer observation that are undertaken by chosen evaluators or by educational developers, which typically involves one-way interaction (Yiend et al. 2014; Fletcher 2018). On the other hand, a development model where observation and feedback is given by a trained educational expert may be more effective in facilitating critical reflection and teaching development than feedback from a colleague (Yiend et al. 2014). Development models can also be seen by faculty as better allowing for more targeted focus on the development of a specific teaching skill (Byrne et al. 2010).

Ongoing development processes, either through repeated observations or a multi-stage program (Huston and Weaver 2008; Byrne et al. 2010; Shortland 2010; Yiend et al. 2014) are typically viewed as being more effective in promoting reflection and improvement of teaching practices than

one-off peer observations. Multiple observations over an extended period can allow participants to form a trust-based relationship that can enhance the value and impact of feedback (Shortland 2010). Peer observation is typically viewed in terms of its benefits for the teacher being observed. However, Hendry and Oliver (2012) argue that there are a number of potential gains for the observing teacher as well, through learning new teaching strategies by watching, affirmation of their own current teaching by watching, and also seeing some approaches as being too difficult to do.

Other initiatives involve students in more formative roles in teaching or course development. Jensen and Bennett (2016) review a model where students observe and provide feedback on teaching, instead of other teachers. Bovill et al. (2011) studies examples of "co-creation" of course development programs involving teacher-student dialogues (e.g. students as teaching consultants, students in "course design teams"), with participants (both students and teachers) reporting that they benefited from new perspectives on teaching.

Teacher competence development

While the main purpose of peer observation is to support teacher competence development, the literature reveals a number of other initiatives designed to strengthen teaching competences. These are often focused on competences within a specific area, such as promoting student engagement (Kember 2009; Stes, Coertjens, and van Petegem 2010; Potter et al. 2015; Stains, Pilarz, and Chakrverty 2015; Hilpert and Husman 2017), or deep learning, student reflection and critical thinking (Rutz et al. 2012; Stes et al. 2012; Dekker-Groen et al. 2013; Marchant, González, and Fauré 2018).

A number of the studies examine longer term programs (often running the course of a school year) that cover points such as active learning strategies, assessment and curriculum development (Stes et al. 2012, 2010; Trigwell, Caballero Rodriguez, and Han 2012; Stewart 2014). Other forms are single workshops that either focus on teaching practices overall (Stains et al., 2015) or a specific aspect,

such as the promotion of critical thinking (Rutz et al. 2012). Matthews, Duck, and Bartle (2017) examines a course for temporary staff.

Kember (2009) examines a university wide initiative at a university in Hong Kong to promote student-centered forms of learning. The initiative includes: interviews with 18 award-winning teachers to disseminate models of good teaching practice in promoting active student engagement; compulsory training courses for new teachers; and teaching development grants for projects to introduce student-centered forms of learning.

Other development programs seek to enhance discussion and exchange of experience among staff (Laksov, Mann, and Dahlgren 2008; Dekker-Groen et al. 2013; Elliott et al. 2016). Dekker-Groen et al. (2013) studies a training program that involves iterations with group meetings, individual practice, individual consultation and further practice. Laksov, Mann, and Dahlgren (2008) examines an initiative to develop a "community of practice" that promotes mutual engagement of staff in the development of teaching and learning, and a shared knowledge of relevant teaching methods. Elliott et al. (2016) study the effects of a Faculty Learning Community, which was established to facilitate dialogue among staff and the development and adoption of active learning strategies in a large course.

E-learning initiatives in face to face teaching

The role of ICT in higher education has been conceptualized in a number of ways. Usoro & Abid find that blended learning which combines ICT with some degree of face-to-face interaction has proved to be the most successful approach (Usoro and Abid 2008; Monteiro, Leite, and Lima 2013). Similarly, Moskal et al. (2013) conclude that the potential strengths of blended courses are that they offer flexibility in teaching and learning while meeting student's request for some face-to-face interaction (Moskal et al. 2013).

Ehlers (2009) argues that technical developments play a key role in creating a new learning culture, facilitating a shift from "transmissive learning" to "student-centered learning", where students are

more participative and have greater chances for reflection. In doing so, the article discusses the types of learning and development processes that e-learning 2.0 can potentially facilitate.

Leask argues that using e-tools (knowledge management tools and Web 2.0 tools) for teachers to communicate is a key component for improving the quality of education (Leask 2011). Technology can also be used to improve feedback and Leonard, Fitzgerald, and Bacon (2016) argue that using what they call fold-back instead of feedback, which provides multiple layers of information instead of just one layer, can improve the quality of learning.

Notions of quality and their outcomes

This section first reviews how quality is conceived in the literature and thereafter the analysis of effects of quality work practices.

Quality elements

The literature reflects a range of different conceptualizations of quality, but at the same time with a strong emphasis on specific aspects. Quality is understood in terms of teaching and learning processes, in terms of the competences or preconditions that influence teaching, or in terms of learning, education or employment outcomes. The literature reviewed here typically has as its primary focus the development of competences and teaching or learning approaches, and less direct focus on learning and employment outcomes. The table below lists main elements of quality that are investigated in the reviewed literature.

Table 1. Quality elements investigated in the literature

Quality element
Staff competence development (18)
Feedback and observation (16)
Staff motivation, acceptance (10)

Student centred learning (17)
Learning outcomes (critical thinking, deep learning, reflection) (5)
Student learning experience (7)
Retention (2)
Employability (2)
Successful use of e-learning technologies (13)

Number of papers that refer to quality element is given in parentheses.

Feedback is generally viewed as a tool to facilitate dialogue among teachers on their teaching practice, to promote reflection and to provide suggestions for concrete improvements. Courses, workshops and other forms of teaching development programs are instead often focused on the implementation of specific teaching practices and increasing awareness and acceptance for them. By far the most prevalent topic for staff training involves practices to promote student centered learning. A number of papers highlight the importance of staff motivation to participate in the development of teaching practices. For example, Kember (2009) notes that a critical step in promoting student centered learning is to gain acceptance among staff prior to the implementation of new practices. Staff motivation is also viewed as a key element in determining whether quality assessment activities influence actual teaching practices (Brady and Bates 2016).

Perhaps the most prevalent topic among the reviewed papers is student centered learning. Much of the staff development programs described in the literature, and quality work more generally, have the goal of promoting active learning practices. This also includes the increased use of e-learning (Ehlers 2009), teacher-student feedback and student peer feedback practices.

There is less direct focus on learning outcomes in the reviewed literature, though those studies that go beyond learning practices to examine effects on learning outcomes, focus on the types of

outcomes that are typically linked to active learning. This includes critical thinking abilities (Rutz et al. 2012), reflection (Dekker-Groen et al. 2013) and deep learning (Marchant et al. 2018).

Student satisfaction is often viewed as an intermediate measure that can be linked to the quality of teaching. There is, however, increasing focus on what is referred to as the student learning experience as an end goal in itself. This includes, for example, work on the effects of quality assessment, where a number of articles argue for better inclusion of the student experience in assessment activities (Cahill, Turner, and Barefoot 2010; Shah et al. 2017).

Despite its extensive policy focus on discussion of quality, relatively little attention is given to employability in the literature on quality work reviewed here. Exceptions, however, are Kettis et al. (2013) and Wallman et al. (2011), who argue that placements, or internships, should be given a greater role in efforts to improve educational quality, where placements function as a component in students' overall development process.

Crosling, Heagney, and Thomas (2009) focus on one specific goal for quality work, student retention, and review the literature on development activities that can improve retention, arguing that student engagement is a central factor in retaining students.

Effects of quality work

A key focus of this review is on the improvement aspect of quality work – how quality work seeks to improve quality and how the literature seeks to measure this. However, given that our search and selection strategy was broad, not all papers analyze the effects of a specific initiative. A group of papers in the review (14 papers) can be characterized as discussion papers or reviews, and thus do not focus on the effects of any specific initiative. A second group of 25 papers focus on specific initiatives but do not investigate their effects. These papers instead seek to increase understanding of quality work initiatives and how they function. This group consists of a number of individual case studies, descriptive analyses, document analyses and interview studies with staff, students or other stakeholders.

The remaining 29 papers seek to examine the effects of quality work from a number of different perspectives and through the use of a number of different methods. This section first reviews the many mechanisms and effect rationales behind quality work, then the different forms of effect analysis employed, and finally the main findings of these papers. Table 2 below outlines the main improvement rationales among the papers reviewed here.

Table 2. Improvement rationales behind quality work

Improvement rationale	**References**
Motivating and involving staff in decision making facilitates change and improvement in teaching	(Laksov et al. 2008; Kleijnen et al. 2014; Brady and Bates 2016; Cardoso, Rosa, and Stensaker 2016; Scott and Scott 2016)
Staff development programs improve teaching competences and facilitate the introduction of new teaching approaches	(Kember 2009; Stes et al. 2012, 2010; Rutz et al. 2012; Dekker-Groen et al. 2013; Stes, Coertjens, and Van Petegem 2013; Potter et al. 2015; Stains et al. 2015; Elliott et al. 2016; Hilpert and Husman 2017; Marchant et al. 2018)
Feedback and observation promotes dialogue and reflection, leading to improvement in teaching	(Huston and Weaver 2008; Shortland 2010; Byrne et al. 2010; Hendry and Oliver 2012; Drew and Klopper 2014; Collings et al. 2016)
Student centered learning improves learning outcomes, particularly deep learning	(Rutz et al. 2012; Dekker-Groen et al. 2013; Marchant et al. 2018)
Improving student learning experiences leads to better learning outcomes	(Cahill et al., 2010; Shah et al., 2017)
Quality assessment activities promote the development of teaching practices	(Tavares, Rosa, and Amaral 2010; Haapakorpi et al. 2013; El-Khawas 2014; Tavares et al. 2017)
Effective implementation of e-learning enhances its impact on learning	(Garrison and Vaughan 2013; Graham et al. 2013; Moskal et al. 2013; Porter et al. 2014; Almpanis 2015; Adekola et al. 2017)
Blended learning facilitates student centered learning, leading to better learning outcomes	(Monteiro et al., 2013)
Student engagement in development work increases the impact of educational strategies	(Healey et al. 2010; Bovill et al. 2011; Shah et al. 2017)

In total, we identified 7 papers that examined the effects of quality work using qualitative methods. These typically involve the analysis of one or more case studies that are examined through interviews, in some cases supplemented by document analysis. Studies include the student co-creation in course planning (Bovill et al. 2011), quality assessment and staff motivation (Brady and Bates 2016), staff development programs (Gunersel and Etienne 2014; Stewart 2014; Matthews et al. 2017), student to teacher feedback (Jensen and Bennett 2016) and teaching observation (Yiend et al. 2014). These studies typically have a dual role of both increasing understanding of how the initiatives work and at the same time whether they can identify any effects. In terms of effects, their focus is both on participants' (staff and/or students) perceptions of the effects of initiatives and on more verifiable information on changes that have taken place. For example, based on an interview study of 12 participants, Gunersel and Etienne (2014) find that the development program led to increased understanding of student-centered approaches, leading to greater adoption of active-learning strategies. Jensen and Bennett (2016) review a model where students observe and provide feedback on teaching, instead of other teachers. Participating students and teachers were surveyed after completion of the consultation process, with both groups viewing the sessions positively.

19 papers involved quantitative effect analysis using a variety of approaches. Three of these involve self-assessment of benefits based on survey data and without any comparison to a control group or to earlier results. These concern the impact of quality assessment on teaching and learning (Szymenderski, Yagudina, and Burenkova 2015; Steslow et al. 2016), and the impact of staff training on student satisfaction (Trigwell et al. 2012).

The remaining 16 papers either use a longitudinal design, examining changes in results over time (Kember 2009; Rutz et al. 2012; Tucker 2013; Drew and Klopper 2014; Potter et al. 2015; Collings et al. 2016; Elliott et al. 2016; Vaughan and Cloutier 2017), or a quasi-experimental approach

involving comparison with a control group (Dekker-Groen et al., 2013; Marchant et al., 2018), or both (Stes et al. 2012, 2010, 2013; Stains et al. 2015; Hilpert and Husman 2017)

Analyses of different forms of observation and feedback are very diverse in their approach, which could reflect that the initiatives themselves are less standardized than development programs.

In the Peer Review and Observation of Teaching project, peer observation of in all 80 teachers is conducted at two points in time, and then followed up with triangulation with student perspectives and group debriefing (Drew and Klopper 2014). Drew and Klopper (2014) find the largest changes concerning attention to individual learning needs, curriculum design, student engagement, and a scholarly approach to teaching.

Collings et al. (2016) evaluates the role of peer student mentoring in promoting retention for new university students. The peer mentoring scheme, which ran for 10 weeks, had greater utilization by those students having greatest initial difficulty with school start, and positive effects of the scheme on well-being were found only for this group. Landry et al. (2015) find that students' quantitative assessment (grading) of written assignments did not differ significantly from the teacher's assessment.

The majority of these 16 studies (11 out of 16) involved the analysis of staff development programs, all of which at least partially focused on the promotion of student centered learning approaches. And while there is still significant variation in data and method used, these studies of development programs are much more comparable than those of feedback initiatives. The studies focused on effects on: the use of student centered learning approaches, self-efficacy, and learning outcomes associated with student centered learning, such as deep learning, critical thinking, and reflection. Overall, the results provide indications that focus on student centered learning in development programs translates into increased use of these methods in teaching (Kember 2009; Stes et al. 2010; Potter et al. 2015; Hilpert and Husman 2017) and greater self-efficacy (Dekker-Groen et al. 2013; Potter et al. 2015; Stains et al. 2015). Marchant et al. (2018) finds that students of teachers with

teaching diplomas are more likely to engage in deep learning. Rutz et al. (2012) find that student critical thinking scores are higher for faculty with high level of participation in faculty development events.

However, there appears to be differences in the size of these effects, with most of these studies finding small effect sizes. An exception though is (Kember 2009), who uses results from the Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ) to provide evidence on the impact of the initiative, and finds large effect sizes in particular for questions concerning whether teaching promoted active learning.

Hilpert and Husman (2017) examine the impact of instructional improvement on student engagement for a group of 11 teachers over time. They utilize large scale survey data on student perceptions, both among students of participating teachers in the professional development program and students of a control group of teachers (n=1000 in both student groups). Based on a composite indicator score of student engagement, they find 2-3% more student engagement among students of professors in the development program.

There are also differences in sample size and thus also the robustness of results. While a number of the studies reviewed here utilize fairly large samples of student survey data to measure effects, others are based on quite small samples of around 20 to 50 respondents.

While focus is mainly on effects on teaching and learning approaches, a smaller set of these studies examine effects on learning outcomes. Results here are mixed. For example, Marchant et al. (2018) do not find any effect of teacher development participation on perceived student learning experiences, while others find mixed or no effects on learning outcomes (Kember 2009; Stes et al. 2012). Elliott et al. (2016) measures learning gains of a staff development program using changes in test scores, where they find evidence of positive learning gains in terms of basic course content, but not for more advanced content.

Discussion and conclusion

While quality work is a central element in the improvement of educational quality, the literature on quality work is, as we have shown in this review, to some degree undefined and fragmented. This review thus cuts across a number of different areas: it includes quality assurance, quality in higher education and instructional development. It also includes blended learning, particularly concerning the implementation of quality work within e-learning, and the relation between e-learning and quality improvement.

While these areas may be very distinct, in combination they provide a fuller picture of the literature on quality work and how it can be promoted. First, studies of quality work practices themselves include instructional development, but also include what appears to be a growing number of studies of different feedback and observation approaches. However, this work provides little information on the factors and conditions that influence the promotion of quality work and its implementation. Finally, given that quality can be many things, it is very relevant to review literature on what notions of quality are considered, and how effects on quality outcomes are examined.

While the distinction is not always clear, quality work practices fall into two broad categories. The first is the promotion of feedback and observation processes that seek to promote knowledge transfer and reflection. This includes both teacher-teacher, teacher-student and student-student interaction. While there are exceptions, often these do not have a specific focus in mind, and instead seek to facilitate reflection and development processes in general. The second is competence development programs, which have become very widespread. While these also have a general purpose, many of these programs tend to have specific focus areas, particularly on student centered learning.

Quality assurance literature contributes in two ways. The first is in considering the question of how or to what extent quality assessment can be used as a resource for quality work. The second concerns how quality assessment results are implemented or feed into quality work. General findings are that quality assurance is perceived to be mainly relevant at a high level, and positive effects at a higher

level can be outweighed by adverse effects on motivation if staff are not involved in discussions of how quality assurance results can be used.

There appears to be an increasing tendency to view the student learning experience as an outcome measure in itself. This reflects a different perspective on quality – both in terms of stakeholders, where there is focus on what students feel they get out of education, and also with a shift in focus towards perceptions of effects. This can be contrasted with, for example, a focus on actual changes in teaching or in learning. This different quality perspective can also have implications for quality work, as efforts that target e.g. student learning performance outcomes can differ from efforts that seek to improve student learning experiences.

This focus on the student learning experience should be seen as part of broader efforts to increase the engagement of students in various aspects of quality work. This includes for example more intensive involvement of students in quality assessment processes, going from the standard use of student evaluation data to actively engaging students in assessment processes and in deciding how results should be acted upon. This also includes, as we have seen in the review, a number of efforts to include students in other elements of the development process, such as co-creation of courses and curriculum and observing and providing feedback to teaching staff.

The e-learning literature also contributes in two ways. The first is in putting focus on the process behind implementation of new e-learning technologies, with focus on clarifying the purpose and intended outcomes of new e-learning and engaging both staff and students. The second is that the successful implementation of blended learning solutions that is able to achieve set goals, is dependent on a number of factors. A final point is that blended learning can also result in changes in the teaching and learning practices, and can e.g. act to foster active learning strategies. Hence, blended learning should be seen in relation to many of the other initiatives that seek to promote active or student centered learning.

As noted above, with respect to e-learning, this review only covers literature that examines how e-learning is related to educational quality and quality development. Work within this area is at a fairly early stage, and is also confronted by the fact that ongoing developments in technology and applications mean that the potential role of e-learning for quality is under continual change. This work has primarily focused on outlining the potential role of e-learning for quality, and key issues for implementation and potential barriers and drawbacks. Empirical work to examine these aspects is still underexplored, with smaller scale survey and interview work providing some first indications and potential directions for further analysis.

A broad range of approaches are used to examine the functioning and effects of quality work, where the purpose of many studies is mainly to describe and gain a better understanding of initiatives, with little formal emphasis on measuring their effects. Based on the review here and on Steinert et al. (2016) there appears to be a growing number of formalized effect analyses, either quasi-experimental studies or longitudinal studies or both. However, there appear to be strong differences in the types of analysis used according to type of quality work. Broadly speaking, studies of different forms of feedback or observation are often designed as case studies while a number of studies of staff development programs are the object of formal effect analyses. This may to some degree reflect different traditions. However, an additional reason can be that development programs lend themselves better to quantitative effect analysis, as they are more concrete and homogeneous in their design and often have specified goals, such as the promotion of active learning strategies.

Given the diversity of effect studies, it is difficult to summarize results on the effects of quality work. Studies on feedback and observation illustrate the many different forms of initiatives that have been implemented, along with different methods to analyze them. The literature reviewed here yields insights on how these initiatives work and their value in promoting critical reflection and development, but it is difficult to make sense of what works best, for example in terms of different observation and development models.

There is a greater number of examples of rigorous analysis of the effects of competence development programs, though lack of comparability is also an issue here. There are also a number of mixed results concerning effects on teaching and learning practices, which can reflect differences in analysis method, but it may also reflect differences in the design of development programs. Also here, more work is needed in order to determine what works best in terms of teaching competence development.

An overall contribution of this review may be a more nuanced understanding of elements of higher education quality work and pathways to assess their adequacy for a variety of purposes. It seems there is a need for more inclusive methodologies and longitudinal studies. A synthesis of our review can point out a number of areas for further work. As noted above, work should be continued in developing approaches for more rigorous quantitative analysis of the effects of quality work to supplement other methods. This includes development programs, for which there already exist a number of rigorous analyses, and also work on feedback and observation initiatives, where much less formalized effect analysis has been attempted. In addition, as e-learning technologies take on an increasingly important role in higher education, research should take their potential role into account to a greater degree when considering how quality can be improved. Finally, studies of the role of quality assurance processes should be more explicit in examining the relation between quality assurance and quality work.

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