Dissertation

Titel der Dissertation

A Clash of Quality Cultures -

Conflicting and Coalescing Interpretive Patterns
in Austrian Higher Education

Verfasser
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For my parents –

a grandchild of a different kind

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Preface

This has been quite a journey. From defining where I wanted to go to finding out how to get there and how to write this book, it has been an interesting yet always challenging process. As with any research project, there are lots and lots of ideas that have been discarded and paths not taken, and it has often been tempting to think about all the interesting things I could write about than do the actual writing. Glad I came to reason, though. And, hopefully, some of the ideas will not remain forever unpursued.

One of the most difficult questions I have been asked along the whole journey is the most expectable one: What is the study about? It is not that I would not know, yet most fitting for a study about different perspectives and patterns of interpretation, the answer to this question strongly depends on the way things are framed: It is as much an analysis of the different logics that pervade the current discourse on quality assurance in Austrian higher education and influence actual quality assurance practices and models, as it is an inquiry of how an issue field is at once stabilised and challenged by the interplay of the various interpretive patterns it is built upon. And from a practitioner's perspective, it is about challenging the persuasion that all will be well as long as we strive for improvement and about the importance of knowing why you do what you do.

Trying to do justice to both my professional identities – the practitioner as well as the scholar – has definitely been one of the most defining aspects of this work. Being an 'insider' of the quality business was as helpful as it was hindering: On the one hand, my day job provided me with a privileged access to data and lots of interesting people to talk about my observations. On the other hand, there is always the risk of taking one's own framing for granted and of not being able to distance oneself from the phenomenon in a way that helps to uncover the deeper-seated logics I was looking for. I was lucky, though, to have been guarded and accompanied by many fellow researchers and colleagues who helped me not only to find my way but to keep a critically-reflective eye on the

steps I was taking. At least to a few of them I wanted to dedicate a personal thank you in this introduction – for without them this study would either be much poorer, never have been finished or even not started at all. I am most grateful to:

- Prof. Dr. Manfred Lueger, WU, and Prof. Dr. Ulrike Froschauer, University of Vienna, for teaching me most of what I know about ontology, epistemology and methodology, and for encouraging me to undertake this journey and for helping me finish it;

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- Dr. Andrée Sursock, Tia Loukkola and the QA team from EUA for igniting the initial spark for this study, and for giving me so many interesting opportunities to take a look beyond the Austrian context;

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- my own team at the Program Management and Quality Management units at WU, for supporting me and for bearing with my infamous Monday moods after yet another weekend of reading and writing;

- and of course Elke Pürgstaller, for her loving understanding and for everything she had to endure while I was basically pursuing two jobs at once.

I am obviously very lucky in my friends and colleagues.

There are also a few thoughts on this book's structure I wanted to share: Right from the beginning, I had decided on a more essayistic approach to writing, which resulted in considerably fewer headings and subheadings than one might usually expect from a scientific piece of work. Thus, I was able yet also forced to stay with a particular strand of argument and keep my different chapters and sections very much self-contained. I sincerely hope the reading experience will benefit from this decision. Yet on the downside, the table of content offers only little orientation or shortcuts if a reader wants to access a specific part of my theories, method or results. On the whole, however, the chapters follow the traditional ductus of any empirical study:

- chapter one introduces the key phenomena and leads to my research goals and questions;

- chapter two describes the Austrian legal and political context with regard to quality assurance in higher education;

- chapter three explicates the issue field concept and introduces the field's main institutional players;

- chapter four construes my methodological choices and details my analytical framework;

- chapter five contains the first part of my findings, yet focuses once again on the observed issue field and what I learned about it from my data;

- chapter six depicts the main part of my findings and is also the eponymous chapter for this entire study;

- and chapter seven, finally, elaborates on my conclusions, and on where they might lead me sometime in the future.

The reference section needs no explanation, but bears once again witness to the numerous people who have influenced this work, yet were not mentioned above. I owe them a lot.

Oliver Vettori   January 2012

Chapter one: Rise of the quality cultures

"The concept of quality is not new: it has always been part of academic tradition. It is the outside world that now emphasizes the need for explicit attention to quality."

<div align="right">(Vroeijenstijn 1995: 2)</div>

I

In the past twenty years, 'quality` and 'quality assurance' have definitely become two of the most-used and most-discussed 'buzzwords' (Laske et al. 2000) in international higher education, constituting a remarkably successful management fashion (Stensaker 2007a). To paraphrase Vroeijenstijn's opening quote in a more polemic way: quality is not news, yet its news value has tremendously increased – even to the brink of abuse (Shanahan & Gerber 2004). Though heavily contested, rankings and league tables have captured a regular place in media coverage (i.a. Harvey 2008, Hazelkorn 2007, Dill & Soo 2005), and practically no political statement on higher education gets by without an explicit reference to the importance of quality. The public interest in how universities guarantee the quality of their teaching and research has obviously grown. As a consequence, 'quality assurance' is rapidly emerging as a regular policy field.

A lot of symptoms and reasons have been identified for this changing relationship between higher education and society at large (cf. Hodson & Thomas 2003; Brennan & Shah 2000; Schnell & Kopp 2000, Van Vught 2000), such as:

- the increase of student numbers (massification of higher education);
- the increase and diversification of higher education institutions;

- a general concern for accountability and change in public funding policies ('new public management');
- a more consumerist view on higher education and the role of students;
- an increased mobility of students, teachers and researchers in Europe;
- and the internationalisation of the European labour market.

The final two reasons mentioned also indicate the important role of the so-called Bologna Process as "an obvious driver for change with regard to quality in steering mechanisms" (Schwarz & Westerheijden 2004: 36). Being framed as 'the Quality Reform' on national levels (EUA 2007), the Bologna Process is increasingly directing attention to issues such as student engagement in quality assurance processes, feedback mechanisms for teaching and learning or greater staff awareness about quality enhancement processes (cf. Gvaramazde 2008). It is interesting to note, though, that it was not until the Berlin Communiqué in 2003 that quality was regarded "to be at the heart of a European Higher Education area". Two years later, the Bergen Communiqué (2005) was explicitly urging universities to enhance the quality of their educational activities through systematic internal mechanisms and linking them to external quality assurance. This resulted in a considerable trend towards institutional quality assurance systems between 2005 and 2010 (cf. Loukkola & Zhang 2010).

The importance of the temporal dimension can also be seen by taking a quick look at the emergence of different quality assurance policies and models: Although the roots of modern quality assurance can even be traced back to the end of the 19th century, when the first accreditation agencies emerged in the United States, it was not until the effects of the transition from 'elite' to 'mass' higher education became fully apparent in the early 1980s, that policy and decision makers started to develop the first formal quality assurance schemes (Westerheijden et al. 2007). Until the 1970s, quality in higher education was 'influenced' rather than 'controlled' through a variety of bureaucratic means,

focusing on the input level (e.g. legal conditions, state-provided funding tied to formalised rules). In the 1970s and 1980s, quality assurance started to emerge as a separate phenomenon in higher education policy and management, reflecting the increasing importance of extrinsic values in higher education (Van Vught 2000) and mimicking the development in the more industrialised sectors (cf. Schwarz & Westerhejden 2004). Still, to this day, the question whether Total Quality Management and similar industrial approaches could be successfully adapted for the higher education context remains a heavily debated issue (cf. Venkatraman 2007, Hoecht 2006, Meirovich & Romar 2006, Harvey 1995). This seems little astonishing considering that the quality movement in industry gained its popularity as a management methodology to ensure a market share by focussing on the quality of the product (Srikanthan & Dalrymple 2003: 126) – a hardly alluring aspect for the prevalently overrun European universities. Nevertheless, quality assurance in higher education has rapidly become a remarkably successful management fashion (Stensaker 2007a) of its own.

The 1990s saw the implementation of formal quality assurance instruments and processes such as self-assessment, supporting documentation, peer review and public reports in most European countries (cf. Harvey 2005), but also overseas (Tam 1999). These 'internal' mechanisms were complemented by the introduction of national quality assurance systems and a growing focus on external quality assurance. Yet the shape and relevance of these systems was still strongly bound to "the particular national contexts and institutional profiles, reflecting factors such as size, structure, prestige, resources, mission, history or leadership" (Brennan & Shah 2000).

From the early 2000s, the growing internationalisation of higher education demanded for a stronger standardisation that is visibly embodied in the *European Standards & Guidelines for Quality Assurances in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG). The ESG was issued by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in 2005 and currently sets norms for internal quality assurance, external quality assurance and external quality assurance agencies in its third edition (ENQA 2009). In 2008, an OECD publication named the development of external quality assurance systems as one

of the most important trends in higher education in the last decades (cf. Riegler 2010: 157). However, the (overreaching?) expectations of quality assurance enthusiasts remained largely unfulfilled, marking the beginning of a more 'realistic' era within the field (Stensaker 2008: 4).

In addition, many quality assurance approaches were characterised by managerialism and formalisation and thereby met with a certain lack of enthusiasm from most academics (cf. Anderson 2006, Newton 2002, 2000). As a consequence, newer quality assurance approaches such as the quality culture model that was introduced by the European University Association (EUA) in 2003, aim to set themselves apart from more traditional quality management strategies and try to shift their focus to more development-oriented and value-based aspects. From such a perspective, formal quality assurance systems are complemented by a 'softer' cultural side based on values and practices that are shared by the institutional community and that have to be nurtured on many levels and by various means at the same time (EUA 2006, 2005). The approach demands the involvement of multiple internal and external stakeholders, acknowledging the fact that a quality culture cannot be implemented from above, although strong leadership may be necessary for starting and promoting the process in the first place. However, the model is still very much underdeveloped, especially in terms of theory, and thereby runs risk of becoming arbitrary: Much like quality itself, "[...] it seems that quality culture, in practice, is everything for everyone" (Harvey & Stensaker 2008). In recent years, an increasing number of publications (e.g. Ehlers 2009, Lueger & Vettori 2008, Harvey & Stensaker 2008, Vettori et al. 2007) have tried to bridge the gap between theory and practice, usually by drawing from the rich literature on organisational culture.

Favouring an interpretative perspective on organisational culture over a functionalist one, the quality culture concept in this study will be used as an analytical instrument instead of an ideological beacon. Following Harvey's and Stensaker's conclusion that "'quality culture' first and foremost can be a tool for asking questions about how things work, how institutions function, who they relate to, and how they see themselves" (Harvey & Stensaker 2008: 441), the concept is intended to serve as a focal point for identifying and analysing the

various and often competing logics within the quality assurance discourse in the field of Austrian Higher Education. Taking a hermeneutic approach to the phenomenon, the main level of analytical interest is a latent one, bearing some similarity to Schein's concept of underlying assumptions (Schein 2004). Consequently, this work is not about contrasting perspectives and verbalised viewpoints of different actors and actor groups (though they will provide the starting point for the actual analyses and interpretations), but to visibilise the differing, even conflicting *underlying* logics and meaning structures that pervade these perspectives. The main goal, then, is not to explore what 'quality culture' means to different actors within this organisational field, but to reconstruct structures of meaning and sense-making patterns that manifest themselves in quality assurance strategies and instruments and form the very basis for different quality cultures – be it a culture of consumer protection, a culture entrepreneurialism or a culture of organisational engineering.

The following sections will provide an overview of the current state of discussion with regard to 'quality', 'quality assurance' and 'quality culture' in higher education and have thus the two-fold task of introducing the key issues my research questions are based upon as well as leading to the conceptual and empirical gaps the questions aim at.

"(Quality) means different things to different people, indeed the same person may adopt different conceptualisations at different moments."

(Harvey & Green 1993: 10)

II

'Quality' has the rather dubious honour of being one of the most intangible key concepts in higher education discourse. Despite the abundance of publications dedicated to quality-related questions, the issue remains elusive and difficult to define. Small wonder, then, that the most frequently used quote stems from Robert Pirsig's "Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance": Quality cannot be defined, you know what it is (Pirsig 1974). The present state of discussion regards quality in higher education as "relative" (Harvey & Green 1993), "subjective" (Doherty 2008) "dynamic" and "contextual" (Vettori et al. 2007), "contested" (Newton 2002, Barnett 1992) or "value-laden" (Kemenade et al. 2008). Many authors leave it at that, focusing on the more 'practical' aspects of quality assurance – and thereby blanking out the political implications, as most quality assurance actions are guided by certain notions of quality and improvement: Following the reasoning of Laske et al (2000), the less such quality notions are defined the more they run the risk of becoming a tool for safeguarding and enforcing (political) interests. Even the operationalisation of quality with the help of criteria and standards does not solve this problem in a fully satisfying way, especially with regard to quality's often 'holistic' character (Harvey 2006: 5). Taking the 'deconstruction' of Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice as an example, Harvey and Newton (2007: 233) elaborate on this argument and come to the conclusion that "it is not the reductionist list of qualities but a synthetic essence that conveys the quality of the play as a whole".

Considering the inherent contrariness of a concept that is at once 'relative' and 'holistic', it is not very surprising that even Harvey's and Green's seminal classification of quality concepts from 1993 does not provide clear definitions but rather works with analogies. It is important to note, though, that even the authors do not claim them to be different perspectives on the same phenomenon, yet rather "different perspectives on different things with the same label" (Harvey & Green 1993: 10). Much like Gareth Morgan's metaphorical take on organisations (Morgan 1986) this approach is aiming at a better understanding of the phenomenon at hand, yet it also means that the pursuit of quality can raise uncertainty rather than reduce it (Weick 2000).

In general, Harvey and Green present five different perspectives on quality which since then have been frequently complemented and elaborated on (e.g. Harvey 2006, Carstensen & Hofmann 2004, Harvey & Knight 1996):

- quality as exceptional or excellence;
- quality as perfection or consistency;
- quality as fitness of/for purpose;
- quality as value for money;
- quality as transformation.

The **excellence notion** characterises quality as something special, either as an exclusive distinction that sets somebody/something apart (e.g. in the case of the so-called 'Ivy League Universities' or the German 'Exzellenzinitiative') from others or as an exceeding of high standards. In any case, excellence seems to be a matter of external ascription. In particular the second meaning is increasingly manifesting itself, i.e. in the case of accreditations or audits where a basic set of standards should be met. Taking this line of thought as a starting point, Carstensen and Hofmann (2004) regard the compliance with formal standards and guidelines even as a quality concept in its own right. Although they do not explain their decision, it might be argued that compliance with standards is indeed departing from a more traditional understanding of excellence, by marking it something that can be achieved rather than being inherent. Yet as

many quality standard checking procedures follow a 'minimum threshold' model (Harvey 2006), the underlying understanding of excellence might be as debatable as the quality concept itself. Standards of excellence are usually fluid, negotiated and can focus on different aspects such as input (e.g. incoming students, researchers), or output (e.g. graduates, publications) – thereby the conformance to standards does rarely provide information about the criteria used to set the standards (Harvey & Green 1993). Moreover, excellence in the more traditional way of being special/distinctive is even more difficult to assess as its claim to be holistic defies any criterialisation. For Doherty (2008), the excellence concept is therefore no less subjective than quality itself, making this definition a tautological one.

Quality as perfection or consistency focuses on process instead of input/output. Again, Harvey and Green present two variants: Reading perfection as 'zero defects' evokes the association of a reliably running machine without any flaws. Here, quality appears even more relative than from an excellence-perspective, as there are no (universal) benchmarks against which a process or output could be assessed; every machine has to be perfect according to its own specifications. The second variant, 'getting things right first time', relates to the prevention of mistakes and can be found in management publications propagating a functionalist approach to quality cultures (e.g. Ebers 1985, Peters & Waterman 1982). Even though such a notion would be better suited for purely administrative procedures, the increasing 'professionalisation' of quality assurance paves the way for formalised process management approaches throughout a university's spectrum of activities (cf. Stensaker 2007b).

Such functional views on quality come to full bloom in the concept of ***quality as fitness for purpose***. Here, quality relates to the extent to which a product or service fits a stated purpose, e.g. an objective stated in a university's mission. In contrast to the 'excellence' or 'perfection' perspectives, this notion is only barely elitist, as everyone can potentially achieve such a goal. However, the relativism and non-comparability of this notion (Harvey 2006) – it can basically mean anything, depending on the purpose – led to the development of determinants and standards of what is acceptable as a quality criterion and thereby to the

emergence of the complementary **quality as fitness _of_ purpose** notion: Is the respective purpose even acceptable as a quality goal? This does not necessarily mean that both concepts have to go hand in hand, yet they very often do. Evaluating the fitness of purpose is also a regular element of many accreditation and quality audit schemes, where the examination of institutional plans and strategies functions as the main point of reference for any subsequent assessment. An alternative variant to this mission-based fitness of purpose is to check whether customer requirements have been met, making 'quality as customer satisfaction' an important subvariant of the concept. Nevertheless, the question whether higher education actually *has* customers is still heavily debated (cf. Eagle & Brennan 2007, Meirovich & Romar 2006), resulting in warnings from overestimating the influence of students (Harvey 2006) as well as in more general ones that any customer-model of higher education would oversimplify the demands posed on higher education and limit thinking about quality (Houston 2008). It seems that for the time being, the 'service quality approach' is more suitable for the U.S. context (cf. Joseph et al. 2005). However, the biggest problem with any fitness for/of purpose definitions of quality in higher education is that they are ultimately empirically empty (Westerheijden et al. 2007): As the purpose of higher education (institutions) seems to be heavily contested itself, the concept lacks its orientation function.

With **quality as value for money**, the quality of inputs, processes or outputs are judged against the monetary cost of these factors, bringing to mind such concepts as 'return on investment' (with higher education contributing to national prosperity), 'maximum benefit for minimum cost', 'maximum effect with a given budget' etc. Carstensen and Hofmann (2004) add 'time invested' as a less monetary oriented criterion. Nevertheless, it is a rather narrow notion that barely applies to a university's core processes, yet it is rapidly gaining importance with regard to the increasing commercialisation and entrepreneurialisation of higher education (cf. Parker 2011, 2007, Brown 2009, Ryan & Guthrie 2009). The introduction of performance indicators in wake of 'New Public Management' approaches is generally getting more popular, yet admittedly more in the context of accountability than quality discourses.

Compared to others, ***quality as transformation*** is a concept very much at home in higher education contexts. Rooted in the notion of fundamental "qualitative change" (Harvey 2006), this transformation can apply to students' learning processes as well as to "changes within an institution so that it is better able to provide transformative learning or research" (Harvey 2006: 22). In this context the concept is showing relations to an institution's capacity for change and organisational learning, yet usually it is about enhancing a participant or provider by adding value to their learning process/results and empowering them, making 'personal development' a key feature of university curricula. The focus on 'transformative' learning represents a welcome discharge of more traditional learning concepts, acknowledging that "quality in higher education is an elusive concept that ultimately resides in a series of interactions between students and other actors in a variety of settings, by no means all of them in the lecture theatre, seminar room or laboratory" (Brown 2009: 23). On the other hand, we can again see that the analogy is not self-explanatory, replacing the question "what is quality?" through the (at least in practice) equally difficult question "what is transformative learning?" In their 1996 article, Harvey and Knight argue that quality as transformation is a meta-concept of quality and that other definitions are partial indicators of the transformation process at the heart of quality. However, in the end they do not come up with ways of assessing the concept, remaining on a well-argued yet ultimately normative position.

What we have seen so far is that such comparative definitions are valuable by highlighting different quality aspects and logics, yet eventually are not able to solve the definitional problem in a satisfying manner, as they mostly replace 'quality' with concepts that are likewise subjective, relative and in need of clarification: 'Excellence', 'fitness for purpose' or 'transformation' are in no way self-explicable. Even studies that focus on specific aspects such as quality of student services or quality in student administration (e.g. Lagrosen et al. 2004, Shanahan & Gerber 2004) basically end up with similarly vague attributions. This also means that in order to gain a better understanding of certain views on quality, these views need to be related to the corresponding views on 'excellence'

(what is good/better?), 'fitness for/of purpose' (what are a university's goals with regard to education/research?) or transformative learning (what is enhancement/improvement?). Barnett (1992) brings it to the point when he argues that secure ideas about the quality of higher education require a clear conception of what might be included under the umbrella concept of 'higher education'.

In addition, the general relativity of quality also indicates the important role of 'context' and 'values': Whether a purpose is itself deemed 'fit', is largely determined by contextual and situational factors (spending a lot of money and time on gaining an accreditation can be well worth the investment, yet usually also implies drawing resources from other areas), and different interpretations of 'excellence', as subjective as they may be, are only an expression of deeper conceptions of what is good or desirable. In his works, Newton (2007, 2002, 2000) has frequently pointed out that quality cannot be conceived through formal definitions alone, yet "is also crucially contingent on how it is used and experienced in practice, by academics and others who are impacted upon by quality assurance arrangements" (Newton 2007: 16). It is thus suggested, that "any given quality assurance definition or system will always be affected by 'situational factors' and by 'context' and that in the process of development and implementation, 'quality policy' becomes changed and subverted" (Newton 2002: 48). Table 1.1 shows Newton's comparison between 'formal' meanings of quality (as part of the 'official discourse') and situated perceptions from his own research on 'frontline academics', i.e. teachers and researchers. Immediately noticeable are the predominantly negative connotations of the situated views, creating a broader picture of mistrust and encumbrance. This suggests that the academics' perceptions are not so much views on quality but indeed interpretations of quality policies and strategies: The academics' own underlying quality notions are barely made visible. Nevertheless, we get a clear impression of the 'contestedness' of the concepts at hand, a theme that will be further explored in chapters five and six.

Even though Newton limits himself to an analysis of verbalised perceptions and does not dig deeper, his studies clearly show that quality is not a 'blank sheet', but created/interpreted in the daily (inter-)actions of various actors (in his case "front-line academics") and can therefore be regarded as an important influence on the 'sense-making' approach of this study.

Dominant formal meanings of quality in the early 1990s	Situated perceptions of quality of front-line academics (from mid-1990s)
Quality as 'perfection' or 'consistency'	Quality as 'failure to close the loop'
Quality as 'value for money'	Quality as 'burden'
Quality as 'total quality'	Quality as 'lack of mutual trust'
'Quality as management commitment'	Quality as 'suspicion of management motives'
Quality as 'culture change'	Quality as a culture of 'getting by'
Quality as 'peer review'	Quality as 'impression management' and 'game-playing'
Quality as 'transforming the learner'	Quality as 'constraints on teamwork'
Quality as 'fitness for purpose'	Quality as 'discipline and technology'
Quality as 'exceptional' or 'excellence'	Quality as 'ritualism' and 'tokenism'
Quality as 'customer satisfaction'	Quality as 'front-line resistance'

Table 1.1 "Illustrating contrasting meanings of quality"
taken from Newton 2002: 47.

Kemenade et al. (2008) shift the focus on underlying value systems, relating recent changes in internal and external quality management to changes in values. To them, values are a key constituent for any quality concept (together with the objects, standards and subjects of quality). Suggesting four different value systems (process control, continuous improvement, commitment and breakthrough), they eventually end up with four quality concepts that do not differ very much from those already discussed:

- In the first value system (control), order is needed to provide orientation in a chaotic world. Process control and standardisation seem the favoured tools of achievement. Consequently, quality is defined as "the extent to which the object fits the standards" (ibid: 179).
- The second value system is based on the assumption of unlimited possibilities; improvement is possible as long as people strive and work for it. However, the corresponding definition of quality as the extent to which the object exceeds the expectations of the customers, seems not fully convincing.
- The third value system propagates the 'human factor' and focuses on community building, communication and sustainability. Here, quality is regarded as "the extent to which the goals of all stakeholders are fulfilled" (ibid: 180).
- The fourth value system of Kemenade et al. outlines a complex world characterized by difficult choices and fast change where systems thinking and intellectual freedom are dominant values: "Quality is the extent to which the goals of all stakeholders will be fulfilled in the future" (ibid: 181).

Even though the argumentation is not always conclusive, the article presents one of the rare argumentative cases, where quality notions (and quality actions) are consequently tied to broader interpretive patterns.

Coming back to the initial question about the nature of quality, we can conclude that quality is relative in various ways, e.g. to the user of the term, to the situations in which it is invoked or to the benchmarks/criteria against which it is

assessed. In addition, different quality notions are no 'stand-alone' concepts: They are embedded in (and reproduced by) broader interpretive patterns and value-systems. Considering that they provide an interpretative framework for institutionalised perceptions and actions – an issue I will later elaborate on – understanding different meanings of quality is not just of academic but of immense practical relevance. Yet focusing on formal definitions and verbalised perceptions might not be enough, as we can learn from previous research. We will have to dig a little deeper in order to find out how various actors 'make sense of quality' – and how this is translated in different approaches to quality management and quality assurance.

"In short, we are entering an era where a more realistic understanding of what quality assurance and quality processes can or cannot do is prevailing."

(Stensaker 2007b: 59)

III

The relationship between quality and quality assurance is a difficult one. Arguably, quality assurance is an even more contested concept than quality itself, which is not helped by the fact that the term's full meanings are not that well transferable into other languages. Most Slavic translations, for example, would rather read like 'quality insurance' if re-translated, which does hardly conform to the concept's main purposes – although a cynic could very much regard quality certifications and accreditations as some kind of insurance policy.

Yet what is quality assurance? And is it easier to approach than quality on a standalone basis? Harvey (2006: 2) compares the difference between quality and quality assurance to the concept of intelligence and IQ tests, which purportedly measure intelligence: a complex construct and a broadly accepted (though always limited) attempt at operationalisation. Ironically, the major part of the respective literature omits the operationalisation part altogether (usually by paying a reverential nod to quality's relativity and complexity), focusing on the instrumental side instead. Consequently, several definitions (e.g. Brown 2009, Blackmur 2007) delineate quality assurance as a process of identifying quality-related characteristics, fixing standards for these characteristics (to ensure at least a 'minimum' of quality) and monitoring/protecting the standards through a combination of institutional and external actions – reflecting the "hope that error can be eliminated" (Barnett 1992: 117). This view is not shared by Harvey and Green, for whom quality assurance is decidedly *not* about specifying standards and quality criteria, but about "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: 19). A few years later, Harvey offered an even broader definition, regarding quality assurance as a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process and outcomes) fulfils expectations or measures up to threshold minimum requirements (Harvey 2004-9).

The discussion is not made easier by the blurred terminological relationship of quality assurance to similar quality related constructions such as 'quality assessment', 'quality management' or 'quality enhancement'. For Thomas (2007), for example, quality assurance is a retrospective activity based on a conformity to externally imposed standards and thereby inferior to quality enhancement as a prospective activity aiming at improving quality by continually striving to improve teaching and learning in universities – in essence a re-interpretation of the long-running 'accountability-versus-improvement'-controversy with a slightly different terminology, yet it also indicates the ideological aspects that underlie even academic debates on quality assurance.

What practically all definitions and viewpoints have in common, though, is an emphasis on the instrumental character of quality assurance, putting it into the service of achieving quality objectives on the organisational macro and micro level. Research on a European level shows that practically all quality assurance systems include formal evaluative elements (Schwarz & Westerheijden 2004), which can be grouped into four basic methods: accreditations, audits, assessments, and external examination. It is important to note, however, that all four methods require a clear link between internal and external monitoring: Internal quality assurance processes are always complemented by external quality assurance processes. The main difficulty seems to lie in relating the internal quality demands and external requirements in a constructive way:

> "Good quality assurance procedures may exist without good feedback of their results into the actual management and 'production' in higher education institutions, and what guarantees that good external quality assessment leads to good internal quality assurance in the first place?" (Westerheijden 2007: 81).

The 'UK-Experience' (cf. Hoecht 2006, Harvey 2005) works as an impressive example of the major structural problems that can arise from an overemphasis on the external control part. Still, research on the impact of quality assurance – whether on the system level or on the level of single institutions – is rather scarce, even though the topic's relevance is on the rise (cf. Stensaker 2008, 2007b). It seems safe to assume, though, that most quality assurance processes show indeed a tendency towards bureaucratisation and "[…] are quite removed from either the student learning or the creative research processes, which arguably lie at the heart of quality in higher education" (Harvey & Newton 2007: 226). Yet irrespective of the ongoing critical debate, quality assurance seems to have become a management tool that "has gained a secure place among the other modes of management" (Westerheijden et al 2007: 5) and that may be used for "negative or positive purposes" (Doherty 2008).

Some of these purposes have been identified by Harvey (2005): Quality assurance is intended to make higher education more relevant to social and economic needs, to ensure comparability of provision and procedures (within and between institutions), to ensure students (and the state) get value for money or to ensure that institutions are fit to cope with the emergence of a global higher education market. Laske et al. offer a more actor-oriented and cynical view, interpreting quality assurance as a means to ensure legitimation, provide criteria for the allocation of decreasing resources, entice present and potential partners as well as serve as a battle call in internal conflicts (Laske et al. 2000: 177). For the majority of higher education institutions, though, Westerheijden et al.'s analysis seems to be the most appropriate: "[…] many higher education systems started working on quality assurance, perhaps without a proper analysis of the policy problem(s) quality assurance was to solve" (Westerheijden et al. 2007: 3).

Yet despite this disillusioning statement, the bulk of quality assurance related literature still employs a functionalist perspective, with four main functions – accountability, control, compliance and improvement – dominating the discussion (although the concrete terms may differ), and a fifth function – marketing – implicitly emerging. However, the "basic divide" (Schwarz & Westerheijden 2004) that pervades the majority of quality assurance literature is the one between

accountability and improvement – a "fundamental tension" (Houston 2008) that may not be fully resolvable yet has to be understood in order to find a basis for "intervening with purpose" (Newton 2007). Whereas in practice, quality assurance as a demonstrated conformance to accountability seems to be privileged over quality improvement (Houston 2008), the latter concept is clearly regarded as the preferable one; Newton's often quoted polemic juxtaposition of "feeding the beast" versus improving quality (Newton 2000) brings this attitude to the point. Van Vught (2000: 73) states that while the weight of both, accountability and improvement, still differs in the practices of different countries, the explicit attention to quality improvement can be seen as an important new development.

But is the relation between accountability and improvement really an antagonistic one? Or is it an illusion, based on a misunderstood equation of the two functions (cf. Harvey & Newton 2007)? In order to answer this question, it might be necessary to take a closer look at each function independently: Accountability – defined as the obligation to report to others and to explain and justify how resources have been used, and to what effect (Trow 1996) – is often regarded as a key characteristic of the changing relationship between universities and society (cf. Hodson & Thomas 2003, Brennan & Shah 2000, Schnell & Kopp 2000) and has an important political function: Governments might well lose political support if they provide taxpayer-funded subsidies without conditions or external accountability processes. Trow (1996) identifies accountability as one of three fundamental ways in which higher education institutions are linked to their surrounding and supporting societies, with the other two being markets and trust. Markets still play a minor role in Europe (the fact that the rhetoric of the market has been introduced into higher education does not mean that such markets actually exist) and are therefore negligible. Trust, on the other hand, seems to be an alternative that is getting out of style, as most efforts to strengthen accountability usually involve parallel efforts to weaken trust (Trow 1996: 311) – a lesson that can be well observed in many UK universities in the past two decades (Hoecht 2006; Harvey 2005).

On the other hand, accountability also has an important regulatory function, working as a constraint on arbitrary power and on the corruptions of power including fraud or manipulation (Trow 1996). Morley and Aynsley (2007: 237) regard accountability as the development of new mechanisms and vocabularies that are intended to make higher education processes and practices more transparent and accessible to wider constituencies. Similarly, for Westerheijden et al. (2007: 6) it is about knowing what is done in higher education and how students and external stakeholders are affected by it. Such definitions mark a leave from the traditional understanding of accountability as a demonstration/legitimation of money well spent. As Stensaker (2008, 2007b) argues, the meanings of accountability have changed over the past years: "While accountability has usually been associated with whether quality assurance systems and procedures are developed and in existence, increasingly the question is asked: What is the impact and effect of this activity?" (Stensaker 2008: 4). On the other hand, "[…] evaluating quality while just paying attention to rules, systems and procedures may imply a failure in addressing issues related to excellence, innovation and renewal" (ibid: 10).

Summing up this debate, the problem does not seem to lie with the concept of accountability per se, as parts of the respective quality assurance discourse imply, but rather with the opaque relationship between accountability and quality (Harvey & Newton 2007) and with the ways accountability demands are (re-) interpreted and put into practice: "Ironically, the more severe and detailed are accountability obligations, the less can they reveal the underlying realities for which the universities are being held accountable" (Trow 1996: 313). Apparently, accountability can hold different meanings as well, which makes it difficult to assess whether the function itself stands in a rivalling position to others.

Before we further pursue this line of argument, let us take a look on the 'other' side: Whereas accountability usually is negatively connoted in academic works on quality, **quality improvement** appears as a generally desirable objective – for who could argue against it? Even cost-arguments seem to be eclipsed by the concept's universal radiance (cf. Blackmur 2007). Although rather vague in its actual meaning(s), improvement is arguably the most acceptable function of

quality assurance, possibly because "it is […] seen as being relatively unthreatening to, and by, the academic community" (Williams 2009: 52f). On the other hand, key questions such as 'what gets improved?', 'in what regard does something get improved?', or 'from whose perspective can something be seen as an improvement?' tend to be overlooked or are only marginally discussed (Lueger & Vettori 2008).

In particular the last question indicates that improvements are strongly dependent on the observer, as well as on the unit and time of observation. 'Better' teaching evaluations for example do not necessarily signal an improvement of the student learning experience or learning results, might not even be intentional and could – in the long run – even lead to a devaluation of teaching styles that do not fit the evaluation criteria. In addition, the demand for improvements in the way of a continuous process can arguably even be seen as a devaluation of previous achievements (cf. Weick 2000) – a process much likelier to result in quality weariness than the sought-after quality awareness. And even an improvement of the evaluation instruments is not able to solve this problem satisfactorily, on the contrary: By focusing on those aspects that are actually measurable, e.g. the number of publications, impact factors, ranking positions, course evaluations, student-staff-ratios or the level of third party funding, the organisational reality is reduced to its purely quantifiable aspects. By and by, the indicators and measures get more and more equated with the measured phenomenon itself and finally tend to invisibilise the underlying assumptions (cf. Lueger & Vettori 2007). In this regard, Middlehurst and Woodhouse (1995) have already pointed out that improvements in quality are different from improvements in quality assurance. Taking a critical view, the demands for demands for formalised and continuous quality improvement can even be seen as a mirror for the decreasing trust in the universities' capacity for autonomous quality development (Westerheijden 2007).

Hence, at close range, both concepts – accountability and improvement – bear some intriguing similarities: Not only are they not as easy to grasp as it may initially appear, but both seem to be used as umbrella terms that mask the actual and rather diverse structures of meaning that lie beneath the rhetoric. The

same can be found for other functions – quality control, compliance with standards or quality marketing – as well, leading us to the conclusion that quality assurance, much like quality itself, cannot be regarded as a neutral and value-free concept (cf. Anderson 2006), but as an ambiguous construct that needs not so much to be defined as to be made sense of. Yet as quality assurance activities are usually embedded in complex processes of definition, interpretation and implementation, it seems that formal and verbalized concepts of quality and quality assurance always bring us back to the same questions: What are they actually oriented by and geared at? In this respect, we are again referred to the level of concrete actions or interpretations within a specific field and the underlying structures of meaning they are reciprocally shaping as well as being shaped by them. Considering this, it seems little surprising that the debate on quality and quality assurance has experienced a clearly observable 'cultural turn' in recent years: The question is whether this turn also includes the underlying assumptions themselves?

"We are entering a new era in quality management for higher education. While it is difficult to mark its exact beginning, it is clear that it is moving away from a mechanistic to a holistic and cultural view of quality in education."

(Ehlers 2009: 343)

IV

Considering its relative newness, the quality culture term has made quite a career in the past years. Searching for "quality culture in higher education" via Google delivers about 26.400.000 results – tendency growing –, and the term is already an established part of conference programmes, press statements and institutional quality assurance policies. The term's popularity with policy makers, managers and practitioners is even a little surprising, considering that quality remains an elusive concept and culture often is used as an "umbrella term for all possible intangible factors in organisational life" (Harvey & Stensaker 2008: 431) – it thus seems unlikely that a combination of both parts will overcome the relative vagueness of each single component. And indeed, the quality culture notion seems to be rather a projection space for various ideas and interests than a guideline for concrete action. In essence, the concept is highly political, carrying the hope of policy-makers, university managers and practitioners alike that it may somehow reframe quality assurance as a core value of higher education institutions instead of an externally imposed chore: „A culture of quality is one in which everybody in the organisation, not just the quality controllers, is responsible for quality" (Crosby 1986 cited in Harvey & Green 1993: 16) – an idea that has again been imported from the corporate world.

Correspondingly, academic writing on quality culture is still rather scarce and so far mostly limited to so-called 'grey literature', i.e. conference proceedings, working papers, position papers and institutional policies (cf. Gordon & Owen 2008), showing a clear dominance of articles that assume that a quality culture

can be created or at least partly controlled (i.a. Gvaramazde 2008, Gordon 2002). And even though the term has entered higher education literature more than a decade ago (cf. Yorke 2000), it remains a theoretically underdeveloped and underresearched issue. In general, the quality culture notion seems to complement the structural dimension of quality assurance (quality management handbooks, process definitions, instruments, tools) with the dimension of values of an organisation, relating to the commitment of its members, the underlying values, skills and attitudes (Ehlers 2009: 346). At least in theory, it is even putting a stronger focus on the behaviour of stakeholders rather than the operation of a quality system (Harvey 2007: 81) – or, differently phrased: The existence of an in house quality assurance system does not guarantee a quality culture (Yorke 2000: 23). Barnett calls this an institutional culture of total quality care, "in which each professional is seized of his or her responsibilities and takes care over all his or her own professional efforts" (Barnett 1992: 133). Ehlers (2009) declares quality culture as an inseparable part of the overall organisational culture, a specific subculture that is observable much like communication cultures or management cultures. Following Edgar Schein, Ehlers sees quality culture as an answer to the question in which way an organisation is responding to its quality challenges and is fulfilling its quality purpose. Consequently, "[…] an analysis of quality culture would start with the question about how a higher education organisation is realising the challenge of enhancing quality in a certain field, e.g. the area of teaching and learning or the area of research" (Ehlers 2009: 353).

In the European Higher Education context, the ever-increasing popularity of quality culture as a 'new' approach to quality assurance has various reasons, of which the – apparent – compatibility with academic traditions and values is arguably the most important one. The main catalyst of the term's sheer omnipresence can be found in its strong promotion by European policy-makers and higher education managers (especially the so-called E4-Group, consisting of the European University Association, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education and the European Student Union) which manifested itself in the first

Quality Culture Project and has since been taken on in multiple follow up activities.

The Quality Culture Project was launched in 2002 by the EUA (European University Association) in order to assist universities in their efforts for embedding and developing an internal quality culture as well as for encouraging the dissemination of existing best practices in the field of quality assurance. The project's main goals were to

- increase awareness for the need to develop an internal quality culture in institutions, and promote the introduction of internal quality management to improve quality levels;
- ensure the wide dissemination of existing best practices in the field;
- help institutions approach external procedures of quality assurance constructively;
- contribute to the Bologna process by strengthening the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area (EUA 2005: 6).

Spanning an overall period of four years (2002-2006), the project was organised in three rounds, each of them involving more than 40 different higher education institutions from various national backgrounds, which were grouped into six theme-specific networks (e.g. research management, teaching and learning, student support services etc.). Based on a method mix of exchange meetings, SWOT analyses and action plans, the network partners tried to increase quality awareness within their own institutions and implemented several initiatives and projects for strengthening their internal quality culture. A summary of the major findings can be found in the overall project report (EUA 2006).

Striving to set itself apart from technocratic top-down approaches that might backfire in an academic setting, the name of the project was deliberately chosen. In the EUA's quality culture perspective, quality is not beheld as a process that can be operated through evaluation and measurement procedures alone, but as values and practices that are shared by the institutional community and that have to be nurtured on many levels (e.g. by considering the subcultures in the

respective academic subunits) and by various means at the same time. The approach demands the involvement of multiple internal and external stakeholders, acknowledging the fact that a quality culture cannot be implemented from above, although strong leadership may be necessary for starting and promoting the process in the first place. Quality measurement and quality control are undoubtedly important elements of such an approach (as they are of any quality management system), but they cannot be regarded as quality guarantors per se, rather needing to be embedded in an overarching framework that is in line with the institutional objectives and focuses on continuous improvement (cf. Vettori et al. 2007: 22).

Yet despite this turning away from more management-oriented quality assurance approaches, Sursock (2004) went a little far when initially naming the approach more "neutral" than most others; ideological issues may be different but they are still present. The concept's relation to power and ideology was thus acknowledged in a later revision of the concept (cf. Sursock 2011). The approach is based on a number of assumptions, e.g. that an internal quality culture is worth striving for; that practice in developing a quality culture is transferable; that internal quality management will necessarily improve quality or that external quality assurance is useful (Harvey & Stensaker 2008: 433). Small wonder, then, that the project was originally developed to increase the capacity of universities to meet the accountability needs and the heightened demands that higher education improve its level of quality with fewer resources (EUA 2006). The context of origin also indicates the – sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit – instrumentalist understanding of quality cultures that pervades a considerable part of managerial as well as scholar publications dedicated to the phenomenon. This might also be ascribed to the fact that – as was already stated above – the concept is still underdeveloped in terms of theory, especially with regard to the meaning(s) of culture within the overall framework, even though this deficit is increasingly gaining attention (Ehlers 2009, Harvey 2009, Harvey & Stensaker 2008, Lueger & Vettori 2007, Vettori et al. 2007).

In general, the academic discussion of quality cultures in higher education is very much mirroring the debate on organisational culture since the 1980s, contrasting a functionalist approach and a rather interpretative, social-constructivist approach. In short there are those seeing culture as something an organisation has, i.e. culture as a potentially identifiable and manipulative factor, and those seeing culture as something an organisation is, i.e. culture as an integrated product of social interaction and organisational life impossible to differentiate from other factors (Harvey & Stensaker 2008: 431).

Within the functionalist approach (culture as something an organisation *has*), organisational culture is understood as one factor (among others), which fulfills a certain function for the organisation and its success and which can be rationally managed. Here, a quality culture is "[…] an organisational culture that sustains the development of an effective and efficient quality management approach that allows the educational institution to realize its objectives and enhance the quality of its education and services" (Berings 2009). By forming and managing such a culture (which becomes manifest in organisational artefacts and collective behavioural patterns such as rituals or ceremonies), it is intended to integrate and motivate the members of the organisation. From this perspective, organisational cultures can be created and consciously shaped, a task best fulfilled by certain key players, e.g. incorporators (cf. Martin et al. 1985), executives or institutional 'heroes'. A quality culture is then the 'end product' of a process aimed at an increased awareness of the importance of quality assurance, which could be brought forward by structural or managerial efforts stimulating shared values and beliefs (Harvey & Stensaker 2008). It is thus not very surprising that this approach is mainly discussed in more management-oriented disciplines (cf. Ebers 1985, Peters & Waterman 1984). Yet even though the approach originated in the early 1980s, the interest in culture as an instrument for improving organisational performance is still a dominant theme in much of the available management literature (Harvey & Stensaker 2008). This is clearly reflected in a recent shift of the quality culture notion towards a more functionalist meaning where quality culture is about the development of and compliance with processes of internal quality assurance (Harvey 2009). Small

wonder, then, that the term quality *assurance* culture is already surfacing (European Commission 2009).

From an interactionist point of view (culture as something an organisation *is*), quality culture can be defined as "[…] a socially mediated and negotiated phenomenon leading to shared results of meaning construction which is largely unconscious and only in some elements directly visible to the outside" (Ehlers 2009: 352). Different understandings of quality are already embedded in several contexts, of which an organisation's culture is one of the most important ones. In this perspective, culture is not fixed and stable, but can be regarded as the result of multiple interactions, involving all participants of these interactions (cf. Froschauer 1997, Weick 1994, Smircich 1985, 1983 or Allaire/Firsirotu 1984). In this regard, values may be less shared than thought (Hofstede 1998). This take is highlighting the importance of basic and underlying assumptions und shared beliefs, symbols, rituals and patterns.

Accordingly, the focus lies on developing structures of social meaning (sense making), which form the fundament for every interpretation of organisational activities, events or observances and their interconnection with specific action sequences. Geertz (1993: 145) brings these ideas to the point: "Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action; social structure is the form that action takes, the actually existing network of social relations." As this interpretative process takes place permanently and depends on specific contexts of action, organisational culture is in a state of continuous and dynamic change. As a result, a university's quality culture has to be comprehended as a historically grown social phenomenon that is very likely differentiated into several subcultures, but without guaranteeing that the participants are completely aware of the single components (Vettori et al. 2007). Such a quality culture is never homogeneous since it reflects the complexity of the interactions and interpretations the culture(s) emerge(s) from. Interventions are possible, but rather in an indirect way that takes localised and sub-cultural differences into account, as the latent premises for perceptions and actions are only slowly changing and cannot be directly tackled (Lueger & Vettori 2008). This lack of compatibility with most management approaches makes it

easily understandable why the interpretative perspective seems to be losing out to its functionalist pendant in the mostly managerial and practice-oriented quality assurance literature (Harvey 2009).

On the other hand, it is just this interwovenness with the latent levels of human interaction, that makes 'quality culture' an ideal focal point for analysing the underlying interpretative patterns and competing logics of the quality (assurance) discourse that we have found of interest in the previous sections. If we understand quality culture rather as 'context' than a set of procedures (cf. Harvey 2009), then the concept can be used as an analytic tool (Harvey & Stensaker 2008) for reconstructing the contexts, in which different quality assurance approaches, strategies and instruments make sense to the actors in a given field. It is thus not my intention to develop a theoretical model and test it, but to analyse the differing and sometimes even rivaling implicit logics which constitute (and are themselves shaped by) the contemporary quality culture/ quality assurance debate. Instead of asking how the present discourse is translated into action (Lanarès 2009), the main question is what quality assurance related actions – or "quality in use" (cf. Harvey 2007) – tell us about the underlying assumptions (Schein 2004) and values these actions are oriented at. The focus lies not so much on "shared vocabularies" (Morley & Aynsley 2007) but on shared meanings, aiming at a reconstruction of sense-making processes and interpretative patterns (see chapter four) that are constitutive for a specific quality culture. Based on an understanding of culture as a "fabric of meaning" (Geertz 1993), this research moves away from a mere description of verbalised quality notions and quality assurance approaches (which, as we have seen in the previous sections, are rather *meaningless* if their interpretative frames remain unattended) towards a decoding of the underlying structures of meaning that become manifest in quality-related artefacts and actions. In a way, the quality culture concept then is the overarching typological framework that allows for an analytical arrangement of the empirical findings. By choosing an entire organisational field (i.e. Austrian Public Universities) as my level of observation (see chapter three), it will also be possible to analyse the relation of different

quality culture notions, i.e. how their internal logics influence, interplay and compete with each other.

Resuming, this work is intended to find answers to the following research questions:

- What are the constitutive notions of quality, quality assurance and higher education in Austrian Higher Education?
- What are the actions and communications in the field orientated at and geared to?
- What are the field's main interpretive patterns and how do they integrate those notions as well as organise the relations between different actors/instruments/approaches?
- How are the different 'quality cultures' relating to/competing with each other?
- Are there dominant logics and is this dominance changing?
- And, finally: What are the practical implications for developing future quality assurance policies and procedures?

The last question already indicates that this work will try to combine two different perspectives, as I cannot shed off either one of my own two identities: From a researcher's perspective, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on the nature of 'quality' and 'quality assurance' in higher education, taking the respective analysis to a level of latencies that has hardly found attention in previous research. By taking a hermeneutic approach, this work shifts the focus from formal and explicit definitions to processes of sense-making and meaning-construction, thus intending to shed light on the mostly implicit underlying assumptions that shape actions, interactions and communications in the field. To my knowledge, a systematic inquiry of these shared assumptions and the resulting socio-technical dynamics has not been attempted so far – at least not by applying a methodology tailored to reconstruct such latencies. In this regard, I will also show how the current quality assurance discourse in Austria can be regarded as the manifestation of deeper-seated conflicts about

the future of higher education itself. On a more abstract level, this work can be seen as a contribution to gain a better understanding of the interplay of manifest and latent meaning levels in organisational fields and how such fields relate to similar entities and contextual factors in their relevant environments.

From a practitioner's perspective, this work will hopefully provide a means for critical reflection in practice and raise awareness for the unintended consequences of well-meant actions – particularly if these consequences are already a potential if latent part of these actions. I will demonstrate how different QA instruments and approaches are far from being neutral, but rather manifestations of different underlying logics that are often more conflicting and incompatible than complementary. In this respect, I will also address the dangers of the instrumentalism and desire for apparent stakeholder harmony that characterise the current discourse of policy-makers and practitioners in Austrian higher education.

From any perspective, this study is about *understanding* where many of the contradictions and paradoxes we experience in higher education stem from – and where they could be heading to.

Chapter two: Tu, felix Austria, evaluate!

"No other educational sector in Austria is subject to such strange regulations."
(Pechar & Pellert 2004: 320)

V

When many European countries experienced a new wave of (generally Anti-Bologna) student protests in late 2009, Austrian students were very much at the heart of it. At first glance, this may appear more than a little surprising in a country where the predominant majority of students do not have to pay any tuition fees and enjoy free access to almost all fields of studies. Yet upon closer examination, it quickly becomes clear that Austrian higher education is in general shaped and pervaded by a multitude of apparent and actual contradictions and paradoxes, e.g. the disparity of Austria's considerable investments in its education system and the system's lack of effectiveness (e.g. OECD 2010) or the well-accepted though still ignored relation between the free access policy in public higher education and the comparably high drop out and low academics' rate (ibid.). The following introduction of how Austrian higher education is organised and characterised cannot tackle all these peculiarities – this would well require a study of its own –, but rather focuses on those contextual aspects that are arguably most relevant for the quality-related discourse in Austria, before section VII provides a more detailed explanation of the status quo of Austrian quality assurance policies and structures.

Overall, the Austrian higher education landscape is rather fractured: Public universities, private universities, universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*) and university colleges of teacher education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen)* all have a different legal basis and are not even governed by the

same Ministry: The pedagogical universities (as well as the entire primary and secondary school system) belong to the domain of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture, whereas the other higher education institutions are supervised by the Federal Ministry of Science and Research This fracturedness is largely owed to a political compromise: When the so-called grand coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) was reinstated in 2006, neither party wanted to give the other a dominant role in one of Austria's ideologically most contested policy areas, i.e. the education field.

Comparing the different sectors, the sector of the **public universities** is by far the largest, in terms of student numbers as well as in public expenditures. All in all, the sector encompasses 21 public universities (with the majority located in Vienna) and the Danube University Krems (*Universität für Weiterbildung Krems*) as a 'university for continuing education' whose structures are basically equivalent to the state universities. Due to the public universities' structural importance and symbolic value, this sector will be featured and described a little more elaborately than the others. I will thus return to the public sector after a brief introduction of the other types of Austrian higher education institutions:

Austria's second largest higher education sector was established comparably late: Based on the 1993 Federal Act on Universities of Applied Sciences (*Fachhochschulstudiengesetz*), the first **universities of applied sciences** (*Fachhochschulen*, abb. FH) entered the field in the academic year 1994/1995. The focus of these institutions lies on vocational trainings with a strong practical orientation, though research is increasingly becoming an issue. Structurally, the *Fachhochschulen* can be regarded as `hybrid institutions' (Pechar & Klepp 2004): Despite their private legal status they have public bodies dominating the associations or even as main shareholders. Additionally, the major part of their funding comes from public sources. In the academic year 2008/2009, more than 33.000 students were enrolled in a program at an Austrian FH, which means a triplication since 2000/2001 (cf. BMWF 2009a). Compared to the public universities, this number is still rather low, yet the sector's rapid growth in combination with a different legal situation (opposite to public universities, FHs

can select their students by means of entrance examinations and are funded on the basis of their student numbers) is leading to an increasing competition among the sectors.

The sector of **private universities** came into existence in 1999 on basis of the University Accreditation Act 1999 (*Universitätsakkreditierungsgesetz*). In order to offer educational programmes leading to an academic degree, these institutions have to be recognised by the state. Such recognition is usually obtained through accreditation, both on an institutional as well as on a programme level. Currently, 13 institutions are thus accredited, ranging from branches of international higher education enterprises (e.g. Webster University) to smaller local universities focused on such diverse subjects as arts, psychology or tourism. About 80% of all applications for accreditation or re-accreditation have been rejected since 2000, showing the rather important gatekeeper function of the responsible Austrian Accreditation Council (cf. BMUKK/BMWF 2008: 155). Overall, even though the number of students enrolled in a private university program has increased from 857 in the academic year 2000/2001 to 5829 in the academic year 2009/2010 (cf. AC Homepage), the sector still plays a minor role in Austrian higher education. In terms of quality assurance, however, the private university sector and the Accreditation Council in particular have been very influential as we will see in section VI.

Since their reorganisation based on the Federal Act on the Organisation of University Colleges of Teacher Education in 2005 (*Hochschulgesetz* 2005), the **university colleges of teacher education** have been a part of Austrian tertiary education. These former pedagogical academies train prospective teachers at primary schools (*Volksschulen*), lower secondary schools (*Hauptschulen*), special schools (*Sonderschulen*), at pre-vocational schools (*Polytechnische Schulen*), as well as teachers of theoretical and practical subjects at part-time compulsory vocational schools (*Berufsschulen*) and at intermediate and higher technical and vocational schools (*berufsbildende mittlere und höhere Schulen*). The Bologna-conforming curricula conclude with the academic degree 'Bachelor of Education' (cf. BMUKK/BMWF 2008). Despite some similarities, however, the university colleges of teacher education do not belong to the same

organisational field as the other higher education institutions, and will thereby not be featured in the subsequent chapters.

Historically, Austrian higher education shows two dominant characteristics: In terms of higher education concepts, Austrian universities were and still are influenced by a strong Humboldtian tradition, with an underlying assumption that the concept of the unity of teaching and research must also be applied to the education of the students – polemically spoken, a *laissez-faire culture* of teaching and learning (Pechar & Pellert 2004: 323). In wake of the Europe-wide transition process from small elite higher education systems to huge mass systems, the Humboldtian model came into a state of crisis, as the more diverse student body was differently prepared to live up to Humboldtian ideas (ibid: 324). Nevertheless to this day, the unity of teaching and research remains a "normative ideal" in Austria and Germany (Meier & Schimank 2009) and has to be regarded as an important contextual factor of the respective quality assurance discourse.

In terms of structure and governance, the landscape of Austrian universities is characterised by a pronounced centralism (Konrad & Fiorioli 2007). Until the 1990s, Austrian universities were basically state agencies; autonomy was defined as a constitutional right of the individual academic, not of the university as an institution (Pechar & Klepp 2004: 62). All relevant inputs (e.g. financial resources, technical infrastructure, staff) were regulated and controlled by the responsible ministry. In a notable way, this bureaucratic mode of governance was also a well functioning guarantee of quality: All degrees were practically equal and no employer had to consider a university's image or 'profile' when looking for graduates (Konrad & Fiorioli 2007).

In recent history, we can identify two events that show strong connections to each other and have had a lasting (and from a long term perspective still not foreseeable) impact on Austrian public universities: Austria's participation in the Bologna Declaration in 1999 and the Universities Act 2002 (*Universitätsgesetz* UG 2002), which concluded a major reform process that was started in the early 1990s and came into full effect on January 1st 2004.

As in many European countries, the Bologna Process was initially regarded as a lever to enforce national reform, and thus presented quite a few challenges, when "the process obtained its own dynamic, leading to, perhaps, more convergence of states' priorities and policies for higher education than initially envisaged" (Westerheijden 2007: 77). Nevertheless, the process requirements were adopted very quickly – Bachelor programmes at Austrian Universities started in 2000/2001 with the Master Programmes following continuously –, which was probably helped by (mis-)interpreting them as purely technical or administrative: In this regard, contact hours were quickly converted into ECTS credit points and four-year diploma studies curricula were compressed into three year Bachelor programs. The resulting problems are still not resolved, with each of the two major parties – the Ministry and the public universities – blaming each other for the 'misimplementation'.

Apart from the technicalities, the Bologna-related discourse in Austria is very much dominated by the employability topos (with the usual confusing of employability and employment, cf. Vukasovic 2008), particularly as the labour market is treating the new Bachelor graduates with caution (and, at least financially, less well as the former diploma graduates). Mobility issues play a comparatively minor role, leading Hackl (2007: 169) to the observation that the Europeanisation and Internationalisation processes in Austria were – very much in line with Westerheijden's diagnosis for Europe in general (Westerheijden 2007) – mostly instrumentalised as a trigger for domestic policy reforms without acknowledging the processes' broader meaning and consequences. With regard to quality assurance, on the other hand, the European dimension was definitely an important influence on shaping and legitimating the relevant frameworks and processes as will be shown in chapter five.

The influence of the Bologna process and the more recent developments in European higher education policy can also be detected in the major organisational reforms that were brought about by the 2002 Universities Act (UG 2002). The most important changes concern the governance of the universities (both, on the institutional and on the system level), with the universities gaining quasi-autonomy and being released from the Ministry's previous and rather rigid

input and process control. In many ways, this development had already been prepared by the 1993 University Organisation Act (UOG 1993), e.g. by cutting back the government's direct participation in the universities' hiring policies (for a comprehensive analysis of the development of the more recent higher education law in Austria cf. Burtscher et al. 2006). The UG 2002's most momentous innovations and effects include:

- the strengthening of the university management (i.e. the rectorate) and a strong tendency towards (intra-institutional) centralisation;
- the rearrangement of the universities' budgeting in the form of triannual global budgets (with a significant part of the budget being tied to the performance contracts between each university and the Ministry);
- the introduction of University Councils *(Universitätsräte)* whose governance and control function was largely adopted from their US pendants;
- the requirement to develop an integrative institutional quality management system (which, interestingly, was not tied to any requirements for external quality assurance, at least not at first – the next section will provide a detailed analysis of this particular policy area);
- and – at least in the beginning – an incentive setting for more differentiation ('profile building') and competition ('entrepreneurial university') in the sector.

All in all, the UG 2002 is very much a child of its time, mirroring not only the 'European spirit' of turn of the century but also a strong tendency towards managerialism which can be seen as a comparatively late occurrence of the New Public Management idea: "*The UG 2002 marks a point of time in Austria, where the state begins to speak the language of modern management*" (Burtscher et al. 2006: 144, my translation).

On the other hand, there is one important area which even the UG 2002 did not surrender to the newly autonomous universities and which, along with the recently reinvigorated evergreen issues such as university budgets and

capacities, is dominating Austria's higher education discourse like no other: the issue of higher education access. Whereas the *Fachhochschulen* and private universities are authorised and in fact even required to define criteria and develop procedures to select students prior to their entrance, the public university sector is still affected by an almost general free access policy that was coined in the early 1970s. With a few exceptions (e.g. medicine or arts), the receiving institutions cannot select their students by any means: Every student who holds the *Matura* (a comprehensive school leaving exam) or an equivalent is regarded as qualified to enter any field of studies he/she is interested in ('entitlement system', cf. Pechar & Pellert 2004). The question if and how that could or should be changed is the centre of heated ideological debates, especially between the coalition partners ÖVP and SPÖ. Opponents of access limitations fear that they would discriminate against some applicants, in particular the less endowed and socially disadvantaged. Proponents on the other hand, point to the rather high drop out rates and the impact on quality in mass disciplines such as psychology, communications, business administration or architecture (for an analysis and discussion from various perspectives cf. Badelt et al. 2007).

Consequently, Pelinka (2006) sees Austrian education policy in a conflict between performance orientation and social justice – with neither of the goals coming even remotely into reach. Yet the arguably most problematic aspect of this issue lies in the incongruity between the free access policy and the universities' funding, as the universities' student capacities are not factored in their respective budgets, letting the discussion on teaching quality appear in a rather different light: "*Since neither the government nor the universities have any appropriate means of control, the number of enrolled students in some fields of study does not match available resources (rooms, academic staff). As a consequence, cynicism spreads at all levels*" (Pechar & Pellert 2004: 320). Most recently, the government has made a few tentative attempts to tackle the issue, yet any substantial reform is firmly interlocked by the diametrically opposed educational ideologies of the government parties. A recent amendment to the UG 2002, for example, foresees the possibility to define a university entrance phase that has to be passed successfully in order to move on in one's course of studies, yet on

the other hand firmly claims that this entrance phase is primarily intended as an orientation phase and must not be (mis-)used as a means for regulating student numbers. It remains to be seen if the current efforts to develop an alternative funding model that would be based on a university's capacities for students can be financed and enforced. In any case, with regard to quality assurance and quality management, the whole discourse remains an important influence and contextual factor, as we will see in the later chapters.

"It is thus even more conspicuous that the procedures for external quality assurance and the universities' accountability requirements are barely making reference to the universities' internal quality management and quality development."

(Hanft & Kohler 2007: 85, my translation)

VI

When Johannes Hahn, then Minister of Science and Research, declared standards for quality assurance an indispensable matter of course for which universities could not expect any particular gratifications at an Austria-wide convention in June 2007 (Hahn 2007), it seemed more like an invocation than a description of the actual status quo. Overall, the (formal) national quality framework is still not much developed in Austria (cf. Pechar & Pellert 2004). Even though some basic elements of performance monitoring and reporting were already included in the Universities Act 1975 (UOG 1975), it was only in the University Organisation Act 1993 (UOG 1993) that evaluations became an integral part of the Austrian university system. Yet without any practical know-how to build upon, the corresponding regulations barely came to life: For a long time, evaluations were equated with student satisfaction surveys at the end of a teaching sequence (cf. Stifter 2002). Consequently, until the late 1990s, formalised internal quality assurance procedures were practically non-existent. Konrad (2004) cites a pilot evaluation project of the Austrian Rectors' Conference in the mid-1990s as an example for the lack of relevant experiences and structures, arguing that a systematic analysis of data on students, programmes or expenses posed considerable challenges. Corresponding to the centralistic structure of the higher education system, quality assurance was largely input-oriented: "*Study courses were regulated by two federal laws, a ministerial decree and a final 'fine-tuning' by the university itself. A strong ex-ante legal control was considered to guarantee quality standards*" (Pechar & Pellert 2004: 325).

The introduction of a new higher education sector – the *Fachhochschulen* – in 1993, and the legal enabling of a private university sector in 1999 provided some important impulses for change (Konrad & Fiorioli 2007; Pechar & Klepp 2004): For the first time, higher education institutions and/or programmes needed to be formally accredited, rendering the development of internal quality assurance processes a necessity. Within the *Fachhochschulen* sector, responsibilities for external quality assurance were delegated to a newly established government agency, the *Fachhochschulrat* (FH Council, description see chapter three). One of the FH Council's first tasks was the development of Accreditation and Evaluation Standards and Guidelines, complementing the rather slender *Fachhochschulen Studies Act*. The system includes three different forms of external quality assurance procedures:

- Initial accreditations of programmes: Every new FH degree programme requires accreditation by the FH Council, with the accreditation being granted for a maximum of five years. The accreditation is based on an elaborate application of the course-providing body, including detailed descriptions of the intended qualification profiles, the curriculum, the admission regulations and the didactic concept. A separate demand and access survey is intended to provide evidence whether the programme's main markets (intake market and job market) show sufficient and sustainable demand.

- Re-accreditation of programmes: Again, the course-providing bodies have to apply for it, with the re-accreditation following basically the same logic as the accreditation. In order to get re-accredited, the institutions also have to submit a comprehensive evaluation report.

- Institutional evaluations: From 2003 to 2009, the FHR regulations stipulated two types of evaluations, on the institutional level and on the programme level. Since 2010, only institutional evaluations are required every six years, which can arguably be seen as a harbinger of the new cross-sectoral Quality Assurance Act that lays the focus on the institutional quality management systems (see below). Following a 'fitness-for-purpose'-approach, the evaluation touches on all the FH's supposed core

functions (e.g. teaching, applied research, management and internationalisation), but is also strongly synchronised with the European Standards and Guidelines. The procedure itself includes six different steps (self-evaluation; external evaluation by a review team; comment on the review team's evaluation report; acceptance of the evaluation report by the FH Council; follow-up procedure; publication of the evaluation results) and is to be conducted by an independent and internationally accepted quality assurance agency (cf. FHR 2010, 2009). Due to the fact that no evaluations were carried out in this particular form before 2010, it is still too early to analyse the impact of the amendment or summarise experiences from the field. For the purpose of this study, however, this fact is of relatively minor importance as most of the analysed data stems from the period between 2004 and 2009 (cf. chapter four).

Overall, the FHR's guidelines for Accreditation and Evaluation show a certain fondness for details, which is not always met with the same kind of enthusiasm by the *Fachhochschulen* themselves (cf. Stocker 2008). On the other hand, the fact that quality assurance played an important role within the sector from the very beginning made it arguably easier to establish and develop the respective internal processes and systems, providing rather clear orientation and suitable leverage for the decision makers. That many *Fachhochschulen* have chosen a variant of more industrial quality management systems has various reasons, most notably the sector's intended proximity to certain areas of business and the predominance of academic staff from technical and managerial disciplines.

In the private university sector, the main responsibility for external quality assurance lies with another government agency, the Austrian Accreditation Council (description see chapter three). Every private university needs to obtain such an accreditation in order to be recognised before the law and to obtain the right to offer educational programmes that lead to an academic degree (i.e. the Accreditation Council still accredits on both levels, institution and programmes). The main stakeholders of the Accreditation Council are students and their parents as well as employers (cf. Pechar & Klepp 2004). In applying for

accreditation, the institutions have to provide evidence that they meet the requirements and criteria as outlined in the Austrian University Accreditation Act such as the qualifications of the academic staff, financing and resources, curricula standards and research requirements. Other than in the FH sector, no demand and access survey is necessary. In addition, the educational institution must carry out its activities in accordance with the same principles of academic freedom as the public institutions.

After submitting the application, the institutions are visited by a review team of external experts, each of who has to write an independent report. The Council comes to its decision based on application documents, the site-visit, the expert reports and the statement of the institution. Despite the Council's independent constitution, the official notification on the accreditation must still be approved by the incumbent Federal Minster. Regular re-accreditations are an integral part of the process, with the initial accreditation and the first re-accreditation each being valid for five years, and each further accreditation potentially extended for ten years. In correspondence with the Accreditation Council's supervision function, each accredited university has to submit an annual report that covers information on the students, academic staff, resources, research, developmental plans as well as the internal quality assurance. Even though the private universities are generally free to develop any kind of quality management system that fits their form and purpose, regular internal and external evaluations of the teaching and research quality are mandatory and have to be conducted at least every two years. Considering that most private universities are rather small and keep only a minimum of administrative staff, this frequency is probably a considerable challenge. In general, however, the experiences from the private and FH sectors, were undoubtedly an important influence factor on recent Austrian quality assurance policy in general as well as on the developments in the much larger public university sector.

For the public university sector, the Universities Act 2002 (UOG 2002) once again marked a turning point: § 14, section 1, states that the universities shall develop their own quality management systems in order to assure quality and the attainment of their performance objectives. The specific design of such a quality

system, the concrete choice of quality management instruments and procedures, the definition of the competences of the internal quality assurance units and the decision which processes are implemented on what organisational level was and still is basically left to the universities (cf. Hanft & Kohler 2007: 84).

On the one hand, this is very much in line with the Bologna requirements. The Berlin Declaration (2003) explicitly states that the primary responsibility for quality assurance lies with each single higher education institution – a point that is regularly emphasised by the universities themselves (e.g. EUA 2010). On the other hand, the lack of (legal) guidance is still causing some confusion, especially since the latest round of performance contracts includes a clause that the institutional quality management systems shall be audited/evaluated in the near future; yet it is still unclear what criteria such a system should fulfil or meet.

Apart from the unspecified opening passage concerning the development of a quality management system, the entire paragraph shows a preoccupation with evaluations, allowing a first glimpse of the underlying logics (cf. figure 2.1). Roughly defining evaluations as a determination of merit and shortcoming (Stake 2004), their main function is often seen as the provision of information for decision-making purposes. In this regard, evaluative elements are important parts of any quality management system – e.g. the so-called Deming-Cycle, cf. Deming 1982 – yet cannot be equated with quality management as such (cf. Stockmann 2002). Even though Hanft and Kohler (2007) argue that section 8 – "the consequences of all evaluations shall be for the decision of the governing bodies of the universities" – corresponds to the idea of a quality cycle, the government's focus is decidedly set on performance measurement for accountability purposes; it is quite telling – even if not conformant to the current international quality assurance rhetoric – that the paragraph makes frequent mentions of performance objectives and agreements, yet not once uses the term 'improvement'.

§ 14 Evaluation and Quality Assurance

(1) The universities shall develop their own quality management systems in order to assure quality and the attainment of their performance objectives.

(2) The subject of an evaluation is the university's tasks and the entire spectrum of its services.

(3) Evaluations shall be conducted in accordance with subject-based international evaluation standards. The areas of university services to be evaluated shall, in the case of evaluations relating to single universities, be established by the respective performance agreement.

(4) The universities shall carry out internal evaluations on an ongoing basis, in accordance with their statutes.

(5) External evaluations shall take place:
  1. on the initiative of the university council or rectorate of the university in question or the Federal Minister where they relate to individual universities;
  2. on the initiative of the university councils or rectorates of the universities in question or the Federal Minister where more than one university is concerned.

(6) The universities concerned and their governing bodies shall be obliged to provide the necessary data and information for evaluations, and to contribute to it.

(7) The performance of university professors, associate professors, and other research, artistic and teaching staff shall be regularly evaluated, at least once every five years. The detailed arrangements shall be established by university

Figure 2.1: Universities Act 2002 (excerpt)

However, as much as the law's simultaneous one-sidedness and ambiguity were and still are criticised, it also offered the opportunity to develop quality management systems and quality assurance strategies that would suit the universities' specific needs and institutional cultures. And indeed, apart from an expectable tendency towards 'mimetic isomorphism' (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; for another case study in higher education context cf. Stensaker & Norgard 2001) – e.g. graduate surveys are quickly replacing student evaluations as the latest 'must have' at Austrian universities – for most universities the given freedom seems to induce creativity rather than perplexity (cf. Carstensen 2005). The development of the institutional systems was further aided by the establishment of an inter-institutional 'Network for Quality Management and Quality Development of Austrian Universities' which was founded in 2007 and currently involves more than 80 quality assurance professionals from all 22 public universities. One of the network's most important goals is the exchange of ideas and experiences concerning the implementation of quality management systems (cf. chapter three).

The still prevailing uncertainty is rather indebted to the underdeveloped external quality assurance system: Whereas the quality-related activities of the *Fachhochschulen* and private universities were guided as well as constrained by a combination of external evaluations and accreditations (on the institutional *and* programme level) from the very beginning of the sectors, until very recently there was no obligatory external quality assurance procedure for public universities. The Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance (AQA) which was established at the beginning of 2004 does not have a mandate comparable to most of its European pendants, but rather "aims at assisting higher education institutions to implement quality assurance procedures, coordinate evaluations and elaborate quality assurance standards" (Pechar & Pellert 2004: 325). On the other hand, public universities could always undergo any external quality assurance procedure on a voluntary basis and in accordance with their developmental goals, and evidence suggests that the universities are well making use of it: Drawing from a small survey among all QA offices at the Austrian universities, Raggautz (2009) shows that at least 17 of the 22 public

universities have been engaged in some form of external quality assurance (evaluation, accreditation, certification or audit) during the last five years, most of them combining several forms and covering a broad range of the university's services or even taking it to the level of the institution itself (e.g. in the case of WU, which was the first Austrian university to gain a prestigious international accreditation seal – EQUIS – in early 2007).

In addition, the situation is about to change considerably: In 2007, Minister Hahn announced that all external quality assurance agencies in Austrian higher education should be jointly reorganised in some kind of umbrella construction (Hahn 2007). Preparations on a new law for quality assurance in higher education and the establishment of a new 'supra-agency' for quality assurance and accreditation across all sectors of tertiary education had already started by then. In fall 2009, a first draft of the new law (consultation paper) was released for consultation (BMWF 2009b). More than 150 different institutions (e.g. public and private universities, *Fachhochschulen*, lobbies or federal agencies) were invited to contribute to the discussion by presenting an official response statement. The original consultation paper as well as the roughly 60 position papers that were submitted during the process were published on the homepage of the Ministry in early 2010 (BMWF Homepage Consultation Process). In late 2010, the Ministry sent a marginally revised version out for another round of comments and feedback which was concluded in January 2011. The new Quality Assurance Act (*Qualitätssicherungsrahmengesetz,* abb. QSRG) passed parliament in June 2011 and will come into act in March 2012.

According to the new Quality Assurance Act, the reorganisation of external quality assurance in Austrian tertiary education pursues the following objectives (cf. BMWF 2009b: 6-7):

- to develop an integrated national framework (without disregarding institutional autonomy);
- to determine common standards for Austrian higher education in order to ensure/improve the acceptance of the performance of Austrian higher education institutions;

- to improve the instruments and tools for evaluation, quality assurance, accountability and quality development;
- to improve the vertical and horizontal transferability of degrees and qualifications (as a part of the development of a National Qualifications Framework, cf. Markowitsch 2009);
- to contribute to the implementation of a joint higher education area;
- to ensure new forms of transparency according to European standards (e.g. compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, cf. ENQA 2008).

However, a closer inspection of the text quickly reveals that the main purpose of the new law is a restructuring of the external quality assurance by merging the three present agencies, the Austrian Quality Assurance Agency (AQA), the *Fachhochschulen* Council (FHR) and the Accreditation Council (AR): The major part of the new law is dedicated to the organisation of the new Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation (AQAA), including the question of its internal structure, funding and business areas. Nevertheless, the respective sections already indicate that the new supra-agency will not be an entirely new organisation, but indeed more of an umbrella for the present agencies.

Bigger changes can be expected on the procedural level though: Apart from the already established programme accreditations and institutional accreditations for private universities and *Fachhochschulen*, the act demands mandatory institutional quality audits for the public universities as well. These audits are intended to review the status of the institutional quality management systems as stipulated in the Universities Act 2002. The universities are not obliged to employ AQAA for their audit, but can choose any European agency that is included in the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies. The paper further defines a number of review areas (e.g. strategy, education, research, national and international cooperations) on which such an audit could focus. Considerably more debated was the Ministry's plan to include spot tests of study programmes in the audit process, which the universities regarded as badly concealed

programme accreditations and an invasion in their institutional autonomy. The plan was then neglected.

In compliance with international standards, the audit will be organised as a cyclical peer review of the internal structures, resources, processes, roles and responsibilities and their fitness for purpose, i.e. whether they are adequate to achieve the university's mission/objectives and performance agreements under the existing legal conditions (BMWF 2009b: 31). Due to the different legal constitutions, a negative audit for public universities would not have equally immediate consequences as a negative accreditation result would have for private universities or *Fachhochschulen*. Nevertheless, the results and decisions are to be published, and the audits are already included in most universities' performance agreements, signalling that their outcome will have an impact on the universities' funding in subsequent contract periods.

In general, even though the idea of reforming the Austrian quality assurance system was welcomed, the various drafts of the act were largely met with rejection and critique, especially from the other institutional key players within the field (cf. the collected position papers on the BMWF Consultation Process Website). In particular the following weaknesses and risks were identified and discussed:

- The role of the new agency seems rather vague and inconsistent; AQAA should develop the relevant procedures, provide advice for the higher education institutions – and determine the success of the audits and accreditations. These divergent functions and business areas could very well lead to a role conflict (especially with regard to the fact that AQAA would be competing with other agencies when it comes to operating the audit).
- The approach is still oscillating between an institutional focus (audit of the internal QA system as such) and a focus on specific programmes and processes. Therein lies not only an internal discrepancy but a considerable risk that increasingly specific requirements and criteria could also undermine the universities' institutional autonomy.

- As the number of agencies in the European Register is still rather limited (and the Register itself favours certain types of agencies over others), some performance areas (e.g. research) are automatically taking a back seat. In addition, highly specialised agencies (e.g. for universities of arts or business) cannot be selected.

Yet the most frequent concerns were aimed at the composition of the various boards and bodies (i.e. a relative overrepresentation of the Austrian social partners, cf. chapter three) and the differences between the different higher education sectors. Only a few criticisms, though, were eventually amended when the new act finally passed parliament in June 2011. It will be interesting to observe how the legal changes will affect the field in the near and farther future. However, as the new law will not come into effect before 2012, it plays only a minor contextual role for the findings of this study, which is predominantly based on data from 2004 to 2010. The consultation process itself, on the other hand, offers a particularly well-documented insight into the competing logics and interpretive patterns within Austrian higher education, as the emerging 'clash of quality cultures' is neither limited to the level of formal and procedural details, nor can it be simplifyingly reduced to a conflict between the lawmaker and the affected higher education institutions. The collected response statements are thus used as complementary material in my analysis (cf. chapter four). Yet before delving deeper into questions of data gathering and interpretation, it is time to define my unit of analysis, by carving out the respective organisational field and characterising its key players.

Chapter three: The state of the field

"[…] More than just a collection of influential organisations, a field is the center of common channels of dialogue and discussion."

(Hoffman 1999: 352)

VII

In the previous chapter I have provided a brief overview of the current state of Austrian higher education policy in order to help contextualise the different 'quality cultures' I am looking for. Yet in terms of reconstructing the main interpretive patterns that are at work here, the scope is still too vast and the 'here' much too undefined to explain something beyond the incidental and anecdotal. Every systematic observation needs a focus – in an almost paradoxical way the researcher usually has to confine his visual field in order to actually see something. Scott (1995: 55f) proposes to differentiate at least six different levels of analysis for institutional and organisation studies: the world system, societal fields, organisational fields, organisational populations, organisations and organisational subsystems. With regard to the emergence, development and dispersion of interpretive patterns, every level holds its own attraction as a research field (in addition to the interesting question how the various levels are linked in this respect), yet in view of the national dimension involved and the variety of relevant institutional actors that become only visible above the level of the individual organisation (or even population), the organisational field – as a macro-sociological yet still manageable level of analysis – seems the most promising and comprehensive starting point.

The concept of the organisational field was introduced in 1983, in a hugely influential paper by Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell on why organisations in a certain sector or area tend to push towards homogeneity instead of diversity, once a certain level of maturity has been achieved (DiMaggio & Powell 1983: 148) – an idea that should define the working programme in the organisational field arena for years (cf. Wooten & Hoffman 2008). Showing similarities to earlier concepts such as industry systems or societal sectors (cf. Serrano-Velarde 2008; Scott 1995), the organisational field was envisioned to contain the "totality of relevant actors" (DiMaggio & Powell 1983: 148) that are grouped around a common market or production technology:

> "By organisational field, we mean those organisations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organisations that produce similar services or products" (DiMaggio & Powell 1983: 148).

Consequently, an organisational field does not exist a priori, but emerges from the activities of the organisations within such a focused area – a process that the authors label 'structuration' and which they describe as consisting of four parts:

- an increase in the extent of interaction among organisations in the field;
- the emergence of sharply defined inter-organisational structures of domination and patterns of coalition;
- an increase in the information load which organisations in a field must contend;
- the development of mutual awareness among participants in a set of organisations that they are involved in a common enterprise (DiMaggio & Powell 1983: 148).

DiMaggio himself (1991) provides a detailed example for the structuration process of one particular organisational field, U.S. art museums, showing the

important role of individual actors and particularly (administrative) professionals in the process.

In the 1990s, the concept experienced a sociology-of-knowledge influenced turn, departing from the idea that organisational fields were mainly "independent variables that affect organisational forms or processes" (Scott 1995: 103). Scott proposed a cognitive approach that would rather focus on the question how information, influence or negotiation processes were organised within the field, acknowledging the field's manifold relations with its cultural environment (ibid.). Consequently, in his own definition, an organisational field was conceived as a "community of organisations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field" (Scott 1994, cited in Scott 1995: 56). In this perspective, fields are organised around shared cognitive or normative frameworks, showing once again new institutionalism's closeness to phenomenological positions (cf. Meyer 2008) and redirecting organisational field research towards "understanding the processes that guided the behaviour of field members in unconscious ways" (Wooten & Hoffman 2008: 132). Fields became contested, the commonality of interests of the field actors was put into question and the various field constituents were found to show incongruent purposes (ibid.). In her elaborate study on the introduction of quality assurance systems in Germany in the wake of the Bologna process, Serrano-Velarde (2008) has described some of the conflicts that may arise from a meeting of divergent interests, yet her field concept is still very much oriented on DiMaggio and Powell and largely focuses on the 'suppliers' of quality assurance services (i.e. evaluation and accreditation agencies), and thus rather neglects the latent socio-cultural framework that underlies the organisations' formalised relations.

The field concept I am using in this work, owes a huge debt to DiMaggio and Powell and Scott, yet is primarily tied to the 'issue field'-idea introduced by Andrew Hoffman in his study on changes in the constituency of an organisational field centered around the field of corporate environmentalism (1999). Building on Scott's cognitive premise, Hoffman suggests that

> "[…] a field is formed around the issues that become important to the interests and objectives of a specific collective of organisations. Issues define what the field is, making links that may not have previously been present. Organisations can make claims about being or not being part of the field, but their membership is defined through social interaction patterns" (Hoffman 1999: 352).

In such a perspective, a field does not appear as a mere collection of influential organisations, but as a "center of common channels of dialogue and discussion" (ibid.: 352), in which "competing interests negotiate over issue interpretation" (ibid.: 351) – a concept that seems to be a very well suited framework for analysing the struggle over the meaning and purpose of quality assurance that is currently pervading Austrian higher education.

In addition, the concept's emphasis on the different and even divergent interests, perspectives, interpretations and 'mind sets' of various organisational actors, increases its adequacy for analysing fields that are just emergent and where rules, norms and routines are still being negotiated as in the case of higher education quality assurance. As a consequence, the concept appears most applicable where such negotiation processes (or discourses) can actually be empirically approached and observed, hinting at the continuously relevant problem of 'talk versus action' (Brunsson 1993) and raising questions about the stability/dynamics of such a field. The next section will at least partly deal with these aspects, adding a few thoughts on the construction of a specific issue field in the balancing between conceptual and empirical requirements and restraints.

"The structure of an organisational field cannot be determined a priori but must be defined on the basis of empirical investigation."

(DiMaggio & Powell 1983: 148)

VIII

All in all, the field concept is very flexible, allowing the researcher to include and exclude actors and actor groups in accordance with his analytical demands and theoretical perspective (cf. Serrano-Velarde 2008). On the other hand, this makes it all the more important to be very explicit and transparent about how a particular field is constructed – and who is regarded to belong to it. This seems especially relevant for issue fields, where power and influence are already conceptually inherent. DiMaggio's and Powell's (1983) demand to include all relevant actors, yet, as any matter regarding inclusion/exclusion, the question ‚who is relevant?' is not a trivial one: Some actors get attention while others are neglected, which does not only raise the point of impartiality but also has a considerable impact on the findings – even if we lay our focus on institutionalised interpretive patterns that – by their definition – are transcending individual and group perspectives. Wedlin (2007) argues that the forming of fields and the creating of 'belongingness' or relevance in the field is achieved with the help of informal and formal classification mechanisms in the field – though the question how these mechanisms are formed remains unanswered.

Scott (1995: 56) describes a specific educational system as an example for an organisational field that would be composed of a set of schools (focal population) and related organisations such as district offices and parent-teacher associations, and Serrano-Velarde (2008: 89) depicts the organisational field of German evaluation and accreditation agencies, but both examples provide only mild orientation for our Austrian case. Following DiMaggio's and Powell's introductory

quote above, the question about the structure of organisational fields (including actors, relations and field boundaries) has to be answered on a case to case basis and is largely a matter of empirics – though I would argue that it needs two intertwined approaches, a conceptual one (depending on the analysed issue and the research questions) and an empirical one (depending on the data and material that enable the researcher to (re-)construct the field). With regard to my own research focus, the (re-)construction of the field is based on the following premises:

- The organisational field that gives this research scope and structure does not exist per se, but is an analytical construct 'built' around the main issue of quality assurance/quality management in Austrian higher education. If the issue would be (even marginally) different, for example 'research funding', the field would look quite different (though some players might be the same). How different issue fields are related to each other (and influence each other) is still an open question in institutional research. I will tackle the implications (but also the possibilities for future research) in my final chapter.

- Relevance is not a given characteristic of any actor, but an observer-dependent attribution. Actors rarely include or exclude themselves (at least not consciously) – and even if they tried to, they would still be affected by the field as Hoffman observes: "*If an organisation or population chooses to disregard an emerging issue, others may crystallize the field formation process for them*" (1999: 352). It is the field that connects the various actors – as discourse participants, policy stakeholders or sponsors of specific interpretive patterns (cf. chapter six). In any case, the researcher has to make his criteria of relevance as transparent as possible. In this particular study, I have decided to include all actors/actor groups that have actively and publicly participated in the expert discourse on quality assurance in Austrian higher education between 2004 (when the UG 2002 came fully to life and the Austrian Quality Assurance Agency was founded) and 2010. Empirically, they either had to publicly articulate their

viewpoints, e.g. in the form of a position paper or official statement, or repeatedly play an active role in an official forum, e.g. presentations or podium discussions at an issue related symposium or convention (cf. chapter four). One of the most notable observations resulting from this decision is the absence of the academic staff as an institutionalised actor group of their own (even the Association of Austrian University Professors remains strangely silent in my data set): Even though their perspective is of considerable importance within most higher education institutions, they appear to not have a voice of their own on the level of the issue field. On the other hand, the traditional academic viewpoint is far from being lost, as we will see in the following chapters: As many rectors, QA professionals or even policy makers have been (or, at least partly, still are) members of the universities' academic staff, the *habitus* of the academic is represented across the actor groups.

- Interests, attitudes and even actions do not only diverge between different actor groups (cf. Ebel-Gabriel 2004 for a brief description of the similar situation in Germany), but also within individual populations – such as the public universities, for instance. This structural aspect leads Hoffman to his argument that, in order to fully appreciate the complexity of institutional dynamics, one should analyse both the specific institutions that lie at the centre of an issue-based field and the competing institutions that might lie within the individual populations inhabiting the field (Hoffman 1999: 352). This is possible (though, with regard to my own research goals, not necessary) when choosing an institutional actor such as the public universities, where the population consists of a manageable number of organisations, but becomes far more difficult when focusing on the students, where the core population is to be regarded as individuals not individual organisations. Students are an especially heterogeneous group, differing in age, time available for study, study modes (from on-campus to Internet-only), learning styles, gender, ethnicity, previous knowledge, experience and competencies, reasons for studying etc. (Westerheijden et al. 2007: 4). However, it is not individual students that play a role in the

field level discourse, but their institutionalised political representatives, in this case the Austrian Student Union (*Österreichische HochschülerInnenschaft,* abb. ÖH). Correspondingly, only institutional(-ised) actors were taken into consideration, regardless of the fact that institutions can only act or speak through individuals. It may well be that sometimes the position of an institution gets intermingled with the individual viewpoints of the person that acts for it, yet with regard to my research focus – the underlying interpretive patterns and logics on the field level – I do not make a distinction here. Even more, the actors themselves and their explicit viewpoints hold only contextual relevance, as will become clearer in chapter four: the gathering of various institutional actors in some kind of forum (manifest as in the case of the AQA conferences or virtual as in the case of the consultation process on the new Quality Assurance Act) is not the phenomenon to be explained but rather some 'window' through which the underlying meaning structures of their verbal exchanges become observable.

Keeping these premises in mind, the following paragraphs provide short characterisations of the most relevant and prominent field actors as identified during my research – for even though the field is not built and structured by these actors and their relations, it is mainly their interactions and combined communicative efforts that bring the issue to life and provide an outlet for the underlying interpretive patterns this study aims at. The focus of each characterisation lies on the institutional purpose (if identifiable) and on the institution's relationship to quality assurance in Austrian higher education.

BMWF – the Federal Ministry

The Federal Ministry of Science and Research (*Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung*, abb. BMWF) is the smallest of the Austrian Ministries. In its current form it was established in 2007 as part of the coalition agreement between the two government parties, SPÖ and ÖVP. In January 2010

the previous minister Johannes Hahn (ÖVP) was superseded by his fellow party member Beatrix Karl, who passed the torch on to Karlheinz Töchterle in early 2011. As the main government department for higher education and basic research, the BMWF holds responsibility for the public and private universities as well as for the *Fachhochschulen*, though in practice, in correspondence to the coalition agreement, all major educational policies have to be accorded with the Federal Ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture. Chapter two has already shed some light on the underlying ideological struggles.

For the public universities, the Universities Act 2002 had ended a very bureaucratic mode of governance, where all relevant inputs (e.g. financial resources, technical infrastructure and staff) were regulated and controlled by the responsible Ministry. This was superseded by a more NPM influenced approach, where the universities are largely autonomous, yet the Ministry tries to exert its influence through triannual performance contracts with each university and special funding programmes. The last round of performance contracts in 2010 had earned a lot of critique when it became apparent that more than 90% of the main objectives of the 'mutual' agreements had been predefined by the BMWF in order to support its political agenda. Currently, the Ministry's main administrative duties with regard to the higher education sector are general legal supervision, performance contract and budgetary negotiation, approval of the performance reports and balance of accounts as well as controlling and monitoring (cf. Wadsack & Kasparovsky 2007).

With regard to the *Fachhochschulen* and the private universities, which were introduced rather late in the 1990s, the Ministry had introduced an alternative governance model from the very beginning: To a large degree, supervision duties and quality assurance responsibilities have been delegated to two state agencies, the FHR and ÖAR, which will be described below.

Due to its structural power and importance ('he who pays the piper calls the tune'), the Ministry is certainly one of the most influential actors within our organisational field, even though its quality assurance related actions have been rather hesitant in the recent past. Compared to other European countries (cf.

Schwarz & Westerheijden 2004), Austria is a rather 'late bloomer' in the international quality assurance area, particularly in the sector of the public universities. On the other hand, the government's previous self-effacement allowed for a rather constructive phase of 'system building' that was hardly hampered by pertinent and premature accountability demands. After a few years of development, the BMWF has recently pushed a new law in order to reorganise external quality assurance for all three higher education sectors (cf. chapter two), yet all in all, the political discourse (and the Ministry's actions or rather *re*actions) has lately been dominated by issues of financing, university capacities and higher education accessibility.

AQA – The newcomer agency

The Austrian Quality Assurance Agency (*Österreichische Qualitätssicherungsagentur,* abb. AQA) was founded at the beginning of 2004 (right when the Universities Act 2002 came into full effect) at the joint initiative of the Austrian Rector's Conference (ÖRK), the Austrian Conference of Universities of Applied Sciences (FHK), the Austrian Union of Private Universities (PU), the Austrian National Union of Students (ÖH) and the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture (BMBWK), with the latter still being its main source of funding. Four of the founding partners – UNIKO (the ÖRK has been renamed in 2008), FHK, ÖH, BMWF (as the Federal Ministry for Science and Research) – are currently ordinary members of the Association, meaning they participate fully in the Association's work. In addition, the Articles of Association (AQA 2009a) make provisions to also include umbrella organisations of the Austrian private universities and the Austrian universities of teacher education at a later point of time.

The Association's executive bodies include the General Assembly (with 13 delegates) and the Board (5 members), with the latter being (re-)appointed every two years (cf. AQA 2009a). A Scientific Steering Group consisting of seven international experts from the areas quality assurance, evaluation and higher education development and not bound to directives is intended to support the

(scientific) quality of the Agency's work and shall ensure the independence of its methods. The Scientific Steering Group advises the Board and the Management with regard to all quality assurance matters, paying special attention to international developments. It is also responsible for determining the adopted quality standards and for appointing the reviewers for the quality management audits and evaluation projects (Hanft & Kohler 2007). Showing full compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG), AQA has been included in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) in September 2009. In addition, the Association is a full member of various international networks in quality assurance, i.e. the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEE) and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).

Pursuant to the Austrian Associations Act 2002 (*Vereinsgesetz* 2002), AQA is established as an autonomous service-oriented non-profit organisation with the following main objectives (cf. AQA 2009a, §2-§3):

- Conducting scholarly quality assurance and evaluation projects (especially the certification/auditing of quality assurance systems relating to all core areas and processes in higher education institutions, the co-ordination and organisation of evaluation procedures, advice on quality assurance matters or the observation and consideration of international developments);
- researching and documenting the methodology of quality assurance and evaluation in the higher education sector;
- establishing a database of existing quality assurance materials;
- developing a service and information centre for actors interested in quality assurance and evaluation;
- functioning as a co-ordination centre between researchers and practitioners in the area of quality assurance and evaluation in the tertiary sector.

Since 2007, AQA offers higher education institutions a quality audit in four different performance areas (Studies, Teaching & Further Education; Research & Development; Human Resource Management & Development; Internationalisation & Mobility) in order to assess the organisation and efficiency of the institutional quality management. After a successful audit, AQA awards an accreditation label that is valid for a maximum of six years and is recognised by the Federal Ministry for Science and Research (AQA 2009b). On the other hand, the question whether such a quasi-governmental act can (and shall) be committed by a private association instead of a public authority is still open for debate (cf. Konrad 2004). In addition, the current legal changes with regard to external quality assurance, as outlined in the previous section, will have a considerable impact on AQA, not least because of the pending organisational changes.

During its comparably brief history, AQA has been confronted with a lot of critique for different reasons – many of them related to the fact that the agency was entering the field rather late and could not establish a suitable leading role with regard to QA-specific knowledge and competences. In its position papers and publications (e.g. Schmidinger & Kohler 2006, Hanft & Kohler 2007) AQA has generally abstained from explicating its perspective on quality, even though it sees itself as an "integral part of the national quality culture" (AQA Homepage). However, the basic guiding principle that the results of the agency's procedures shall function as a basis for higher education institutions internal control (e.g. curriculum design, performance contracts) and serve as a basis concerning external control can be found across the procedure manuals and descriptions. However, this preoccupation with 'quality management' under the mantle of 'quality assurance' is not limited to specific actors, but one of the main interpretive patterns throughout the field, as we will see in chapter six.

Summing up, AQA's function and influence might be slightly different (and probably less strong) than those of most of its international counterparts, and thus making it a comparably less powerful actor in our observed field than for example the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK. On the other hand, the agency is still one of the very few bodies with a mandate for developing,

negotiating and disseminating approaches to quality assurance in the entire field of Austrian higher education (even though the focus is firmly set on the public universities). It will be interesting to see what happens after the structural reform in the wake of the new Quality Assurance Act.

FHR and ÖAR – the state authorities

In the previous chapter we have already seen that in Austria external quality assurance is – at least for now – organised quite differently across the various higher education sectors. Until the new Quality Assurance Act comes fully to life, the public universities do not have to undergo any mandatory QA certification. For the *Fachhochschulen* and private universities, on the other hand, accreditations and external evaluations are a regular experience. In both cases, the ministry plays only an indirect role – the major activities and decisions are set by two state authorities: the FH Council and the Accreditation Council.

The FH Council (*Fachhochschulrat*, abb. FHR) is the authority responsible for the external quality assurance – evaluations and accreditations – of the Austrian FH sector. It was established in 1993. The legal basis for its operations is provided by the *Fachhochschulen* Studies Act (FHStG), which also regulates the FH Council's main responsibilities, including

- accreditations of degree programmes and evaluations of course providing institutions;
- awarding academic degrees and nostrifications (i.e. recognition of foreign degrees);
- quality monitoring, e.g. of the programmes' final examinations;
- advising of the Ministry in terms of the development of the FH sector and the funding of FH programmes;
- data collection and analysis and regular reporting (cf. FHR Homepage).

This broad range of responsibilities was also mentioned during the FH Council's most recent external evaluation in 2007, when the peers considered the FH

Council's functions as "*accreditation body, advisory board for FH degree programmes, strategic planning unit for the FH sector, regulatory agency, and appellate board for students*" to be "*difficult to fulfill in view of possible role conflicts*" (Report on the Evaluation of the Austrian FH Council 2007: 6). This general tension between decision making and consulting duties is also reverberated in the consultation papers on the new Quality Assurance Act from 2010.

The FH Council consists of 16 members, of who half are required to have a relevant post-doctoral academic qualification (i.e. habilitation) and the other half needs to have worked in the main vocational fields for FH degree programmes for several years, demonstrating the sector's objective to unite academic rigour with practical orientation. All members are appointed by the competent Federal Minister (four of them based on suggestions of the advisory board for economic and social issues) for a three-year term; re-appointment for a second term is possible. The FHR is chaired by its president. According to Austrian law, the members of the FH Council are not bound by any instructions (though supervised by the Ministry and the Austrian Court of Audit) and their administrative decisions cannot be contested with an ordinary appeal. Since the FHR members usually take this responsibility in addition to their regular job, the operative work of the FHR is supported by a Managing Body staffed with nine professional employees.

The FHR's position on quality and quality assurance finds expression in the Accreditation Guidelines (FHR 2010) and mirrors the clear vocational orientation of the whole sector. The main focus lies on the relationship of the graduates' qualification profiles and the requirements of the targeted labour market with the singular curriculum as the most important unit of observation and development. The guidelines encompass a variety of detailed regulations and data demands, with the majority of the quality standards being put into service of the students' employability. The increasing importance of areas such as internationalisation, new media or research within the guidelines reverberate the current Austrian and international developments in higher education policy. Related to this, the *Fachhochschulrat* has been repeatedly criticised for its rigid and detailed further

refinement of the rather open provisions in the actual *Fachhochschulen* Studies Act (cf. Stocker 2008).

The Accreditation Council (*Österreichischer Akkreditierungsrat*, abb. ÖAR) shares a lot of characteristics with the FHR, though its scope of tasks is – in accordance with the comparatively much smaller sector – not as broad. The responsibilities of the ÖAR were established by the Federal Act on the Accreditation of Educational Institutions as Private Universities (UniAkkG) in 1999 and include four main tasks: the accreditation of private universities, the accreditation of academic programmes (once the institution itself has been accredited), corresponding re-accreditations and the supervision of accredited private universities (cf. Konrad 2004: 10). Similarly to the FHR, the ÖAR rules as an independent state authority and is not bound by any directives, though its procedural guidelines have to be approved by the Ministry. An Internal Complaints Commission deals with complaints against the actions and decisions of the Accreditation Council.

The ÖAR consists of eight members who are all appointed by the government – with four members being nominated by Universities Austria. The competent Minister also nominates the Council's president and vice-president for a period of three years. Though half of the members are Austrian, all have to demonstrate acknowledged expertise in the field of international higher education. In its day-to-day work, the Council is supported by the Accreditation Office (which is situated on Ministerial premises – the continuous puns about the Council's independence should come as little surprise).

Structurally and thematically, ÖAR's Accreditation Standards are again comparable to the FHR's (cf. ÖAR Guidelines 2010a & 2010b), putting additional emphasis on resources and e-didactics, which, in this case, I would regard rather as a sector-specific characteristic than a political fad: Due to the lack of public funding and the private universities' monetary orientation, cost-benefit aspects play a much more important role here than in other sectors. Correspondingly, the quality notion of 'value for money' may not be obvious on first view, but is

definitely a defining feature of the Accreditation Council's understanding of quality and quality assurance.

UNIKO – the university managers

Universities Austria (*Österreichische Universitätenkonferenz,* abb. UNIKO) is the official representative organisation of the Austrian public universities. Originally founded as the Austrian Rectors Conference (*Österreichische Rektorenkonferenz,* abb. REKO), the organisation was renamed in 2008 – which was not least owed to the inauguration of the first female rector in Austrian history in January 2008. Universities Austria sees itself as the "voice of public universities in Austria", holding responsibility for "asserting the requests the universities have on society, the private sector and government for the purpose of ensuring the future of university education and research in Austria" (UNIKO Homepage).

UNIKO's origin dates back almost 100 years: The first initiative for a convocation of the Austrian university rectors was taken in 1910/1911, and – with exception of the time between 1935 and 1945, when the rector's conference did not meet – has since been regularly representing its member organisations, though with varying legal status. Whereas the Universities Act 1975 and the University Organisation Act 1993 both recognised the Austrian Rectors' Conference as an institution of public law that is financed by public funds, and even defined its rights and responsibilities, the Universities Act 2002 does not mention the Austrian Rectors' Conference. Thus, the consortium was re-established as an autonomous non-profit organisation in accordance to the Austrian Associations Act 2002 (*Vereinsgesetz*) in 2003.

The full members of Universities Austria are comprised of the 21 public universities. The association's main governing body is the members' assembly or plenary, with each rector representing his/her own university as its delegate. The plenary meets four to five times a year, yet at least once per semester. The plenary is chaired by the president who also functions as the primary external representative. He is assisted by a board that consists of up to seven rectors and

manages the association (cf. UNIKO 2007). A major part of UNIKO's day-to-day work is organised via policy committees and working groups. The policy committees are intended to provide an opportunity for exchanging views and ideas and coordinating purposes between those members of the universities' rector's councils that hold responsibilities for certain issues (e.g. the Vice-Rectors for Research). Currently, five different policy committees are established (i.e. on Financial Affairs, Research, Teaching, International Affairs and Human Resources). Working groups, on the other hand offer a platform for discussing the needs and concerns of specialised universities (i.e. the universities of arts or the medical universities). 'Cross sectional' issues such as quality management and quality assurance do not have a forum of their own. They are either included in the work of the policy committees or are dealt with by the plenary. All bodies are supported by the secretary general and several programme officers.

UNIKO's agenda includes the following objectives and purposes:

- coordinating the strategies and activities of the individual rectorates, especially with regard to general higher education policies;
- providing advice and counsel to policy makers with regard to all issues concerning higher education and the public universities in particular;
- representing the interests of the Austrian universities in the public as well as commenting on bills and draft laws related to (higher) education;
- conducting projects, events and publications, especially with regard to the implementation of the Bologna reforms.

With regard to quality assurance, UNIKO emphasises institutional autonomy as a necessary condition for developing a comprehensive institutional quality culture (*Österreichische Rektorenkonferenz* 2008). Similarly to AQA, the association does not explicitly take a stand on the meaning(s) of quality, but rather chooses an instrumentalist approach by defining basic requirements for quality assurance systems. Nevertheless, even these requirements remain very vague and generalist: Quality assurance systems shall be compatible with international standards, consider the specific needs of an institution or higher education

sector, show reliability with regard to methods and results and avoid unnecessary bureaucratic demands (ibid.). It is also interesting to note, that the position paper uses the term quality *assurance* system rather than the term quality *management* system as does the UG 2002. I will come back to the question, whether there could be a deeper meaning to this, in chapter five.

In general, quality management and quality assurance are rather regarded as a domain of the individual universities and not so much as a central policy issue. As one result, the progress regarding the implementation of institutional quality management systems and quality assurance procedures differs considerably among the universities. On the other hand, we have already seen that the UG 2002 brought along a significant strengthening of the university management and the latest round of performance contracts with the Ministry puts strong emphasis on the implementation (and external review) of the quality management systems. It is therefore highly probable that the topic will gain more attention in UNIKO's central bodies, at least in the nearer future. However, as a politically highly influential organisation, UNIKO is certainly one of the key players in our organisational field – last but not least due to its role in the founding and governing of AQA.

FHK – the *Fachhochschulen* representatives

Just a short time after the universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen)* were introduced as a new type of 'practically-oriented' higher education institutions in the early 1990s, they established a representative association of their own, namely the Austrian Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (*Österreichische Fachhochschulkonferenz,* abb. FHK). Founded in late 1995, the first constitutive general assembly took place in January 1996.

FHK's main goal is to support the *Fachhochschulen* in achieving shared educational objectives, envisioning a role where they would be "*sought after as politico-educational experts for the tertiary educational sector*" and "*act as stimulus and opinion leader for the UAS-sector"* (FHK Homepage). Similar to

UNIKO, FHK represents the interests of its members to the outside (particularly to the government), yet due to their slightly different structure and participatory mode, the association is also an important networking opportunity and platform for exchange: The General Assembly, for example, does not only include the FH's rectors or executive directors, but also the heads of degree programmes (giving a first hint of how important the degree programmes are in terms of the sector's structures and core processes). Apart from drawing up the association's articles of association and budget, the General Assembly is also responsible for electing the Presidium. A Managing Board, consisting of two representatives of each of the currently 20 so-called *Erhalter* (i.e. the course-providing bodies, which can vary greatly in form and size) determines the resource-related and strategic frame of the association and assists the Presiding Council. Again, one representative of each *Erhalter*-institution stems from the community of the institution's heads of degree programmes. Finally, the Presiding Council, which consists of seven members of the Managerial Board, acts as FHK's steering committee.

The Presiding Council does not deal with all important matters itself: Some of the more critical issues have been assigned to various committees, of which four are currently active. Apart from human resource management and organisational development, international affairs and research and development, this also concerns this study's core issue: quality assurance and quality management. In general, this committee is assisting the FHK members by organising the exchange of ideas and experiences on quality management and quality assurance and by collecting and critically discussing information and trends from various contexts, both nationally and internationally. Currently, more specific activities of the committee include comparative research on higher education rankings and higher education quality management in general (cf. FHK Homepage).

The FHK views quality assurance and quality development as a continuous discourse between higher education institutions and communities of practice. Similarly to UNIKO's position, the primary responsibility for quality is regarded as an institutional one, rejecting all attempts to overregulate and overspecify

policies and procedures. From this perspective, the legally provided freedom to develop a tailor-made QA system instead of being forced to adapt a common template is considered an asset which – if used in a corresponding manner – can even offer competitive advantages within a sector that has at least partly market-like characteristics (cf. Stocker 2008).

ÖH – the students

The Austrian Student Union (*Österreichische HochschülerInnenschaft*, abb. ÖH) is the legal representative of more than 290.000 Austrian students in higher education, including all ordinary and extraordinary students at the public universities, the *Fachhochschulen*, the private universities and the university colleges of teacher education. Founded more than 60 years ago – on 19th November 1946 Austrian students got to elect their ÖH representatives for the first time –, the union has proved to be a very influential political player, not only in the education sector but also with regard to general socio-political issues (for a brief history of the organisation cf. ÖH 2006). This influence was at least formally cut back by the UG 2002, which reduced formal student participation within university bodies. As a consequence, many ÖH representations on the university level have (re-)defined themselves as student service organisations, focusing on student information, student counselling or organising events and leisure activities. However, in an informal capacity, the student representatives still play an important formative role within most higher education institutions. Apart from a few employees, all ÖH operatives are volunteers. In addition to the biannual elections this causes a considerable fluctuation of actors within the organisation.

In general, ÖH fulfils the following objectives and functions:

- negotiating student interests with the Federal Ministry of Science and Research (BMWF) or the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture as well as representing those interests to political parties, state associations and the public in general (through lobbying, campaigning, networking or fundraising);

- consulting the Ministry with regard to any legal matter that concerns/affects students in higher education (e.g. when a law is changed or planned);

- representing Austrian student interests on an international level (e.g. in the Bologna Follow-Up Group, the European Student Union ESIB or the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers EURODOC);

- supporting the Students Unions at university level.

ÖH's legal status is regulated by the Student and Students' Union Act (*HochschülerInnen- und Hochschülerschaftsgesetz*), the Students' and Student Association Electoral Regulations (*Hochschülerinnen- und Hochschülerschafts-wahlordnung*) and the ÖH Statutes (*ÖH Satzung*). Major policy decisions are usually made on the national level only. The main decision making body is the National Delegation (*Bundesvertretung*, abb. BV) which is composed of 85 mandataries. The National Delegation also elects the chairpersons, who are ÖH's main external representatives and coordinate the internal work with the help of the general secretariate. ÖH's operative work is divided into several areas, each of which is managed and organised by a so-called unit. Currently, these units are: Educational Policy Unit, Teachers' Education Unit, Universities of Applied Sciences Unit, Financial Affairs Unit, Social Welfare Unit, Public Relations Unit, Student and Prospective Student Advising Services, International Affairs Unit, International Students Unit, Feminist Issues Unit, Human Rights and Social Justice Unit (cf. ÖH Homepage). In practice, a major part of ÖH's most relevant contributions to higher education is being achieved through their local dependences on the university level (e.g. as participants in the institutions' governing bodies). Very much in line with their role as an institutionalised interest group, ÖH's position on quality in higher education is very much focused on practical matters related to the students' learning experience (e.g. standards for the qualification of university teachers) and on the necessity to involve students more closely in all quality assurance procedures and decision making processes in higher education. In their policy demands, ÖH is usually following

the recommendations of the European Standards and Guidelines (cf. ÖH 2009).

The social partners

The social partnership is an integral part of all aspects of Austrian economic and social policy. In principle, it is a voluntary cooperation between the major economic interest groups, the Trade Union Federation (*Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund*, abb. ÖGB), the Federal Economic Chamber (*Wirtschaftskammer Österreich*, abb. WKÖ), the Federal Chamber of Labour (*Bundesarbeiterkammer*, abb. BAK) and the Chamber of Agriculture (*Landwirtschaftskammer*, abb. LK) – between them themselves and with the government. The three chamber organisations are organised as self-administrating legal entities with compulsory membership, whereas the Trade Union Federation is organised as an association of various businesses and companies.

The functions of the Austrian social partners are manifold, going far beyond the role of mere interest groups: The representative organisations are almost inextricably intertwined with all aspects of Austrian policy making, having the right to evaluate proposed legislation, make recommendations to law-making bodies, and draft texts for legislation directly related to the social partners' main areas of interest such as labour law or social welfare (cf. Social Partners Homepage). In addition, the social partners exert their influence in a broad number of advisory boards and committees and play an informal though often defining role in practically all major policy areas, including education and even higher education policy. Accordingly, the social partners will also be strongly represented in the Steering Board for Austria's new Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation.

For the social partners, education often equals qualification and is regarded as an essential factor for international competitiveness. 'Value for money' is a strong aspect of their quality concept, yet the quality notion that probably defines their position best is 'fitness for purpose': Graduates have to be 'fit' for the dynamic

challenges of the labour market, marking employability as the most important quality criterion. The social partners are strong advocates of life-long learning and the permeability of the education system, e.g. by demanding that formal and informal (i.e. vocational) skills and competences should be treated more equally. Accordingly, standards and standardisations are seen as an important part of quality assurance in higher education (cf. *Sozialpartner* Austria 2007)

The professionals

Stensaker (2008, 2007b) regards professionalisation as one of the key developments in quality assurance in the past ten years. Within our issue field, we can differentiate between two groups of quality assurance professionals: For once, we find a considerable number of international scholars and policy experts, who share their experiences in a consultancy function in the form of good practice examples, case studies and overview presentations. Yet for various reasons they can be regarded as a relatively minor part of our unit of analysis: Due to their rather selective appearances, high level of fluctuation and usually low degree of familiarity with the Austrian context, they can be rather seen as fleeting visitors than as actual parts of an organisational ensemble. On the other hand, this does not mean that they do not influence the discourse within our field: Yet clarifying the relationship between nationally limited issue fields and the broader international contexts they are embedded in, will again be reserved to chapter five.

Our second and arguably more important group of professionals is those from within the Austrian higher education institutions who carry job titles such as quality managers, quality assurance officers or quality development specialists. Other than the field actors described above, the QA professionals do not possess a formal representation or an association, yet are far from being disorganised: In 2007, they founded a Network for Quality Management and Quality Development, which currently consists of about 80 members from all Austrian public universities. The Network's main objective is to support and enhance the informal good practice and ideas exchange between practitioners (cf. QA Network

Homepage). Network meetings are held thrice a year, providing a mixture of presentations from the practitioners and experts from abroad, workshops and discussions. Additional working groups on QA audits and QA systems, graduate surveys or feedback loops deal with the particularities of specific areas of interest. For an informal initiative, the network has stirred quite some interest in its first three years, especially from UNIKO and the Ministry (cf. BMWF 2008: 16). Corresponding to its informal constitution, the network has never issued a formal policy paper or position on quality and quality assurance, though observations from within the network meetings suggest an almost unanimous agreement on QA as a strategic domain that is tied to all other aspects of the higher education institution and that requires a strong and ongoing process of professionalisation.

The majority of the professionals in the network has emerged from the structural reforms brought about by the UG 2002 – especially §14 which demands the development of an institutional QA system. In terms of their positions, responsibilities and activities they are quite heterogeneous; most of them work within a correspondingly labeled QA unit, yet a quick browse through the various homepages shows that this common label can be quite misleading: The tasks which are assigned to the QA professionals include teaching evaluations, controller duties, graduate and student surveys, performance measurement, teaching support, research services, the coordination of the so-called *Wissensbilanzen* – and, most importantly, though not in all cases – the development of the internal QA system and preparation of external QA processes and certifications. Another aspect that differs greatly across the universities is the units' integration in the institutions' strategic processes and their connection to the top management – leading to some still unclear questions about their future significance (cf. Schmidinger & Kohler 2006: 3) and acceptance: According to Konrad and Fiorioli (2007: 9), many are still predominantly regarded as a control body and internal performance police. Positioning and profile are a little more homogeneous within the *Fachhochschulen* and private universities though, where the legal requirements and regulations are much more detailed and specific.

The last group concludes this short introduction of the field's structurally most important institutionalised actor groups, requiring a final statement on their selection: As stated above, the specific scope, form and structure of the field can only be empirically defined and are thus strongly reliant on the data material. In my case, the strong focus on conference proceedings as well as position and consultation papers (cf. chapter four) could have disadvantaged or even excluded some actors that might have been more present in other media (e.g. the media themselves as an actor). This decision can be well argued (conceptually as well as for more pragmatic reasons of data consistency and research economy), but should be beared in mind when going through the list of featured actors. In addition, the field changed during the analytical phases of the project: Positions moved and relations shifted, leading to a situation where the final picture differed considerably from the initial one. It is for this reason (and due to the difference between a cyclical research process and the necessarily linear presentation of such a process and its results) that the relevant actors are only described here without any systematic written or even graphical depiction of their relationships and field dynamics. The social and temporal dimensions of our issue field will be taken up in chapter five instead.

Chapter four: Making sense of quality

"We can only live and survive within the meaning we create ourselves; meaning is the environment, which we build, maintain, look after, repair in times of crises and occasionally revolutionise."

(Geideck & Liebert 2003: 3, my translation)

IX

Chapter one had concluded with a seemingly trivial but in fact rather far-reaching goal for this entire study: to contribute to a better understanding of where many of the contradictions and paradoxes we experience in Austrian higher education today stem from – and where they could be heading to. In a general, everyday sense, such an endeavour is hardly awe-inspiring: In our daily interactions and communications we heavily rely on our ability to understand each other – in a certain way, understanding can even be regarded as the starting point of any communication (cf. Luhmann 1984: 195f.). Yet for the social researcher, this every day understanding is only the beginning – in order to make sense of the often banal rules, procedures and actions that shape and stabilise our daily dealings with each other, he has to work towards an understanding of this understanding (cf. Hitzler 2002, Hitzler & Honer 1997), and thus reconstruct the meaning that is attached to any (inter)action and - following the basic premises of Symbolic Interactionism (cf. Blumer 1969) - without which it would not be recognisable as such. Consequently, for Hitzler (2002), reconstructing social meaning is even considered as the most general function of interpretative social research.

Here, we have to make an important first distinction between the 'subjective' meaning actors assign to their actions themselves and the 'objective' meaning, in which all social actions, interactions and their perceivable expressions are

entrenched. Whereas the first is bound to the individual actor (and basically inapproachable due to our lack of talent as mind-readers), the latter is interactively constructed (comparable to the idea of social constructionism cf. Gergen 2000), and has its conceptual roots in the phenomenological action theory and the Lebenswelt concept of Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann (Schütz 1972; Schütz & Luckmann 1973), carried by the assumption "that action is meaningful and that meaning is constituted through rules that are specific to the social field" (Meyer 2008: 521). Following the sociology of knowledge oriented perspective of social scientific hermeneutics – which, in addition to Schütz, is strongly influenced by the works of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann -, the theoretical focus of this work does not lie on the category of subjective meaning, but on those lifeworld structures that the subjective interpretations of our social world draw from, " (…) i.e. the socially approved typifications available in a concrete historical socio-cultural Lebenswelt" (Meyer 2008: 522; for an introduction into this perspective cf. Meyer 2008, 2006; Soeffner 2003; Schröer 1997, 1994). In the same sense, the constitution of meaning is not to be regarded as an individually achieved act of bringing order to chaos, but as a product of institutionalisation and socialisation processes, leading later generations to perceive a certain order as given and self-evident without drawing its underlying logic into question (cf. Berger & Luckmann 1966). As a rather problematic consequence for the social researcher, though, such underlying logics, meaning structures or 'reservoirs of meaning' are generally abstract and sensually imperceptible – in other words, the rules are mostly implicit, the relevant knowledge predominantly tacit and the sought-after meanings show various degrees of latency. The resulting methodological implications – most notably that the researcher cannot work with mere rhetorics and the explicitly stated meaning actors attribute to their actions themselves – will be discussed in section XIII.

Conceptually, a considerable number of attempts have been made, to approach the ways in which actors give meaning to objects, events, actions, situations and experiences, while perceiving them to already be meaningful. The objective hermeneutic in the tradition of Ulrich Oevermann, for example, aims to

reconstruct and analyse the *structures of meaning*, in which all social actions, interactions and their perceivable expressions are embedded (cf. Lueger & Meyer 2009, Oevermann, 2002, Reichertz 1997), whereas other hermeneutic strands aim for the "reconstruction of how everyday experiences and actions of individuals are entrenched within socially patterned, temporal practices and forms." (Meyer 2006: 726). The analysis of social frames and framings in the wake of Erving Goffman focuses on the reconstruction of culturally mediated interpretative schemata (cf. Lüders 1994) or interpretative packages (cf. Meyer 2004).

For the purpose of this work, I found the concept of interpretive patterns, which is closely intertwined with modern social science hermeneutics, as the most feasible one – among other reasons, because this concept concedes considerably more influence to the acting subjects than the objective hermeneutic for instance. Interestingly, both concepts can be traced back to the same author:

The concept of interpretive pattern or *Deutungsmuster* has its roots in a working paper by German sociologist Ulrich Oevermann from 1973, which – though never actually published in its original form – has proven to be of significant and long lasting influence on the discussions about the relationship of actors, actions and the contexts – or, borrowing again from Schütz, the *Lebenswelten* – which they are bound to. As a theoretical model that aims to explain social actions on the basis of shared reservoirs of meaning (cf. Höffling et al. 2002), it also owes a considerable debt to the works of Schütz or Berger and Luckmann. From the very beginning though, Oevermann (2001a/1973) worked at delimiting the concept from 'less stable' and more psychologically oriented concepts such as opinions and attitudes while other scholars emphasised the similarities with other theoretical constructs especially from the Anglo-American tradition (for a detailed analysis on the similarities and differences with other related concepts such as Bourdieu's Habitus concept, Goffman's frame analysis, Garfinkel's ethnomethodology as well as interests and ideologies cf. Meyer 2004, Oevermann 2001b, Meuser & Sackmann 1991).

Initially defined as an ensemble of socially communicable interpretations of the physical and social environment (Oevermann 2001a: 5), interpretive patterns can be seen as collectively shaped routines of sense-making for overcoming critical problems of action, yet not as mere 'interpretive options' that refer to single situations but as 'interpretive necessities' that are anchored in the practical key problems of our *Lebenswelt* (cf. Kassner 2003: 54). Oevermann gives a number of examples for such problems (e.g. the upholding of social justice, the gender difference and its consequences, the resolving of relationship conflicts), yet the most comprehensible is the socialisation-related problem Oevermann identified to be at the heart of his original research on parental education styles: How is it possible to educate one's children as responsible and autonomous subjects? For Oevermann such problems cannot be permanently solved anew but need established routines of interpretation which facilitate an almost automatic handling in everyday life – a kind of implicit rules of action, which the actors do not need to be aware of (or always be able to explicate). In Oevermann's view, interpretive patterns are like implicit theories that have become independent in their operations and whose validity does not have to be permanently reflected (Oevermann 2001b: 38). Oevermann took this idea even a step further in his search for almost algorithmic rules that would instruct and form social actions (for a short critique on Oevermann's almost metaphysical concept of structure cf. Reichertz 1997). In the context of my study, though, such a theory of structure perspective is only of peripheral importance. Instead, this work is rather following a sociology of knowledge perspective, in which interpretive patterns are not so much seen as compulsive structures but as providing directions for interpretations and actions, thus helping actors to make sense of their environment and adapt their actions to specific situations (cf. Höffling et al. 2002; for a more profound comparison of the structural theory perspective and the sociology of knowledge perspective cf. Lüders und Meuser 1996.)

So far, no integrative and generally accepted concept of interpretive patterns has been developed, neither in terms of theory nor methodologically. However, in his overview of recent discussion strands, Kassner (2003) observes a general

consensus that interpretive patterns usually denominate knowledge reservoirs, by which means our daily perception, interpretation and action processes are organised and structured. This relationship is not linear though: "On the one hand, [interpretive patterns] are continuously integrated into the structuring of social practice. On the other hand, they also hold a social reality of their own – beyond individual attitudes as well as beyond the societal conditions that bear the relevant problems of action" (Kassner 2003: 41, my translation).

In an earlier article on the state of the field, Meuser & Sackmann (1991) identified a group of 'essentials' that can be regarded as relatively indisputable (and which I have slightly altered and complemented on the basis of newer literature and my own findings):

- *Interpretive patterns* bear a functional relation to (objective) problems of action. Hence, at the heart of the concept lies the question of how actors and action structures are associated with each other.

- *Interpretive patterns* are collective reservoirs of knowledge and meaning. Habitually developed subjective interpretations and constructs do not constitute an interpretive pattern in the way the concept is used here.

- *Interpretive patterns* are latent and pre-reflexive. In this regard, interpretive patterns belong to a knowledge level that lies below or beyond the consciously available intentions, opinions and attitudes of single actors (cf. Lüders & Meuser 1996). Related terms like 'implicit rules', 'tacit knowledge' or 'latencies' already indicate that the analysis of such interpretive patterns cannot limit itself to the level of manifest expressions, but has to approach a layer of social meaning that even the actors themselves are not necessarily aware of.

- The scope of an *interpretive pattern* is at first vague and can vary between different social levels (societal level, field level, organisational level, group level etc.). It is thus necessary to identify and explain which level a certain pattern refers to and/or is limited to and in which regard it is viable to other patterns and levels (cf. Kassner 2003: 43). In this sense, culturally

powerful interpretive patterns are not necessarily charaterised by their statistically proven wide spread but by their structural dominance. (cf. Lüders & Meuser 1996: 66)

- Within a specific social frame, *interpretive patterns* have considerable normative power yet are not necessarily compatible; as this very study shows, they can be simply coexistent but also competing or even conflicting.

- In order to become collectively shared, *interpretive patterns* need to be imparted and exchanged, either as part of the socialisation process or situatively (cf. Höffling et al 2002: 2). Consequently, the definition and framing of interpretive patterns is also a matter of space and time.

Yet even though this short overview provides a useful depiction of the possibilities of interpretive patterns as a theoretical-conceptual category, their actual exploration asks for a more hands on approach: as a purely theoretical construct it remains a little too vague and intangible. In this regard, Lüders opts for a more pragmatic position, arguing that the answers to the questions how a specific interpretive pattern is constructed, what it looks like and how the relationship between the latent rules and the manifest expressions can be defined, are primarily a matter of the empirical analysis (Lüders 1991: 382ff; see also Lüders & Meuser 1996: 64) – although the researcher should nevertheless guard himself against succumbing to the danger of a theory-less empiricism.

Before moving on to the issue of how to approach interpretive patterns empirically, I will therefore discuss a few important conceptual features of the specific interpretive patterns this work focuses on and where I digress from the original concept, starting with the conceptual key question which problem these interpretive patterns are intended to cope with or even solve. On a superficial level, the answer seems obvious and is closely related to the issue field I attend to: how can quality assurance in higher education be organised? But on second view, this specification is already becoming problematic and fuzzy and leads us right back to the first chapter: is the key problem indeed an organisational one? Or is it more about introducing a new philosophy or managerial mode into a field

that had already found its own ways of dealing with quality as parts of the historical excurse in my introductory chapter suggests? Is it about ensuring the quality of services, outcomes or performances? Or is it about demonstrating the respective capability to other stakeholders and thus a question of how trust can be built or renewed? Is it a combination of all the options above or something more fundamental, more abstract?

Evidently, defining the problem of action to which my investigated interpretive pattern would provide a sense-making solution, is not as easy or trivial as the theory suggests and cannot be simply discarded as 'observer-dependent': selecting one of the options the field offers (as is the privilege of the researcher, one could argue) would do the field's internal complexity little justice and ignore the dynamics of the field-internal discourse. And it is precisely this dynamics that can be regarded as one of the key characteristics of an – probably any – issue field. Taking up Hoffman's definition of issue fields as "centers of debates in which competing interests negotiate over issue interpretation" (Hoffman 1999: 351) and anticipating my own findings from the subsequent chapters (an admittedly paradoxical device in a seemingly linear piece of work which strongly hints at the circular nature of any social research), I would therefore argue that in the case of this study there is no singular and unitary interpretive pattern to reconstruct (hence my previously unexplained use of the term's plural form); moreover, at this stage of the field's development it is not even possible to reconstruct different interpretive patterns as different solutions to a specific problem, since there is no such specific problem: The field's manifest discourse on the nature of quality and how to define, control and improve it, seems to be paralleled by a latent negotiation of *what* problem it is that should actually be solved (although the leading actors' preoccupation with means and methods can be kind of misleading).

This negotiation can be regarded as a 'focal point' in which various interpretive patterns from within and outside of the field coincide, coexist, coalesce and conflict. It is this situation of coincidence that lies of the heart of this study's research goals, providing a unique opportunity to observe the 'struggle over meaning' on a structural rather than an actor-oriented level. The respective

interpretive patterns do not even have to originate in this discourse but ingress or get imported from adjoining fields and similar discourses before they are taken in by the field and appear as if they had always been a part of it. That I have framed and labeled these patterns as different 'quality cultures' in the context of this work can be regarded as an early sign of such an appropriation but should not be confused with the way they are perceived or dealt with in the field. Summing up, a reconstruction of singular interpretive patterns, their socio-historical genesis and development and their structure as suggested by previous studies such as Schütze 1992 or Lüders 1991 is at least one step too early or possibly not pertinent at all – at least not until the question 'what is going on?' has been sufficiently answered.

But how to find such an answer without tumbling into well-meant arbitrariness? In terms of methodology, the analysis of interpretive patterns (*Deutungsmusteranalyse*) can be regarded as a variant of the German tradition of interpretative sociology and is basically a reconstructive qualitative method. In this respect, the approach is an answer to demands for methods that do not access social phenomena in a reductionist way on the basis of merely individual attitudes and intentions, but on the other hand do not lose sight of the role of individual actors in the formation and alteration of social structures either (cf. Lüders & Meuser 1996). As any related latent concepts – e.g. structures of meaning, action frames etc. – interpretive patterns cannot be observed directly but have to be uncovered and reconstructed from the expressions and artefacts of human actions and interactions. In addition, interpretive patterns and the structures of meaning on which they build upon, are processually constituted (i.e. over and through a chain of interlinked interactive and communicative acts), demanding an approach that does not limit itself to the present manifestation of the observed phenomenon. The approach I have chosen in order to satisfy these requirements is strongly influenced by modern hermeneutics, conceiving the analysis of interpretive patterns rather as a *context* analysis than a mere *text* analysis (although the material for analysis usually appears in a textual form as we will see). The following two sections are dedicated to the explication and

description of the accordant methodological premises and the actual decisions and procedures that arise from there.

„Problems are at least partly paradoxical; for any research problem has to be relevant and original in order to find acceptance. Yet to be counted as relevant or original (…) problems already have to implicitly point to their own resolution."

(Froschauer & Lueger 2009:80, my translation)

X

Making sense of other actors' sense-making patterns and social meaning structures is a tricky endeavour: on the one hand, the researcher has to take care that he does not simply and unquestioningly adopt the actors' own interpretations, as they usually appear as reduced and socially acceptable rationalisations of their perceptions and experiences, and often ignore the latent and unconscious shared patterns in which those perceptions and experiences are embedded in, and by which they are shaped (cf. Froschauer & Lueger 2009: 10f). Therefore, such an undertaking needs a research strategy that allows for taking the actors' statements and their implications serious, but also critically scrutinises them in consideration of their genesis.

On the other hand, the researcher has to provide for the risk of falling prey to his own ex ante interpretations and assumptions which can all too easily be reproduced and projected onto the field. Here, the design needs to take provisions for minimising this danger, reminding the researcher that his results are but 'second-order constructions', i.e. constructions of the constructions in the field (cf. Soeffner 2003) and compelling him to the principles of artificial 'stupidity' and 'slowness', as Hitzler & Honer (1997) have aptly formulated it.

Methodologically, such requirements can be met by following the maxims of an interpretative social research approach as delineated by Froschauer and Lueger (2009, pp. 102-103), i.e.:

- The permanent and interlocking alternation of phases of data collection and interpretation;

- The continuous reflection of the research status, methodically as well as regards content;
- The abandonment of standardised textbook methods in favour of a more flexible and variable shaping of the data collection and interpretation approaches;
- The constant check and modification of the preliminary results;
- The systematic development of the findings on the basis of temporary partial analyses.

Subsequently, these maxims shall be briefly described and analysed how they apply – or have been applied – to my own research.

The first maxim refers to the **cyclical organisation of all interpretative research** (cf. Lueger 2000): As the researcher approaches the research field as a learner who intends to understand the interpretive patterns and social processes through which they are shaped and thus to develop his theory from the material (instead of testing it *by* the material), he has to choose a strategy that precludes rash conclusions. This strategy includes a repeated alternation of the main phases – data collection, analysis and interpretation – in order to approach the patterns and structures that hold relevance for the actors in a particular field. A linear process organization (e.g. carrying out all the interviews at once and then interpreting them in a second phase) would presume that the researcher already knows the field inside out from the beginning (including all the relevant data sources) and cannot imagine anything surprising/new that he would want to pursue in a later phase. Considering the complexity of most social fields, this seems highly unlikely. Consequently, within an interpretative approach, the interpretation navigates the data collection, instead of the other way round. This is also reflected in the theoretical sampling idea within Grounded Theory (cf. Glaser & Strauss 1967), where the current development status of the theory determines the cases that will be further analysed. Practically, this meant that – although the main data corpus as presented below was defined in a rather early stage - the decision which specific texts, discussions and presentations should be included in the main (hermeneutic) analysis was not made at the start

of my empirical work, but rather following the constant comparative method as outlined by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Strauss & Corbin (1994), with a necessarily much stronger focus on sample *adequacy* than on sample *size* (cf. Bowen 2008). In this regard, the sampling strategy was strongly depending on the newly opened or still open questions after each interim appraisal.

Such interim appraisals lie at the core of the second, fourth and fifth maxim, the **continuous reflection and modification of the research approach and results**. Each phase of data collection and interpretation is followed by a phase of reflection, causing and enabling the researcher to adapt his approach to the dynamics of the research phenomenon and helping him to avoid getting lost in the data or getting stuck on a particular idea at a much too early stage. This seems even more sensible, if the researcher is – at least partly – a participant in his own research field and is thus challenged to switch but also to systematically differentiate between the role of researcher and the role of field actor, as in my case. Even though an intimate knowledge of a particular social context has its advantages, it does also increase the necessity to reflect one's blind spots, in order to not get entangled in the very interpretive patterns that are to be enquired in the first place.

In this regard, such reflective phases also fulfil an important function of quality assurance. Despite a considerable number of attempts (cf. i.a. Steinke 2006, 1999, Reichertz 1999, Lincoln & Guba 1985), the qualitative research community still has not come up with generally accepted and applicable quality criteria that parallel validity, reliability and objectivity in quantitative research – and with very good reason, considering the sheer variety of non-standardised qualitative approaches. On the other hand, this lack of firm technical rules and standards makes it even more necessary to ensure the quality of the findings and explain and legitimate one's decisions.

In the course of my own work, a number of related steps were taken: Regular discussions with senior experts on interpretive research approaches and hermeneutics; team interpretations at the beginning of each new interpretative phase; regular reflective sessions on the design, methods and preliminary

findings, resulting in research memos (cf. Froschauer & Lueger 2009) and additional commentary columns in the interpretation protocols; and finally a research diary dealing with challenges, decisions and experiences (as well as new ideas) during the research process were all employed to ensure the coherence of the study and prevent me from 'losing my way' along the process. Additional precautions and measures that are more closely related to the hermeneutic interpretation approach itself will be described in section XIV.

Finally, the third maxim claims the **necessity to abandon a strict textbook approach in favour of a more flexible and demand-oriented adaption of the data collection and interpretation methods** in order to enable the researcher to relate to the specifics of his or her particular research field. Yet, to preclude potential misunderstandings, this maxim does not stand for the abandonment of well-tried strategies or principles, but rather emphasises the importance to tailor the methodical approach to the concrete research problem at hand. A 'one-size-fits-all'-approach would hardly allow the field's own structures of relevance to come to light. In addition, comparability and representativeness are per definitionem no particular goals or values in interpretative research, considering that any kind of standardisation is not only of little functionality but might even be dysfunctional as it neglects the specificities of each case and thus makes it harder to extract the generalisable findings. On the other hand, this does signify that we have to waive the claim for a transparent systematic as will hopefully become clear from the next section.

Translated into the practice of my own research, the flexibility maxim means that all my analytical questions and auxiliary interpretative tools were continuously adapted to my current state of knowledge. In other words, they were developed *for,* but also *through* this particular research process. As a consequence, new questions were emerging while others were slowly falling away. On the downside, in retrospect, such a dynamic and cyclical approach is difficult to put into writing: from the present point of view the interpretative processes of the past always seem to be inevitably heading toward the final results – their fragrant emergence is lost in the necessity to portray the findings in the most convincing (and economic) way possible. Resultantly, the description of the

actual data gathering and analysis – even though indispensable for reasons of transparency and comprehensiveness – is actually a very difficult endeavour, as the condensed final version cannot do justice to the dynamic process of its formation.

The application of these maxims to the data collection and organisation has at least two important implications. The first concerns the kind of data that should be used: In general, the literature on social-science hermeneutics is strongly emphasising that the data should be as 'natural' as possible; in other words, that the material should be structured by the field itself and not by the researchers (cf. Oevermann 1981, Hitzler & Honer 1997, Froschauer & Lueger 2009, 2003). The analysis of interpretive patterns in particular demands for non-reactive approaches such as document analysis in order to keep the researcher's influence on the data to a minimum (cf. Höffling et al. 2002). The basis for any hermeneutical analysis is the data's textual fixation: Only written texts are actually compatible with the approach's rather rigid interpretative requirements (cf. Vettori & Knassmüller 2009).

The second implication refers to a pivotal requirement for the interpretation process: As most data in social sciences appear pre-interpreted (cf. Soeffner 2003), the data's origin (e.g. for interviews the interactive social context in which the interview texts were 'produced') and the researcher's role in their creation have to be used as constant reflexive foils against which the different analytical strands have to be tested (cf. Hitzler & Honer 1997). I will come back to this second implication in my next section.

In order to meet the first requirement, I decided against any approach where the researcher is automatically co-constructing the material (e.g. interviews or group discussions) and tried to investigate and assemble materials that were already existent within my field. For this purpose, I collected documents (presentations, position papers and debate transcripts) that were generated in the research field since 1 January 2004 (when the UG 2002 came into act). After going through the collection, I then decided which materials promised the most variable insight into the field's internal dynamics and interaction processes. As a consequence, the

main data corpus consists of the printed documentations of three conferences organised by the Austrian Quality Assurance Agency (AQA) in the last five years (AQA 2009, 2007, 2005). This decision was taken for several reasons: The by now annual conferences bring together representatives from all key actor groups as described in chapter three (representatives from the Ministry, UNIKO, AQA, ÖH etc., as well as QA professionals from most Austrian higher education institutions and international experts). The program includes speeches, presentations, panels and plenary debates which are literally transcribed in the conference proceedings. Although each conference has a thematic focus, the meetings usually leave enough room for general discussions. The debates and discussions were of particular value (and, conveniently, already transcript) as they did not only provide an overview of the respective status quo but also delivered a detailed insight into the field's internal dynamics. As it appears neither possible nor sensible to describe in detail every text that was (at least partly) interpreted, I will at least give an overview of the three conferences and their main characteristics:

- The first conference ("Qualität sichern, managen und entwickeln: Europäische Anforderungen und die Praxis der Universitäten und Fachhochschulen") was held on 16 June 2005 at the University for Music and Performing Arts in Vienna. Combining two main issues (quality management as a managerial core function and benchmarking as an instrument for quality development), the agenda did not only comprise political statements and inputs by national and international experts but also a panel discussion including Friedrich Faulhammer (then deputy head of the Universities and Fachhochschulen department in the Federal Ministry of Science and Research), Werner Jungwirth (then president of the FHK), Claus J. Raidl (a well-known Austrian manager and at that time president of the FHR), Hermann Reuke (a board member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), Hannelore Weck-Hannemann (president of the Austrian Accrediation Council) and Georg Winckler (rector of the University of Vienna and then president of the European University Association). The student representative had excused

herself. As a consequence, the students were practically the only key actor group that did not actively participate in the first meeting (meaning that there was a very small number of students on the list of participants, but as they did neither present something nor take part in the recorded discussion, their 'voice' does not show in the data material). All in all, the proceedings contain 22 different texts, including the two opening speeches, the plenary discussion and a small number of powerpoint slide collections.

- The second conference ("Qualitätsmanagement und –entwicklung im Europäischen Hochschulraum"), which took place on 20 June 2007 at the University for Veterinary Medicine in Vienna, attracted slightly less participants (around 200) and its proceedings contain only 18 different contributory texts. Thematically, the focus was moving towards process-orientation and quality management systems, introducing AQA's approach of a process accreditation. Two additional special tracks ("forums") were dedicated to issues of benchmarking as an instrument of internal quality management and to quality assurance of internationalisation strategies, a topic to be regarded as crucial for all Austrian universities at that time. The plenary activities were once again dominated by a plenary debate on the interplay of internal and external quality assurance among different institutional representatives: Friedrich Faulhammer (in the meantime promoted to Director General for Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences, Personnel Management, Management of Premises and Gender Mainstreaming within the Directorate General) was once again representing the Ministry; Anke Hanft, professor for further education management at the university of Oldenburg and chair of AQA's Scientific Steering Group; Fritz Schmöllebeck, rector of the FH Technikum Wien and representative for the FHK; Lina Anna Spielbauer, then Co-Chair of the Austrian Students Union; and Hermann Reuke and Georg Winckler who were both taking up their functions (and topical positions) from the first conference. However, although the panel did include a member of the

Austrian Student Union this time, the student perspective was still underrepresented.

- This changed with the third conference ("Trends of Quality Assurance and Quality Management in Higher Education Systems") on 24 September 2008, again at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna. This was not only the first conference where the majority of the presentations were held in English but also the first which provided the students with a wider podium, i.a. by dedicating a whole track to the issue of "Students as Members of Review Teams". Two other tracks focused on the development of institutional quality management systems and the relevance of employability for different disciplines and one special track presented ten different approaches and practices of quality audits in Europe, mirroring the recent developments in Austrian higher education policy which foresaw a new audit approach to be at the heart of the new higher education quality assurance act. The closing panel discussion was dedicated to the question of how the quality assurance of the Austrian higher education system could be further developed. Similarly to the special track, the discussion was also intended to pave the way for the introduction of a new legal framework and model for the external quality assurance of Austrian higher education institutions. The panel included Christoph Badelt, then head of Universities Austria and rector of WU Vienna; Samir Al-Mobayyed, then head of ÖH Austria; Friedrich Faulhammer, who had once again been promoted, this time as Secretary General of the Ministry; Ferry Stocker from the FHK; Heinrich Schmidinger as chair of the AQA board and rector of the University of Salzburg; Gerhard Riemer from the Federation of Austrian Industries as a representative of Austria's mighty social partner institutions; and Anke Hanft, once again reprising her role as chair of AQA's Scientific Steering Group.

Concluding the data overview, this is the right place to once again raise the point that the choice of data also has serious consequences for the findings and their

claim for validity: the fact that the conferences were organised by one of the field's key players is of considerable structural influence: AQA's own rationale and its relations to other parties definitely impacted on the agenda and the invited speakers. Yet since AQA's various boards and steering groups are involving almost any other major player in the field (which, at least partly, minimises the danger of a potential 'exclusion' policy) and this kind of pre-constructedness of the data is at least accessible to critical reflection and control (other than the researcher's very own influence on the data through interviews or observations), I would argue that in this case the advantages clearly outweigh the weaknesses.

In addition to the three conference proceedings, I also included about a dozen 'official' position papers by ÖH, UNIKO, AQA, AR, FHR and FHK, which were published or distributed between 2004 and 2009. Even more importantly, the data was complemented by my own observations and experiences in the field since May 2004, which were recorded in various memos and working papers. Although this last category of material was not systematically analysed, – and could also be discarded as being too subjective - it is a valuable source of context information and of particular importance for the reflexive loops during the interpretative process.

Corresponding to the principles of my research paradigm, not all texts were subjected to a full analysis. On the one hand, this was not necessary because conceptual and theoretical saturation was well reached before scrutinising the entire data corpus. On the other hand, the entire logic of a hermeneutical analysis is not oriented to a comprehensive coding of every single piece of text. The decision which material is to be included in which way is rather depending on the progress and the dynamics of the interpretative process itself than on a set of pre-defined criteria. Explaining this logic in a more detailed manner is one of the main goals of my next section.

„The notion that data tell something on their own or that theories are step by step squeezed from the data is as amiable and naive as the notion of the existence of the holy grail.“

(Reichertz 1990: 199, my translation)

XI

As an interpretative method, hermeneutics can look back on a long and rich history. Stemming from the old Greek verb hermeneuo (interpreting, construing, explaining), hermeneutics can be translated as the scholarly enquiry of people's understanding (*Verstehen*). In a very general sense, it denominates the idea to interpret a certain phenomenon as carrying meaning within a certain context and the attempt to reconstruct and decipher this meaning, i.e. to understand it (cf. Knassmüller & Vettori 2009). Early hermeneutics was mostly theologically oriented (marking man's ambition to understand God's will from the holy scriptures), but from the 17th century the approach was increasingly adapted and applied to more profane texts. As a very influential school of thought in philosophy and the social sciences, 'classic' hermeneutics is closely connected to the names and works of Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer (for an overview of hermeneutic's foundations and development in this 'classic' period cf. Kurt 2004, Jung 2001, Hufnagel 2000, Vedder 2000, Nassen 1982).

The newer generation of hermeneutic approaches (which, among other aspects, take a more deconstructive position on the dealing with pre-knowledge and thus break with the concept of the hermeneutic circle) is mostly based on the works of Ulrich Oevermann and his concept of 'objective hermeneutics' (cf. Lueger & Meyer 2009, Oevermann 2002, 1993; Oevermann et al. 1979, Reichertz 1997). In the past 20 years, a barely manageable abundance of different methods has emerged from this approach, which shows an almost equally large variety in terms of their research goals and methodological positions (various overviews can be found in Hitzler 2002, Hitzler/Reichertz/Schröer 1999, Hitzler & Honer

1997, Garz & Kraimer 1994, Schröer 1994 or Jung & Müller-Doohm 1993). One of the most important and influential strands – apart from 'objective hermeneutics' – is social scientific hermeneutics or hermeneutic sociology of knowledge (cf. Soeffner 2003, Hitzler/Reichertz/Schröer 1999, Schröer 1994). My own interpretation model has its roots in both, the objective hermeneutics and social scientific hermeneutics, yet due to its conceptualisation of interpretive patterns as described in section XII, I would rather attribute it to the latter perspective.

However, despite the wealth of publications indicated above, in terms of practical interpretation guidelines, the relevant literature has not very much to offer: That hermeneutics is still regarded as an 'art' that has to be learned like a craft (Reichertz 1994: 128) and its practice deemed 'indescribable' (Reichertz/Soeffner 1994: 310) is probably making the approach attractive and unattractive at the same time. There are only a few publications (e.g. Froschauer & Lueger 2003; Wernet 2001; Lüders 1991) that provide an in depth view on how the results have been achieved – and even there the examples often seem trivial and strangely remote from the actual interpretation process. Every presentation of a hermeneutical analysis appears to be faced with the same dilemma: without concrete examples of how the data have been interpreted and how the researcher has reached his conclusions, the method is deemed intransparent or unfounded. On the other hand, the display of the complete interpretation process is rendered impossible in view of the sheer quantity of interpretation results and protocols. And providing singular examples is not too helpful either, as any example has to be necessarily de-contextualised and detached from the dynamic and cross-linking cognitive process in which it originated, which makes it appear either trivial – or again intransparent. A considerable part of the problem can be ascribed to the fact that a hermeneutical analysis is by its very idea dynamic and process-oriented: It is only towards the end of the analysis that the interpretive patterns and meaning structures 'shape up' in their final form. From the beginning, every thesis and interpretative thread is considered to be a preliminary finding that could and should be discarded and refined the more the project progresses. The most viable solution seems to be a particularly detailed

introduction of the method's underlying principles and requirements and an almost handbook-like depiction of the various interpretative steps.

I will thus start – in analogy to the maxims of interpretative social research in my previous section – with an overview of the methodological key concepts I found of particular importance, in the scholarly discourse as well as in practice:

Deconstruction and Sequentiality: In contrast to classic hermeneutics and the idea of the hermeneutical circle, the Post-Oevermann methods abstain from approaching the text as a whole, where each previous reading – in a process of oscillating between holism and particularism - provides the assumptions that are tested and developed during each subsequent reading. Following Oevermann's theoretical premise that the relevant meaning structures are at least latently represented in every component of the material, the texts are rather deconstructed and broken up into smaller units of meaning. Through this deconstruction, the text is stripped of its immediate context which could otherwise dominate the interpretation process. The units of meaning form the basis of the analysis, yet what constitutes such a unit (e.g. its length) is a question that can only be pragmatically answered with regard to the research questions and the research design. However, one aspect remains the same within any hermeneutic approach: The units of meaning have to be interpreted chronologically, i.e. strictly following the sequence of their appearance in the texts. This rule is owed to the assumption that structures of meaning are also following a principle of sequentiality (cf Oevermann 2002: 6f): within any action or communication sequence, a preceding act opens certain possibilities for later acts while precluding others. Following Lueger (2000) only an approach that is oriented at this sequentiality can be able to understand the structuration process of actions and communications instead of subsumingly explain it from to the logic of the finalised structure.

This has also some practical implications for the interpretation process: Even though it is possible to skip parts of the text (maybe because they are redundant or do not bear any obvious relation to the research questions), it is not recommendable to 'jump backwards', i.e. interpret earlier sequences after the

later ones. It is very difficult to blend out any knowledge about how the case at hand will unfold, thus making it more likely to succumb to a subsumptive logic.

Reconstruction and Extensity: Hermeneutic approaches do not intend to decipher *the* meaning of an act or communication as any act carries various meanings on various levels. Even on a manifest level, an expression such as 'quality assurance' offers different options of how it can be defined or understood. And if we try to reconstruct what the concept means within a specific field, the scope for valid interpretations grows even wider. Contextual factors, actor relations, culturally mediated values or socially requested norms all play a role here. Consequently, as researchers, we never find isolated meanings or clearly delimited sense-making patterns, but are rather confronted with a dynamic netting of different meanings that can even be inconsistent and contradictory. One of the main challenges of the interpretation process, then, is to accept the ambiguity of the material and to reconstruct as many potential meanings as possible. It is through collecting, discussing and contrasting many differentiated readings (*Lesarten*) that the analyst tries to uncover the typical and generalisable patterns within a specific case. *Lesarten* can be comprehended as virtual contexts, in which the (originally decontextualised) sequence appears meaningful and reasonable (Kurt 2004: 246). Yet the collection of different readings is only the first of two closely related parts: In a later step, these readings are confronted with the actual context in which the original statement or expression appeared (Oevermann 1981: 13).

On first view, this combination of decontextualisation and recontextualisation seems needlessly complicated and time-consuming: Why strip a sequence of its immediate context, which offers you valuable hints about its significance, only to reconstruct the same context (as one of various contexts) in a later step in the same process? Again, the answer lies in the plurivalency of the material: without ignoring the immediate context, this context would very likely dominate the interpretation process, making it more difficult to identify less obvious but equally valid (and relevant) meanings. In order to foreclose the risk that potentially important *Lesarten* get blended out systematically (the researcher's

own preferences and underlying assumptions are a fertile ground for fostering blind spots), the interpreters actively look for as many heterogeneous *Lesarten* as possible (extensity principle). For similar reasons, it is theoretically insignificant how often a specific reading is identified (especially in comparison to others): the relevance of a meaning is not mirrored in the frequency of its appearance but in its structural importance. In practice, however, readings that disappear during the interpretation process usually do not find their way into the final findings. I will come back to the respective interpretative steps, when describing my own analytical procedure a little later.

Substantiation and critical reflexivity: As I have already indicated, different readings can well be inconsistent – but they must always be self-consistent. The primary criterion for accepting a certain interpretative thread as valid is its arguability, which – especially within group interpretations – usually goes hand in hand with its agreeability: Even though a specific interpretation does not need to be unanimously shared by all the members of a research team, every analyst has to be able to comprehend the meaning and trace it back to the original text. Such rules guard the interpreters against being carried away by their personal associations, which do have a tendency to become self-referential after a while. Consequently, if a certain reading cannot be argued with the help of the initial material, it gets automatically discarded. This procedure already indicates the limits of the extensity principle: Only readings that are 'typical' for organisational contexts are admitted and registered.

Once more, the main difficulty lies in dealing with previous knowledge and the consideration of the text's terms of construction (cf. Knassmüller & Vettori 2009): On the one hand, it is necessary to pay attention to the specific situative context from which a certain action or statement emerges (e.g. the interview context, the setting of a group discussion etc.); on the other hand, the interpreters need to be able to blend such contexts - at least partially – out, so that certain interpretive strands do not get lost from the outset (cf. Oevermann 1981). Therefore, any previous or contextual knowledge as well as expertise or theoretical knowledge are an important asset for the quality of the interpretation, yet can also be a risk, unless those presumptions and apparently given facts that

stem from such previous/expert knowledge are permanently and critically reflected (cf. Froschauer & Lueger 2003). Theses and arguments, for example, should generally be substantiated on the basis of the material and not on the basis of theoretical knowledge (cf. Wernet 2001), as theory-related preferences have a habit of overshadowing the analysis: interpreting any text from a 'theory of power' perspective hardly provides the added value one hopes for in such an elaborate methical approach.

These methodological premises are also reflected in my particular interpretive design. In general, this design can be described as an interpretation process with six different steps, of which the first four are repeated for each unit of analysis (cf. graph 4.1). Yet before the steps are described in a more detailed manner, it is essential to enter into the question of how the data material as such is approached and how the units of analysis are selected. Considering the methodological underpinnings and time-consuming application of any hermeneutic approach, it should be comprehensible why it is neither necessary nor recommendable to interpret and code every single passage of the original material. Yet in spite of Froschauer und Lueger's argument that the relevant meaning structures are represented in every single part of the material (2003: 112), selecting those units and passages that should be included in the analysis is not a trivial matter. On the other hand, the maxims of a cyclically organised open and flexible interpretive research approach (cf. section XIII) also implicate that the decision which passages should be included cannot be made once and for all at the beginning of the research. In this particular case, these requirements were translated as follows:

Generally, the choice of texts and passages for the actual hermeneutic analysis was based on four criteria (following the recommendations of Froschauer & Lueger 2003): the criterion of density (texts with a decidedly integrative function – e.g. opening speeches or concluding remarks – usually refer to a broad range of issues that are relevant within a community); the criterion of diversity (texts with a great variety of themes and perspectives – e.g. plenary discussions – were considered to provide a particularly good insight into the logics of the field);

the criterion of similarity (in order to review and appraise certain interpretive threads, it can be useful to interpret texts that could potentially support these threads); and the criterion of dissimilarity (in order to avoid a premature determination of interpretive patterns it is necessary to interpret texts and passages that visibly deviate from previous/other materials).

In addition, all texts and passages were selected according to the principle of sequentiality (cf. Lueger 2010: 179), and that on any level: materials from the first AQA Conference were attended to before materials from the second and third Conference, all texts from a particular Conference were approached in order of their appearance (e.g. first the opening speeches, then the keynote presentations, finally the plenary discussions) and the selected passages from a particular text were also interpreted chronologically.
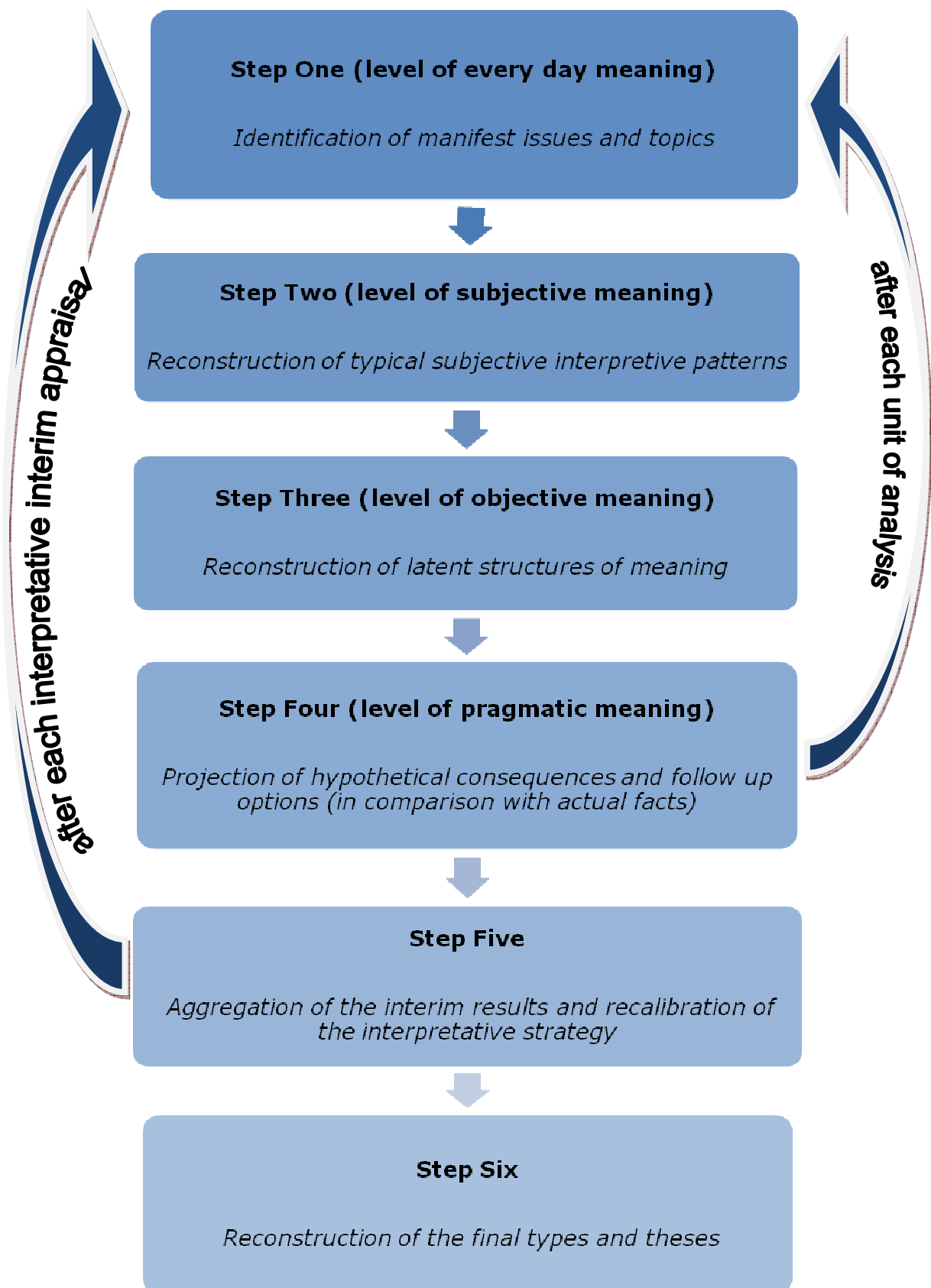
Every text was then subdivided into smaller units based on a thematic principle, i.e. every change of the main topic was considered as a 'natural' boundary that would define the beginning of a new unit. In most cases such boundaries coincided with the paragraph structure of the original transcripts, ensuring that no unit would be longer than half a page at the maximum. Whereas at the beginning of the interpretive process for each new text, the opening paragraphs were analysed completely (i.e. without any gap), at a later stage, the all too redundant passages were skipped (unless being used as a 'touchstone' according to the similarity criterion described above).

Following Grounded Theory's theoretical saturation principle (Glaser & Strauss 1967), new data material was included until the core categories (in this case the main interpretive patterns) were identified and 'saturated', i.e. could be satisfactorily characterised and related to each other. Further material was then used to add depth to the characterisation of the main types and their (thematic, social and temporal) relations, but was not subjected to the same level of detailed hermeneutic analysis. The principle of arrangement for the main types will be described in the final interpretive step below.

The organisation of the text material was then followed by the actual interpretative process (although, in practice, both phases are usually overlapping and cyclically intertwined as I have already described). The basic interpretative steps are visualised in graph 4.1 and will be subsequently described in detail:

Step one: Identification of manifest issues and topics (level of every day meaning)

Before taking the interpretation to those 'latent' levels, that lie at the heart of the hermeneutic approach, it is necessary to come to an understanding of the text's everyday meaning on an almost purely manifest level (I say 'almost', because in my experience latencies can never be entirely blended out; even the most superficial content analysis in social sciences usually work with the meanings of a certain word and expression and not with the word/expression itself as some kind of abstract order of letters.) Depending on the size of the analytical unit, this step combines several purposes: When analysing a rather small unit of meaning (usually a single expression or phrase) as I have done whenever a certain passage seemed particularly rich or problematic, the main purpose is to paraphrase the expression in different ways in order to reconstruct how it might be typically understood (everyday speech perspective). When analysing longer units (e.g. paragraphs or even longer pieces of text), there is an additional need to reduce them by summarising the key content. The analytical perspective remains the same, though: it is still about identifying the various everyday meaning(s) of the text. Consequently, the paraphrase should not become too abstract and reduced – in difference to other forms of text analysis, this is not the step where the theory-building mainly builds upon; yet the collection of manifest themes and viewpoints this first step results in is an important basis for the subsequent approaching of the less obvious underlying meaning.

Step One (level of every day meaning)

Identification of manifest issues and topics

Step Two (level of subjective meaning)

Reconstruction of typical subjective interpretive patterns

Step Three (level of objective meaning)

Reconstruction of latent structures of meaning

Step Four (level of pragmatic meaning)

Projection of hypothetical consequences and follow up options (in comparison with actual facts)

Step Five

Aggregation of the interim results and recalibration of the interpretative strategy

Step Six

Reconstruction of the final types and theses

after each interpretative interim appraisal

after each unit of analysis

graph 4.1: Reconstructing the interpretive patterns

Step two: Reconstruction of subjective interpretative patterns (typified subjective meaning)

In a second step, the interpreter deliberately shifts the perspective from the recipient to the communicator by putting him-/herself into the speaker's/writer's place. Here, the focus does not lie on how a certain phrase might be usually understood, but on how it might have been intended. Yet, as the actual intentions of the text producers cannot be known (and are usually less relevant from a sociologist's point of view than from an individual psychologist's), they can only be reconstructed as *typical* subjective meanings. Depending on the research questions and research material, a variety of aspects can be highlighted (e.g. which functions does the text fulfil? What are the main characteristics the text producers attribute to other actors or issues? How are certain actions assessed? What is the main logic of a specific communication process?). In this particular case, the key questions were mainly geared to reconstructing the actors' subjective interpretive patterns with regard to the key phenomena (i.e. higher education and quality as well as all topics and issues related to these core concepts) and to the field within which they are enacted. In other words: How are the actors making sense of what is going on around them? As the material mostly consists of statements, presentations and position papers, this was operationalised in the following way: What are the main messages the actors (might typically) want to convey? What causalities and interdependencies are they referring to while explaining themselves and their themes to others? What are the main premises they want the other actors to understand/act upon?

In this way, the second step is a necessary basis for the third one: By reconstructing the typified perspectives and sense making patterns of the acting subjects, the interpreter gets valuable hints about the contextual structures of meaning in which those actors (and their own interpretations) are embedded. An actor's observation that the increasing attention to quality is rooted in the also increasing competition between different universities, for example, lead me to the question, under what contextual circumstances such an interpretation comes into existence (or, in a social-constructivist sense: holds truth for the actors).

Consequently, the third step shifts the focus again; from the acting subjects to their enacted contexts.

Step three: Reconstruction of the interpretative patterns' latent contextual structures (objective meaning)

As I have already indicated, the third step is accompanied by another shift in the analytical perspective, turning the focus away from the actors and towards the conditions and results of their enactment. It is this reservoir of socially shared and mostly institutionalised (and in this sense 'objective') meaning structures which form the core of the interpretive patterns this work is aiming at. Consequently, the interpreter looks for the structural conditions that have to be presumed in order for a statement/text fragment to make sense. During this analytical step, the method is implementing the final transit from a text analysis to a context analysis. In other words, the interpreter tries to take a look 'behind the scenes' of the text, aiming to reconstruct the latent structures and patterns which have triggered/conditioned the actor's choice of expression including the wording, grammar or the overall sequentiality (cf. Froschauer & Lueger 2003: 151; for a short description in English cf. Lueger et al. 2005). Yet whereas the text itself can be usually approached in a direct manner (as is being done in the paraphrasing of step one), the research-relevant contextual structures have to be inferred or reconstructed with the help of additional guiding questions and auxiliary constructs. In my case, I have chosen two different though related strategies to approach the interpretive patterns I was looking for: On the one hand, through analytical questions directed *at* the text which were directly deduced from the main research questions. Due to the dynamic nature of the research process (questions dynamically emerge, disappear or change in dependence of the respective state of knowledge), it is almost impossible to list every single one of them, yet the main analytical strands can be described as follows:

- What are quality – and its derivates such as quality assurance, quality culture, quality development etc. – typically associated with? What are the implicit requirements and functions of different QA approaches?
- How can the underlying assumptions about higher education and its purposes be characterised?
- What does the text tell us about the typical actor constellations and rules, norms and values of the issue field in which it was created and shaped? Are there any explicit or implicit references to change and internal dynamics as well as to the world beyond the observed field?

On the other hand, the text itself provides clues and indicators for potentially significant field characteristics and interpretations (cf. Froschauer & Lueger 2003: 117): Specific word choices, unusual expressions, abruptions, grammatical structures (e.g. active versus passive, conditionals), repetitions, generalisations or banalities all can contain hints about the underlying socially shared rules, norms and structures. Whenever the interpreter identifies such valuable particularities (ignoring the temptation to simply read over them), they are subjected to the question what they might have to tell – albeit not in a psychological but in a sociological sense: Under what circumstances or in which contexts are such linguistic choices and decisions socially meaningful rather than incidental?

In practice, the interpretative process can only be successful through the interplay of both elements – the questions *at* the text and the specifics *of* the text; once more, the relationship is circular and not linear. The result of this third step is a compilation of potentially relevant structural conditions – a sort of thesis fragments. In order to complete the reconstructive process, a fourth step has to be taken: the projection of hypothetical pragmatic consequences if the conditions were effective.

Step four: Projection of hypothetical consequences and follow up options (level of pragmatic meaning)

The fourth step has two main purposes and acts as an important link between the various interpretative cycles: in its conceptual function it concludes the immediate interpretative cycle by adding another element to the reconstructive process whereas in its falsification function it provides the criteria against which the plausibility of the preliminary thesis fragments are checked in the subsequent cycles. As described above, the third step ends with a collection of possible structural conditions under which the analysed text can be considered as reasonable and meaningful. All the different readings have to be argued from the text itself. The successional fourth step is the first (and only one) in which the interpreter is allowed to distance himself from the actual text by asking about the hypothetical structural effects that arise from his previous interpretations. In much simpler words: What would be the logical consequences if the respective conditions were in effect? How would that influence the actions, perceptions, communications and interpretations of the field actors and in which way would it have an impact on the field itself (level of pragmatic meaning)? Through this kind of 'thought experiment', the potential interpretive patterns get 'fleshed out' and are also checked with regard to their relevancy for concrete actions and interactions: How would they further manifest themselves in the field if taken seriously?

Such questions already indicate the approach-inherent logic for testing the theory bearing capacity of the preliminary results: Once the potential effects of a certain structural condition are defined, it becomes possible to check whether these effects are actualised in subsequent sequences or further material. Consequently, at the end of the fourth step, the interpreter specifies what future sequences and cases would need to look like/address if certain interpretative strands were actually relevant within the field: What would speak for/against a certain thesis fragment in the material still to be analysed? At this point, it becomes again apparent why the interpreter needs to follow the sequentiality principle as described above: Without strictly following the chronological sequence in which the analysed units of meaning appear in the text, the

interpreter loses one of his most effective means for checking the quality and plausibility of his results. It is important to note, though, that the main criterion for keeping/discarding a certain interpretive strand is not the frequency, with which it appears in the material but rather its 'structural importance', i.e. its significance and explanatory power for the constitution and development of the issue field.

With the description of the fourth step, our main analytical cycle is completed: after defining the potential consequences and 'touch-stones', the interpreter approaches another unit of meaning or text fragment and starts again with the paraphrasing – with one small extension: One of the first questions that are directed at the text asks about whether the expectations and indications that were defined at the end of step four, are realised in the new passage. If not, it is not necessarily a sign that the whole strand should be discarded, but rather very carefully observed during the rest of the interpretation. In an analogous manner, more material is analysed - until the interpreter has collected enough material to attempt a first consolidation of the interim results.

Step five: Aggregation of the interim results and recalibration of the interpretative strategy

Following the premises of a cyclically organised qualitative research design as outlined in the previous section, the interpretative results were not collected and recorded at the end of the empirical phase, but gradually summarised, compared and critically scrutinised. Such an incremental integration is not only more compatible with the sequential reconstructive logic of most hermeneutic methods but should also impede the premature solidification of the interpreter's impressions and conclusions. The careful documentation of these interim aggregations is of particular importance, as hermeneutic interpretations – even though they often change and vary *during* the research process – eventually seem self-evident and appear as if they had always been present and thus invisibilise their own processual reconstruction and development (cf. Froschauer & Lueger 2009: 118). In the context of this research, I have concluded the

reconstruction of every single case with a short summary of the main interpretive fragments. After the analysis of several smaller cases or a particularly complex case (e.g. the podium discussions), the preliminary results were condensed to first tentative patterns by way of comparison – always mindful of the fact that the condensation had to be considered preliminary as well. This step was greatly helped by my research diary and the research memos that were compiled during the analytical process. It is necessary to note that this step does not produce complete theses or types, but rather fragmentary accumulations of structural elements that potentially (in the sense of 'plausibly') belong together. Consequently, similar variants can provisionally exist in parallel as can contradictory ones. Finally, the gaps and open questions that emerged in the course of this aggregation guided the selection of the next cases and the additional questions for the next interpretative cycle, as the main purpose for each new cycle is to deepen the understanding of the field's main patterns by challenging the interim results. It is only after these results have achieved a level of structural stability and empirical saturation that the final integrative step can be taken.

Step six: Reconstruction of the final types and theses

In general, types can be defined as constructed forms to which a specific number and combination of characteristics is attributed (cf. Reichertz 1990). What kind of typology the researcher aims at is very much depending on his perspective and research goals (cf.Bohnsack 1991). In my case, the typology is an arrangement of the second order constructions, which, following Schütz (1972), are based on the typifications of the actors themselves. Comparable to the type-building of the documentary method (cf. Bohnsack 2007, Nentwig-Gesemann 2007) though, the area of my type-building is not the reservoirs of knowledge, theories or norm systems which lie outside the actors' *Lebenswelt,* but the meaning structures and orientation frames that define it: i.e. the ensemble of different quality cultures – as I have labeled my types of interpretive patterns – which constitute this particular issue field – quality assurance in Austrian higher education – and

influence the perceptions and actions of the subjects who are active in the issue field.

Practically, my type-building was conducted as an alternation of inductive and abductive phases as suggested by Reichertz (1990): Carried by the principles of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss 1967), i.e. looking for minimal and maximal contrasts, the structural elements identified in my previous steps were either subsumed under an already existing type (qualitative induction) or led to the (re)construction of a new type (abduction). Although both approaches are closely intertwined, the starting phase was mostly dominated by the abductive logic (justifying Oevermann's claim that hermeneutical analysis are in general reconstructive rather than subsumptive, cf. Oevermann 2002), whereas in the later phases the types were rather 'fleshed out' than renewed. Subtypes or new types were constructed when the coherence of a previously defined type became increasingly brittle or showed irresolvable internal inconsistencies and contradictions. In a more advanced stadium, I started to analyse and align the densest and clearest types with regard to their most fundamental characteristics, leading me to a small number of characteristics or dimensions (determinants) which could be used as additional analytical parameters for shaping new types – or testing whether they exhibited the structural strength and internal complexity to justify taking them as a type of their own. The comparative table presented in chapter six is largely based on these analytical dimensions.

On the other hand, not all of the interpretative material could be used for the type-building: The interpretation had come up with several issues which referred to the issue field as a whole and thereby were not related to a single type but to most or even all of them. In order to organise the more comprehensive themes and aspects which provided a wonderful opportunity to specify the field and its internal structure and dynamics as well as the relationship with its environment, I borrowed Niklas Luhmann's helpful structural trias (functional, social and temporal, cf. Luhmann 1984). Before I arrive at my main results, the presentation of the interpretive patterns as outlined in this chapter, I will therefore 'reintroduce' the issue field at hand – this time as a (re)construction from the material generated by the field itself.

Chapter five: Shared misunderstandings

"The main problem we all face is that there is no single agreed purpose, method or definition of quality assurance. It is largely one of those phrases that mean what you want it to mean […]. Of course, the danger is that people will use the same phrase, the same words, to mean lots of different things. So there is a communication problem immediately when we start talking about quality assurance".

(Williams 2009b: 15)

XII

Quality is important because a) everyone in Europe thinks so and b) there are not good counterarguments. This short summary of the QA-related discourse in Austrian higher education may be polemically exaggerated, but on the other hand demonstrates one of the discourse's most striking characteristics: As all actors and field participants agree on the issue's importance, the question what the issue is actually about gets all too often overlooked or drowned in the technicalities of methodical discussions; why should we debate on the meanings of quality, quality assurance or higher education, when we already know that the concepts are relative and theoretical definitions practically irrelevant?

In the following chapter I will discuss some of the fundamental mindsets and meaning structures that get thus blinded out by the field's actors but fuel the discourse nonetheless. Yet before I present the main interpretive patterns at which reconstruction this study was set to, I will at first delve a little deeper into the field's 'topology' and complement the conceptual outline from chapter three with a synthesis of the field's most noticeable characteristics as uncovered by my analysis. The aspects covered in the present chapter can be regarded as transgressing the single interpretive patterns but will nevertheless contextualise their subsequent presentation. Following Luhmann as outlined at the end of my

previous chapter, the three sections of this chapter will each deal with one dimension: first the factual dimension (dealing with a confusion of two rather different orientations), then the social dimension (showing how the field is influenced by internal and external factors alike) and finally the temporal dimension of the discourse.

Issue-wise, the introductory quote by the former QAA director and ENQA president Peter Williams fits the Austrian context as if it was meant for it: One of the most important internal contradictions that characterise the issue in Austria is indebted to the rather imprecise language and terminology the actors make use of. This observation does not primarily refer to the fact that terms like 'quality' or 'improvement' are constantly used without a clear definition, for there is a clear difference, anyway, between how a term is defined and what is meant by it. Yet it is the very meaning(s) attached to the various terms and concepts that become more vague and confusing the closer one looks at the discussion protocol and other data. This goes up to a point where the academic in me starts to wonder how the discourse could have gone so smooth and unhindered in the past couple of years, as the various protagonists are clearly talking about very different things (whereas the practitioner in me tends to ignore this observation in a cosily pragmatic way). The eminent potential for misunderstanding is not visible on a first view basis: On a purely manifest level, the use of the same language and shared references to the same normative and scholarly sources such as the Berlin Declaration, the European Standards & Guidelines and Lee Harvey's constantly quoted heuristic of quality notions (Harvey 2006, Harvey & Green 1993), signal a common understanding of the issue at hand. This impression is further reinforced by formulaic and omnipresent statements on which every actor and discussants can easily agree upon, such as "the quality of higher education is important" or "improvements are necessary". Yet the more latent underlying notions show considerable differences, even before reaching a level of latency embodied by the different interpretive patterns that will be presented in chapter six. The key terms 'quality management' and 'quality assurance' in particular are constantly intermingled and mostly used as synonyms for each other – sometimes even within one and the same sentence.

Issue-wise, this has far more important consequences than satisfying the pedagogical penchants of scholarly nitpickers: It is not so much the labels themselves that get confused – chapter one has already shown that even formal definitions can vary greatly – but the ideas or concepts they stand for. Let us take a closer look at what I mean by that.

In a very general sense, the QA-related discourse in Austria over the last six years has been shaped by two dominant notions. The first one can be characterised as a rather classic **quality management** concept – though it may be necessary to point out that the term 'classic' rather refers to the concept of quality management as it is presently used in Austrian higher education and not so much to the period of time it was thus used (which, on the contrary, happens to be rather short). This type of quality-related activity is strictly oriented towards the organisation itself, its main function being one of management and control. The underlying understanding of quality – though remaining latent and invisible – is imported from industrial contexts and works more as an unspecified umbrella term or synonym for the kind of organisational goals and purposes we know from the appropriate management literature, such as effectiveness, innovation, efficiency, productivity, prosperity or growth. That such goals are hardly endogenous to higher education (at least not in Austria with its traditionally strong public sector) gets discursively blinded out by the latently conveyed message that higher education institutions are not different from any other kind of organisation – they have just realised this truth comparatively late.

The purpose of a quality management system in this notion is to provide data and information about the organisation's performance in various fields (mostly research, but also teaching or student services) and to support the development of management cycles that are based on these data. Usual characteristics of quality-management-oriented discourse-elements are:

- Role and process descriptions which organise and specify the relations of various actors and their functions for the organisation's goal-oriented and

efficient performance (e.g. the responsibilities of the top management or of the QA units)

- Management models which relate the institutional (quality) objectives to particular activities as well as feedback and monitoring cycles (usually as a derivative of the so-called PDCA-cycle that complement the core activities – plan, do, act, check – with additional operational or analytical steps)

- Key performance indicators and operating figures (sometimes as part of a management information system) that would allow a better understanding of how the organisation works and whether certain activities were actually successful

- Lists and descriptions of management and information tools, e.g. strategy workshops, performance contracts, quality circles and boards, management reviews, process descriptions or the ever popular *Wissensbilanzen*

The quality management notion is strongly characterised by a tendency to incorporate every actor, process and instrument in an overarching framework, where every part has a function in order to achieve the overall objectives (although the question whether a quality management *system* needs to be systemic or just systematic is still undecided). Chapter six will present two interpretive patterns – the managerial quality culture and the engineering quality culture – that integrate the quality management notion in a particularly meaningful way, demonstrating that the underlying logic is not so much quality-related but results from a desire to control the traditionally 'unmanageable' academic community as well as its performance and output.

The second dominant notion is more externally oriented and is rather carried by current political interests and labour market requirements than by a specific management philosophy. I will label this one '**quality assurance**'. Its main function is the meeting of external requirements and reassurance of external stakeholders. Here, 'quality' is everything that is being covered by the criteria catalogues of the quality assurance agencies and similar external examiners – in other words, the concept emerges as a result of its operationalisation (instead of

the other way round). That the operationalisation process itself, on the other hand, is also influenced by underlying interpretations, norms and values, should not be ignored, but makes it even more difficult to explicate what the various actors are actually talking about and dealing with. Chapter six will delve a little deeper into this problem.

In many ways, the quality assurance notion is exemplified by the logic of the European Standards & Guidelines and its various national and international derivates and copies: Management processes and structures clearly play a minor role to the demands for stakeholder involvement and stakeholder information. Usual examples for such demands include:

- the participation of students, employers and labour market representatives in quality assurance activities, e.g. during the development or review of curricula
- the obtaining of regular feedback from outside the universities, e.g. through graduate or corporate surveys
- the publication of qualification profiles, syllabus information or grading criteria to support the students' decision whether to select a certain programme/course or not
- the assurance that all teachers demonstrate a decent level of didactic skills, e.g. by subjecting them to regular staff development programs
- the availability of learning resources and support mechanisms to students, e.g. in the case of libraries, IT facilities but also tutors or student advisers

The ESG even dedicate one entire standard (of seven!) to the issue of public information, requiring that "*institutions should regularly publish up to date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering*" (ENQA 2009: 20) – a demand which we will meet again in the 'consumer protection quality culture' to be described in chapter six.

Taking a look at these examples, it becomes instantly clear that their managerial relevance (in the sense of organising and coordinating institutional activities in order to achieve certain objectives) is only peripheral (by which I do not mean to discard the importance of feedback and external factors for an organisation's management as such, but this is not the way these ideas are primarily framed here). Overall, quality assurance guidelines usually are not descriptions of management models but a blend of codes of conduct, procedure handbooks and collections of good principles. Yet their practical relevance is very high, considering that most external quality assurance schemes and criteria catalogues are rather oriented at this notion than at the 'quality management' notion: in this regard, and from a quality assurance perspective, the functionality of the internal management system ranks clearly below a demonstrated compliance with external standards – even though this is hardly reflected in the respective discourse.

Coming thus back to my initial argument, the main problem does not lie in a manifestly observable confusion of the two labels, i.e. actors talking about quality management and meaning quality assurance, or vice versa, even though this is already causing some confusion and misunderstandings. It rather stems from the apparent persuasion that *there is no difference at all,* that both purposes – internal control and compliance with external standards and interests – can be achieved with the same system, the same instruments, the same approach. The HEI managers make no exception here: Graduate surveys, teaching evaluations and drop out analyses are all expected to provide data that can be used for managing the organisation – the fact that they have so far failed in doing so (with teaching evaluation results being relatively stable due to statistical reasons and graduate rates being almost non-influencable due to the non-existent admission policies) is barely attributed to their inadequacy as management instruments in the Austrian context but to flaws in their design that can be amended (cf. the engineering quality culture pattern in chapter six which brings this persuasion to its full fruition). Bearing this in mind, the regularly voiced disappointments in the field have been kind of pre-programmed.

The organisation and conceptualisation of external quality assurance is making its own significant contribution to the blurring between the quality management notion and the quality assurance notion in Austria. Supposedly aiding the universities in their way towards improving their performance and output, the criteria catalogues of the Austrian agencies are rather reflecting current political interests and adapting the omnipresent European Standards & Guidelines. Paying attention to even the most manifest aspects of the discourse in Austria already reveals that the external approaches – evaluations, audits and accreditations alike – are less suited to check the functionality of a university's management approaches or processes, but rather assess their compliance with externally imposed standards of little managerial relevance. Even the regularly returning argument that the external examination is an important impulse for internal developments is put into perspective by the procedural reality: The identified 'strengths and weaknesses' are always related to the criteria catalogues and the mandate of the peer reviewers. In addition, they have to avoid any embarrassing exposure of the reviewed institution that could result from the political requirement to publish the review results. Hence, many of the more relevant strengths and weaknesses remain unfocused and unattended, either because they are not covered by the review template or because it is more opportune to leave them unheeded – following Frey (2007), most external evaluations do anyway rarely uncover problems that had not been known to the organisation before. Karin Riegler, one of Austria's most articulate QA experts brings this situation to the point:

> „[…] the higher education institutions are well advised, to regard the standards as having highest priority, to neglect everything else ('compliance behaviour'), and to try to avoid the mentioning of weaknesses. Continuous improvement, however, is hardly possible in such a situation, as it requires an honest analysis of internal strengths and weaknesses as well as the institutions' right to set their own priorities" (Riegler 2010: 166, my translation).

In this respect, I would argue that the main difference scholars and practitioners of quality assurance should attend to is not the one between 'accountability' and

'improvement', as current debates suggest (cf. chapter one), but the one between an 'inward-orientation' and 'outward-orientation' of quality assurance. 'Accountability' and 'improvement' cannot even be conceptually equated, with the latter being a very relative, context-bound and observer-dependent construct (cf. Vettori & Lueger 2008). Yet, whether certain actions and practices are geared to achieve external relevance (resulting in certifications, awards, contracts or simply a raise or at least a reduced cut in funding) or internal relevance (resulting in intentionally induced if not foreseeable changes of the organisation itself) marks one of the main conceptual bipolarities of the QA phenomenon (cf. Vettori et al. 2007). It may be necessary to strike a balance between external and internal requirements, but it is not possible to meet both ends with the exactly same means – the current debates concerning the value of rankings and accreditations or the impact of quality assurance in general (cf. Harvey 2008, Hazelkorn 2007, Stensaker 2007b) could bear testimony to that.

Concludingly, however, it is important to remind ourselves once more, that the actors are hardly aware of their primary orientation frames – in this regard the QM/QA notions have a similar constitution and constitutional influence as the interpretive patterns concept described in chapter four. The use of a uniform and standardised language and terminology invisibilise that the actors in the field are talking about different, sometimes even opposite, ideas and perceptions of reality. The situation is further aggravated by the observation that "assumptions about language, labels and definitions have consequences for not only those who have the capacity to influence decision-making but also those affected who do not participate in problem setting or problem solving" (Houston 2008: 64).

There is no clear and common understanding of quality assurance other than that quality assurance is necessary and positive by trend. Quality assurance and quality management are terminologically intertwined, leading to a situation where QA is perceived as a new management mode and any kind of management is also a way of ensuring and improving quality. Terms such as 'quality', 'improvement', 'learning' and 'stakeholder satisfaction' are always positively connoted. In the words of Morley (2003: vii): "Quality has become a

universalizing metanarrative". As a consequence, every argument that contains the word quality and transports the wish to make something better, is benevolently accepted and rarely put to test. By this way, the field reaches an important minimal compromise: no matter what we do, we all mean well and have the same goals. Chapter six will show us that this is only true for the verbalised goals that hide in certain standardised expressions. And apparent harmony should not be confused with mutual trust as we will see in the following section.

"While the key stakeholder groups are well known, it is more difficult to map what is being sought by these differing actors, given divergent ideas about the meaning of quality and the many levels on which judgments need to be made."

(Baird 2008: 67)

XIII

In this section I want to take a closer look at the social constitution of our issue field. This will happen in two steps: In a first step I will focus on internal structures and discuss the basic principles that direct the actors' relations to each other. The issue field's meaning structure itself, however, is at the core of chapter six, where I will present the five interpretive patterns that shape the discourse and guide actions and interpretations alike. In a second step I will turn my view to the field's boundaries and add a few tentative thoughts to its environmental relations and its potential connection to other issue fields.

In chapter three I have already described the conceptual parameters of the field, noting that it is an analytical construct formed around the main issue of quality assurance/quality management in higher education that involves all institutionalised actors/actor groups that have actively and publicly participated in the (political) discourse on quality assurance in Austrian higher education between 2004 and 2010. From the data, the field's underlying social structure appears as an internally highly structured arena involving a multitude of institutionalised actors with conditions and experiences that are partly shared and partly completely different. Accordingly, negotiation and discourse are two important principles of this structure, mirroring academic traditions as well as a struggle over meaning with regard to the field's core issue.

The three different sectors in Austrian higher education – public universities, *Fachhochschulen* and private universities – are clearly reflected in the field's structure. As was already discussed in my short overview of Austrian tertiary education in chapter two, the three types of higher education institutions have

rather different legal, economical, historical and cultural contexts, which certainly is one of the most influential factors on the recent discourse's shape and main themes. Correspondingly to their similar age and comparable legal conditions, however, the *Fachhochschulen* and private universities share much more with each other than with the public universities, which also shows in their argumentative patterns and in the coalitions that are formed, e.g. during the plenary debates in all three AQA conferences.

In this respect, the desire for equality is one of the main argumentative driving forces of the sectors' confrontations with each other, although the form this supposed equality takes (or should take) is highly sector-dependent: The public universities demand the same *rights* when it comes to student selection and funding schemes: From the perspective of their representatives, they cannot even fulfil their own quality standards – much less those of the international community – if they have to keep up their open access policy without an adequate funding per student. The Fachhochschulen and private universities, on the other hand, demand that the public universities should have the same *responsibilities;* to their representatives it has always deemed a great injustice that the public universities did not have to go through the same mandatory external QA processes and thereby have an 'easier life' – something that is at least partly amended by the new Quality Assurance Act.

Overall, though, it is neither envy nor jealousy which shapes the field the strongest – but distrust. As we have already seen in chapter one, trust and distrust are important topoi in QA-related literature, although the way they are usually framed is rather one-dimensional, mirroring most authors' political agenda: External quality assurance is regarded as an indicator that the public's (or at least the Minister's) trust towards the higher education institutions is decreasing, a situation that is either to be lamented as a sign of higher education's sinking status or to be amended with the right kind of quality assurance approach. Taking a close look at the Austrian situation, however, it soon becomes clear that the trust/distrust dilemma is not limited to the relation between the universities and their government (as Trow's observation on the

inversive relation between trust and accountability might imply, cf. Trow 1996), but is indeed pervading practically *all* relations within the field: The different higher education institutions trust themselves but practically none of their competitors: "We know that we are doing our best and have rigid QA measures in place – but how can we know that the others are doing the same and not make unjustified claims?" – This is a pattern of thought that might explain the increasing importance of 'advocacy'- principles as represented in the consumer protection culture pattern, cf. chapter six.

The Ministry does not trust the HEIs (as shown, for example, by the recent attempts to undermine the universities' autonomy by way of predefined performance contracts, cf. chapter two) but this is kind of mutual: Latently, the whole discourse is permeated with a general suspiciousness that all Ministerial actions and communications have a hidden agenda in order to regain or tighten control. The senior management does not trust the academic and administrative staff to achieve their potential to the fullest without adequate processes or stimuli (resulting in internal versions of performance contracts, evaluations and monitoring systems) and the students seem to trust neither of the other stakeholder groups. But the tendency towards distrust and suspiciousness does not end here and is not limited to Austria: Even the QA agencies need meta-standards and rigid mechanisms (such as the European Register) to ensure that no black sheep are sabotaging the system. And the whole Bologna Process seems to be based on one enormous trust problem: How can I be sure that universities elsewhere are delivering the same kind of quality education our own institution is obliged to? In this regard, the entire debate on the connection of student mobility and quality assurance in Austria shows some interesting parallels to the phenomenon of mass tourism: the countries where we send 'our' students to have to demonstrate the same kind of standards they are used to in Austria – ideally, the whole study experience and curricula would be the exactly same as here (which kind of subverts the original idea of studying abroad, but this does not seem to be a particularly important Bologna objective).

And this is where the formalised QA systems come into the game. In the logic of the Bologna Process, formalised QA systems are able to function as a substitute for personal experiences and thus establish trust: even if I do not know a particular institution myself, I can rely on its quality as long as the institution's quality assurance procedures are intact and known, i.e. adhere to internationally accepted standards such as the ESG. In other words: personal forms of trust are and have to be replaced by institutionalised forms of trust. By their very idea, QA agencies are then 'trust brokers' in an increasingly complex world. So far, so good – the only problem about this model is: it does not really induce trust but feeds the growing culture of distrust even further. Every mechanism and initiative that should further trust needs control and every level of control needs another level above in order to make sure that it... well, can be trusted (a more elaborate discussion of hypothesis can be found in my description of the consumer protection culture pattern in chapter six).

So how does our particular issue field deal with the trust/distrust dilemma? In a hardly surprising manner by adhering to the almost proverbial "Trust is good, control is better" - maxim. In this field, the best way to ensure that everyone plays according to the rules seems an attempt to write the rules oneself. And due to its new and pretty undefined state, quality assurance seems the ideal canvas to paint the rules upon. Again, every actor and stakeholder group takes part and tries to assert its own interpretations and regulations with the help of laws, expert counselling, performance agreements, standards or policy documents (the collected papers on the consultation process over the new Quality Assurance Act allows some interesting insights into the underlying rationale, cf. BMWF Homepage). A considerable part of the debate concerns QA models and methods: Which approach is the primary one and which is secondary? What kind of decisions should be made by the higher education institutions and which by the QA agencies or the Ministry? Is external quality assurance imposed upon internal quality assurance or should it be the other way round? And who can claim ultimate responsibility?

The overarching question 'who controls whom' underlies the entire discourse - in this regard, most interpretive patterns are also instruments of power (cf. chapter six as well as Morley 2003). Explicitly, however, the question is almost a taboo: 'Control' is a very negative connoted label in the entire field, echoing an academic tradition built on collective decision-making and supposed egalitarism. It is one of the most apparent though silently accepted contradictions, that almost all presentations on quality management models during the three conferences are emphasising the importance of a strong senior management while at the same time demanding that the quality systems and cultures have to be built 'bottom up' rather than 'top down'. The 'quality management' notion in particular circles around the very idea of taking better control of the institution – but the verb should better never be mentioned. Again, part of the problem is owed to an imprecise use of certain terms – which is not made easier by the fact, that 'control' in German knows at least two different equivalents: 'Kontrolle' which can also be translated as 'surveillance' and 'Steuerung' which is rather meant in the sense of 'strategic management'. It is primarily the first term that is seen as a 'idea non grata', but in most of the models (cue 'performance monitoring') and in practice the differences are not so big as linguistics might imply.

This can also be seen from the observation that 'transparency' in contrast to 'control' is regularly framed as something very desirable, irrespective of the fact that the related purpose and approaches are usually one and the same: It is just easier to 'sell' and legitimise the building of a monitoring system by referring to the need for public transparency than by arguing in favour of managerial needs. In addition, 'transparency' is also a key requirement for establishing international relations – and within the Austrian field, 'internationalisation' is as good as 'control' is bad, as we will see before long.

Shifting our attention to the issue field's external environment creates an interesting problem of its own: Up until now I have treated and characterised 'Quality Assurance in Austrian Higher Education' as an issue field of its own, demonstrating specific traits that are unique to this field, such as a particular historical, political and legal context or institutionalised actors with a strong local flavour. And indeed, all these factors mark this particular issue field as different from others and legitimate the borders I have drawn in order to construct my unit of analysis. There is something 'typically Austrian' to this field and the expert discourse I have based it upon, and not in a prejudicial or stereotypical way: the division into different higher education sectors, the long history of centralised Ministerial control and the struggles with access policies and funding may also be found in other national contexts, yet most certainly not in this particular form or combination. Hence, in many ways, this issue field can indeed be regarded as a national one, being (de)limited by the territorial validity of Austrian law and custom.

In other ways, however, it cannot, and taking a look that transcends the national border, the field appears far less autarkic and self-sustaining than I have characterised it so far: During the analysis it soon became clear that the QA-related discourse in Austria is contextualised, influenced and maybe even part of a much broader discourse which I would label 'European' in lack of a better expression (though fully aware that even the geographical and cultural borders that go along with this label might not do justice to the actual scope of the 'issue' in this regard). Yet before I take a deeper look into the resulting implications (not least for the issue field concept as such), I will rest a little longer with the relations between the Austrian context and the contexts beyond:

Overall, the texts are filled with regular references to the 'European level' or some unspecified 'international dimension': it seems generally agreed upon that the recent developments in Austrian higher education (and its future aspirations) cannot be thought independently of European higher education policy, in particular everything Bologna-related. The relations are usually regarded as hierarchically, with the European level as the more influential or privileged one (either because the actors in Brussels or in other countries decree more

normative power or have more knowledge). This was to be expected when it comes to political statements – 'blaming' Brussels for inner political decisions is a favoured game among Austrian politicians -, but the unreflected implicitness with which this argumentative (or belief) pattern is reproduced and used in the field (by practically all actors and throughout the discourse) is indeed a little surprising – particularly when we remind ourselves that quality assurance in higher education has been a strictly national political matter for a very long time. This only changed in the early 1990s with a respective initiative by the European Commission and was then heavily boosted by the Bologna Process, in particular after the Berlin Communiqué 2003 (Riegler 2010: 161) – an observation also shared by Pechar and Klepp:

> „In any case, internationalisation undermined the capacities and powers of the nation state. It was no longer feasible for national authorities to shape their own education systems without taking into account international trends and developments. The Bologna process is a striking example, because, from a formal point of view, each government is still free to decide sovereignly upon its priorities. Practical constraints, however, secure a high degree of convergence and adjustment." (Pechar & Klepp 2004: 59)

The whole 'Europe makes us dance' theme also adds an interesting new facet to the discussion about accountability in higher education (cf. chapter one): In the usual argumentative patterns it is the taxpaying public that holds politicians and higher education institutions accountable for the way public funds are being spent (though more in an indirect manner involving reporting and monitoring duties demanded by law or quality assurance agencies and auditors that examine the institutions on the public's behalf). Yet in our issue field, such rhetorics play an indirect role at best: the only kind of accountability that the actors regularly refer to is towards their international peers, either in the form of 'Brussels' or the European Union (for the politicians) or the international (scientific?) community (in the case of the HEIs). Austrian higher education policy makers in particular regard themselves accountable to 'international standards' or 'Europe' in general. As the European Commission cannot interfere with national budgetary issues it is

not about how the public's money is spent though, but rather about prestige: Diverting from 'the' European Standards or implementing policy models that do not follow recent international trends could be embarrassing for those who have to represent the Austrian progress at the next Bologna summit. The hierarchy, however, seems to end with the European level: the question who the Bologna actors are accountable to (and, not to forget, what they are accountable for) remain unanswered, at least within this issue field.

However, before we get stuck with the notion that 'Europe' is just an ideal scapegoat for everything local actors need to blame it for, it is necessary to add another observation from my analysis: Overall, the framing of everything outside of, above and beyond Austria is very positive. 'Europe' in particular (though rather unspecifically) is regarded as the big wide world – a glittering and in most ways superior contrast to local provinciality. The really important things happen 'there', whereas 'here' the players have to work hard at keeping track with the dynamic developments which they perceive as unswayable. This goes hand in hand with another structurally important argumentative thread that pervades the discourse manifestly as well as latently: Austria is considered a much too small and irrelevant stage for comparing oneself to others, competing with them or achieving anything even remotely remarkable. The magic wor(l)d is "international".

'Internationalisation' is indeed a key concept within the issue field: the market is international, the competitors are international, standards and rules are international, the community is international – in short: everything necessary and desirable is international. Comparing or demonstrating one's quality is only worth something if the respective arena is international. In other words: It seems one of quality assurance's (previously undocumented) core functions is to increase an institution's international visibility and make it an international 'player' (or, in reverse: one of the key drivers of QA initiatives is the perceived need for more internationalisation). Small wonder, then, that an entire track of the 2007 AQA Conference was dedicated to aspects of 'internationalisation' and how it can be ensured and improved.

Much like quality itself, however, the concept of 'internationalisation' and what counts as international remains very vague and unspecific – although it is permanently and unalterably positively connoted. Being international is very much a value in itself – and probably one of the strongest legitimising forces in the whole field. It is unanimously accepted that playing in an 'international league' also comes with the obligation to adhere to international standards – although it is never explained what these standards are (the ESG are only rarely referred to) and where they come from. It quickly becomes clear, however, that Asia and Africa are *not* the regions that are setting the standards, on the contrary: these continents (together with South-eastern Europe) are regarded as potential markets for one's own QA standards and models (cf. the 'entrepreneurial quality culture pattern' in chapter six). Eventually, 'international' is very much a synonym for 'European' or 'Anglo-American', with the US playing the role of the ultimate instance with regard to quality and quality assurance. This "old isomorphism drive to copy whatever seemed successful in US higher education" (Schwarz & Westerheijden 2004: 5), is still going strong, irrespective of the fact that only a very small part of the US higher education system does actually fall into the category of role models as envisioned by our field's actors.

As stated above, 'international' and 'internationalisation' are like magic words when it comes to giving legitimacy to certain actions and practices: everything that is done in compliance with international standards (or for the sake of becoming 'more international') is automatically good and above suspicion – even though it is never discussed what internationalisation actually means and how you would measure its worth.

On the other hand, international standards and experiences play a clearly observable role in the field beyond mere rhetorical strategies: from the very beginning, international experts and professionals were regular invited guests and speakers at various QA-related events, culminating in the 2009 AQA conference where more than two thirds of the presenters stemmed from other European countries and an entire track dedicated to "Approaches and Quality Audits in Europe" (C 3 -12). This closes the circle to my argument above that the

QA-related discourse in Austria cannot even analytically be fully separated from its (European) context.

This raises some interesting questions about the construction of issue fields such as the one I have undertaken in this study: Where does one field end and where do others begin? What happens if issues are overlapping, e.g. in the case of quality assurance in higher education, higher education funding or educational mobility? And what is the relation of issue fields to specific socio-legal, historical, cultural and economical contexts? Is it possible to differentiate between local, national, transnational or even global issue fields? Part of my findings seem to suggest that dealing with such questions could bring us a step further in our understanding of the issue field at hand (taking a closer look beyond the issue field would be helpful in order to define the issue field sharper and clearer than before), but also in our understanding of the emergence of meaning structures and interpretive patterns: The interplay between different levels but also different communities of meaning is an important aspect of how our perceptions and interpretations of the lifeworld and our actions within it are formed and influenced. Chapter seven will return to these open questions and the potential for future research after showing how the field's structurally most important interpretive patterns refer to meaning horizons that lie far beyond the field's actual scope of validity.

Summing up the discussion so far, however, I would suggest that there are some localised and local meaning structures that are typically for and endogenous to our issue field. They are emerging from and influenced by various factors such as local customs, laws, traditions or particular socio-cultural conditions. Yet on the other hand, there are also factors from outside the field's primary socio-cultural frame (which, at least in this case, falls together with Austria as a nation-state, mostly due to the territoriality of the laws that contextualise and limit the phenomenon at hand) that are at least equally influential, be it directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly. Not every one of these external factors is transformed into manifest norms such as laws, but their impact is nevertheless observable. And the flow of time is helping to cover the origin of ideas, at least of those plausible and strong enough to find acceptance.

"One of the problems with performance indicators, like most evaluation data, is that they are always out of date – they refer to what has been done, not what may be going on now, or may happen in the future."

(Doherty 2008: 258)

XIV

As in any dynamic field, the temporal dimension is of eminent importance, and observing the Austrian discourse on quality in higher education from a temporal perspective unearths a number of internal contradictions and particularities that might be able to contextualise my findings in a different way. Chapter one has already shown that quality assurance as a political issue is a rather new phenomenon whereas the underlying principles and procedures have been a part of academic (research) tradition for quite some time. With regard to our field, we can find the same kind of dichotomy: Whereas the issue field in its current form and many of the institutional actors in it are of rather recent origin (reaching back not even a decade and not having come into full bloom before 2004), which provides an even better opportunity to observe the internal dynamics at work, some discourse threads and contextual conditions date back far longer. As a consequence, quality assurance is at the same time being framed as something entirely new, implying that the universities need time to adjust to this situation, but also as something that has been done and adhered to long before international politics took an interest in it, meaning that the universities should best be left alone to cope with the phenomenon as they have always done. Discourse metaphors such as 'pioneer achievements', 'colonising previously unchartered areas' or 'making new discoveries' are all indicators for the former viewpoint, while the latter is represented by the regular phrasing that "quality assurance is a matter of course and nothing new". What is undeniable, though, is that the issue has gained a lot of momentum in recent years, kicking of a professionalisation process that is quite impressive with regard to its pace (which should not be misunderstood as an assessment of its quality or outcome).

Dealings with the past show a similar ambiguity: On the one hand, the past gets glorified in the form of a 'good old times'-nostalgia, where the universities were trusted and left to their business without being bothered with constant legitimation – everything had worked even without explicit quality assurance procedures and quality management models. On the other hand, habits from the past get discarded as something that was untimely and slowing the universities down, particularly the fact that the Ministry was directly controlling the institutions. Some compromise is reached in a rather rationalistic perspective, where everything is constantly getting better, and where the present is just a consequent further development of achievements in the past. The only actor group that is regularly lamenting the rather slow tempo of organisational changes and voicing its dissatisfaction with the past and the present alike, are the students, whose abidance in the field is comparatively short.

In many ways, the issue field builds upon its past, and the historical context is as important for understanding the field's dynamics as is the environmental context that was discussed in the previous section. This already starts with the contribution the temporal dimension makes for the field's social structuring. Again, we can see a clear difference between the three sectors: the public universities are regularly framed as well-established institutions with a long tradition that lends them credibility and legitimacy. Compared to that, the *Fachhochschulen* and private universities are still in their infancies, yet nevertheless ambitiously challenge the public universities' supposed supremacy. Consequently, the differences in age and experience are also used as an argumentative back up for bolstering the actors' claims and safeguarding their interests. One regularly returning argumentative pattern (usually employed by representatives of the public universities) states that all institutions of rather recent origin, who have not had the time and opportunity to establish stable internal procedures and traditions of their own, need a stricter corset of external control and rigid minimal standards, whereas those institutions with a history of 'hundreds of years' and an often claimed obligation to ideals of a similar age, should rather be left alone, as 'striving for excellence' is already a natural part of

their self-understanding and purpose. This pattern is contrasted by a second popular view (usually taken by representatives from the other sectors), where the public universities are regarded as autocratic actors who are still living in a past that has long gone and are not living up to their responsibility. Therefore, they should *not* have rules of their own, but need to be subjugated to the same kind of control as the other actors (although no one would argue against a general levying of the rules, as long as they are the same for everyone).

But even in those cases where aspects of time and history are not consciously referred to, their influence can still be seen across the field. In chapter two I have already described the two arguably most important single events that were giving birth and shape to the field, namely the UG 2002 (and its predecessor, the UOG 1993) and the signing of the Bologna declaration. Without those factors, many actors – most notably the QA agencies or the QA professionals – would probably exist in a completely different form or not at all. We should bear this tight connection of the field and some of the actors within it closely in mind when it comes to observing the field's development and its most important interpretive patterns (cf. chapter six): As they derive at least part of their legitimacy (and meaning) from the field's success, those actors need to keep the discourse at the heart of the field alive and growing (cf. chapter seven). Constant innovations and methods are an important part of this re-stabilisation process, as we will see before long.

But it is not only local history that shapes the discourse and its development: Very much in line with the assumption that we can rationally learn from the experiences of others and that what has worked elsewhere will also work in our own institutions and fields (an idea that is almost fuelling an entire interpretive pattern, cf. the description of the educative quality culture pattern in chapter six), the history and experiences of other European countries play an inestimable role for defining and forming the respective issues in Austria. Due to the fact that Austria has joined the international QA movement rather late (cf. chapter two), the actors are able to draw from a rich reservoir of international learning experiences, with the UK and Germany being the most popular benchmarking countries, in terms of good practices as well as with regard to mistakes 'us

Austrians' do not want to repeat; the persuasion that Austria is quite lucky in that it can build on the experiences of others and thus does not have to go through all the stages that did not work itself, is quite common in the field. The fact that such imitative learning and the transfer of successful ideas and models have their limits as they disregard the historical dimension of any institutional quality culture (cf. Vettori & Lueger 2011) is usually ignored.

When it comes to the issue of change, we can find two different levels of speed in the field: With regard to methods and models, the dynamics is rather high, with constant innovations and alterations to the status quo. This is aptly brought to the point by Williams' demand that "There should be evolution rather than repetition" (2009b:21). Most of these changes, however, are externally induced (although rather framed as part of the 'professionalisation process') and are rarely implemented "[…] in light of thorough meta-analyses of their effectiveness. Rather, modifications occur frequently due to shifts in the balance of power in educational politics and changes in the agendas of the different stakeholders within the system" (Brink & Kohler 2009: 36). On the other hand, this dynamics is in an interesting way juxtaposed by the ambitious optimism that accompanies the construction of most QA systems: In the rhetorics and logic of the field, all QA systems seem to be built for eternity (or at least for a very long time), with derivates of the classic PDCA-cycle being expected to feed the development process almost like a perpetuum mobile, and evaluation cycles being preplanned for several turns in advance.

Overall, the field is certainly not static but evolving through the entry and exit of actors, power struggles and a shift of the and in the interpretative patterns – although the respective changes on the level of latent norms, values and meaning structures is much, much slower than on the procedural level; it might be an interesting future research project to enquire the relation of procedural changes and changes of their underlying logic, my preliminary hypothesis being that many changes on the manifest level are just cosmetic ones. Other concepts, however, really do go through a change of meaning, and indicators for this process can even be found in our rather short period of observation (from 2004 to 2011). The term 'peer review' for example is still a very popular one, labelling

any kind of observation and review from outside an institution. But 'peers' does no longer denominate just experts with a similar standing, experience and professional background as in the field of academic journals, but rather any kind of expert or external examiner who participates in a site visit and assesses products and processes from an external perspective, i.e. other higher education managers, evaluation professionals, students, graduates and corporate representatives. From a long term perspective, it will be interesting to observe and analyse how the meaning of other concepts related to quality assurance in higher education – such as evaluations, audits, monitoring systems or even quality assurance itself – will change and be changed over the course of time. Observing the field's main interpretive patterns as in chapter six can give us some interesting hints about such processes – but even the patterns themselves are a subject to change, as we will see, and ten years from now, the picture will likely be a rather different one.

By now we have somewhat become acquainted with the arena, in which the supposed 'clash of quality cultures' takes place. We are seeing a field that is on the one hand characterised by a very specific ensemble of legal, economical, social, historical and cultural factors that distinguishes it from similar issue fields, either in the same national context, such as Austrian higher education research or funding, or from thematically similar issue fields such as quality assurance in British or German higher education. Yet on the other hand, it also became apparent that there are important structural overlappings with these other fields and that the way meaning is (re)created in this particular issue field cannot be thought independently from other areas of meaning to which it is connected in relations of mutual influence. In addition, the Austrian field might well be a part of an even larger issue field on a European or even global level: The discourse in higher education has become increasingly internationalised, with no university being able to "escape the gravitational pull" (Morley 2003: 21). As a consequence, it is difficult to tell which meaning structures are actually endogenous to this particular issue field and which ones were assimilated by way of import.

I have found 'trust' and 'power' to be two categories of particular structural importance, and they are certainly related in several ways. Asserting one's own interpretations while distrusting the interpretations of others is a common part of the game, yet interestingly the related conflicts rarely come to the surface: By means of a common language and terminology the actors create an impression of apparent harmony and mutual appreciation and frame most potential conflicts as questions of methodological or political disagreement. As a result, they are clouding and overlooking that the differences start even with the most basic conceptual questions, i.e. whether quality assurance is more about stakeholder satisfaction and compliance with standards (outward-orientation) or organisational effectiveness and efficiency (inward-orientation). In a way, the actors can communicate with each other using the same words, but they rarely comprehend the meaning attached to those words. In my next chapter I will show that such misunderstandings and struggles over meaning go far beyond a level of conceptual dissension: the indeterminacy of the QA-related discourse enables the actors to use it as a means of promoting mindsets and interpretive frames that have less to do with quality as such but with the purpose and future of higher education – and who should be allowed to define and shape it.

Chapter six: A clash of quality cultures

"[.] Quality is an 'essentially contested' issue, and there are competing voices and discourses."

(Newton 2002: 47)

XV

That quality in higher education can be (and often is) a source of conflict among different actors in higher education is a well-known phenomenon which I have already described in my introductory chapter: After all, differing goals, definitions and interests are a common experience in any sphere of social life, and eventually all divergences are overlaid by the persuasion that – methodological issues aside – everyone is pulling together in order to achieve the shared goal of improvement. I chapter five, however, I have already started to shake this persuasion by showing how shared expressions and terminologies cannot be simply equated with shared meaning and how latent orientations – even a simple dichotomous differentiation between internal and external orientation – influence practices and actions. This chapter will take as one step further, as I will present the five interpretive patterns (or 'quality cultures' as I have named them in allusion to the field's own favoured terminology) I was able to reconstruct on basis of the hermeneutic process described in chapter four: the consumer protection quality culture, the educative quality culture, the entrepreneurial quality culture, the managerial quality culture and the engineering quality culture.

Section XVI will then compare the five patterns and highlight their similarities and differences, while in a second step analysing their – sometimes coalescing, sometimes conflicting – relationships. Here we will see that the patterns do not only vary with regard to their notions of quality, quality assurance and higher

education but also show clear differences in the way the roles and relations between different actors/actor groups are organised, in the concepts, approaches and instruments that are employed as well as in the problems of action or meaning that are addressed or which they are intended to solve.

A short reminder concerning the character of these patterns might be in order though: The five interpretive patterns in our field are no verbalised attitudes or explicitly discussed concepts but rather typified underlying orientation frames that infuse the various communicative and interactive acts with meaning. In this regard the patterns are not just different approaches to quality or quality assurance but rather different ways of making sense of a particular section of our life-world. As such, they cannot be attributed to specific actor groups (even though specific actor groups may well 'sponsor' specific patterns as we will see) but are pervading the field as such, providing different means of structuring experiences and perceptions – much like painting different pictures on the empty canvas of the unspecified concept of quality. All five patterns refer to and are limited to our particular field of quality assurance in Austrian higher education, yet they clearly show overlappings with other patterns as well as other fields and also mirror even deeper seated levels of meaning.

One final note concerns the technical aspects of the presentation: Whenever possible, I have named the source of a particular primary quote or expression in the form of s short code, such as A 1-4 or B 7 in order to enhance the transparency of my work. The letter always refers to the type of material (A to C labeling the three conference proceedings and D representing all other position papers), whereas the numbers indicate the specific text and the section of the text if needed. For any reader not familiar with hermeneutic interpretations, however, it might be necessary to remind you that most of the patterns' characteristics and structures are not mirrored in the manifest texts but have to be reconstructed in constant comparison and will therefore not be able to be traced back to some specific line or paragraph. Hence, whenever a part of the results demonstrates fewer of those primary quote codes, this is not so much an oversight or a sign for speculative galloping, but rather an indicator for the deep level of latency the respective characteristics and ideas stem from.

The consumer protection quality culture pattern

In our first interpretive pattern, higher education is regarded as a product which's quality needs to be demonstrated and guaranteed so that those who obtain the good (e.g. in the form of a particular degree) are protected from receiving inadequate value for their investment in terms of time and/or money. Consequently, quality assurance here is the process to ensure an adequate return of investment. This interpretive pattern becomes particularly evident in the frequent use of product metaphors: Higher education is even compared to pizzas (A 5-5) (where the consumer expects a minimum standard even when not choosing his or her favourite pizzeria) and car tyres (A 5-17) (with quality assurance being responsible for measuring their 'tread depth'). The automobile industry is generally very much favoured as a source for comparisons - with quality assurance as a simile for the so-called 'elk test' (A 5-23). Such preference can likely be traced back to the leading actors' knowledge about the origins of the industrial quality management movement, yet also supports the demand for an objective control body or mechanism by indicating the risk of possible failures: Eating a poor pizza will at the worst upset your stomach, but a technical defect of your car would have far more grievous consequences. And higher education is a serious business.

The demand for such a quality ensuring regulative is attributed to the emergence of a higher education market and the resulting competition between the various higher education institutions. Even though the discourse remains rather vague about what this market looks like and what the institutions compete for – a point I will return to a little later -, both concepts are obviously generally understandable, considering that they (re)appear with unreflected regularity in the majority of the texts, speeches and papers included in my data. Interestingly, any regulations in the proposed market are only regarded as an interim solution or start-up aid: Once the market is established and its self-regulatory mechanisms are fully developed, 'true' quality will prevail and the consumers will know whom to trust. To quote an example given in one of the panel discussions: Once the Austrian universities have achieved a Harvard-like status, external QA will have become unnecessary – but until then, QA agencies

are an important workaround for establishing the necessary degree of trust (A 5-4; B 6-47).

On first view, it seems kind of paradoxical that notions of competitiveness and marketability have such a strong resonance in a national context where a general open access policy guarantees a constant and considerable afflux of students to each university and the distribution of state funds to the various institutions has been almost predictably stable, even when the funding system was fundamentally changed in the wake of the UG 2002. Yet on closer inspection, it becomes clear that the idea of a higher education market in which universities compete for the best students is strongly tied to the issue of internationalisation and the notion of Austrian HEIs being only a small part in a global field as was described in chapter five: As the national market is too small for developing any kind of (success) profile, every reference value has to be on a supra-national level (cf. B 7).

However, other than in the entrepreneurial culture to which the consumer protection pattern bears a close, even complimentary relation, the strong influence of the economic dimension is not as easily comprehensible: The fact that most Austrian students pay no study fees and the rest only a minor one (around € 720 per year) would be expected to weaken the obvious foundation of any provider-consumer-relationship – the money the consumer pays for the goods and from which he/she derives his/her claims. Nevertheless, this interpretive pattern seems to be of growing importance, although it resonates much more strongly with the quality assurance agencies and the students than with the higher education institutions. Accordingly, those two stakeholder groups also play the most decisive roles within the related concept of quality assurance. In general, the logic of the consumer protection culture is based on an explicitly regulated interplay of three different actor groups:

- The higher education institutions play the role of the goods providers or producers. Very much in line with the international quality assurance discourse that is almost entirely focusing on teaching and learning and omitting research, it is only the educative function of higher education

institutions that is of interest here. The institutions offer certain academic programmes and claim them to qualify their graduates for specific job profiles (in the form of the increasingly popular 'learning outcomes'). In order to avoid consumer deception, those claims have to be tested and verified. The fact that most Austrian universities are still struggling with the concept of qualification profiles and target markets does not conflict with this logic, on the contrary: from this perspective, the more vaguely defined an outcome is the more important it becomes to validate its actual worth.

In terms of 'role acceptance', however, we find a clear difference between the sectors: For the sectors of the private universities and the *Fachhochschulen,* the consumer protection pattern is very much an established and well accepted logic, whereas the public sector seems to be still struggling with the notion – a not overly surprising finding considering the differences in funding, student admission or external quality assurance procedures. On the other hand, although the consumer protection pattern generally has a rather positive connotation, the related efforts and procedures are perceived as annoying chores, resulting in the two smaller sectors clear demand that the same rules should apply to everyone (e.g. A 5-4, A 5 -14).

- The role of the consumers is shared by two different higher education stakeholders: the students and their future employers. As stated above, both groups are no consumers in a way that they pay for the product they are interested in (if we leave the rather complicated matters of taxes and sponsoring aside), so eventually 'client' might be a more fitting label. In addition, there are some important differences between the two perspectives. First, regarding the product: Whereas the students are interested in a tertiary qualification that increases their employability (i.e. viewing the degree program they are enrolled in as the product of higher education), the labour market is interested in the quality of the graduates as a whole (i.e. regarding the graduates themselves as the actual product of higher education), thus imposing a much bigger responsibility on the

universities – a quite interesting finding, considering that the industrial sector is often blamed for taking its part in shifting the focus from a comprehensive education (corresponding to the German term *Bildung*) to vocational training (corresponding to the German term *Ausbildung*).

A second important difference concerns the power status of the two client groups: The students are considered as the most powerless actor group of all and have to be all the more protected from the machinations of the higher education industry. This holds particularly true within the notion of an increasingly internationalised higher education market, where students need to be guaranteed that their education abroad lives up to the same standards as their education at home (an aspect I have already discussed in chapter five) and that their achievements will be mutually recognised – from this perspective it is not very surprising that the career of the more recent quality assurance movement in Europe has been closely intertwined with the Bologna process and the whole idea of a common international Higher Education Area.

- Finally, the QA agencies fulfill the role of the regulators who are under obligation to protect the interests of the clients. This protection is achieved in at least three different ways: first, by establishing a set of rules and standards that guarantee the quality of the product; second, by checking whether the producers actually comply with these standards (regulating market entrances as well as market continuances); and last but not least, by informing the clients about their 'test results' – or by ensuring that the producers themselves communicate in a consumer-friendly manner and do not manipulate their audience with unproven claims. 'Fairness' is a core value here. The 'consumer protection agents' become more important the more the state retreats from a more direct governance mode, taking over its protective function. In a wider way, the agencies even protect the state's own interests by making sure that the public funds are used in an adequate way and to the benefit of the taxpaying public – probably one of many reasons, why criteria of 'societal relevance' have found their

entrance into a considerable number of accreditation or audit procedures over the past years.

All in all, within this interpretive pattern, it is not only the purpose of quality assurance that is defined in a specific way, but also the way(s) in which this purpose can be achieved. Gearing to the objective of ensuring comparability and very much in line with the nature of regulations, the consumer protection culture relies heavily on standardisation. Taking up the example of the automobile industry, mandatory security standards such as airbags or ESPs for skidding prevention are a well-accepted normality and standardised product tests are an integrated part of any production process. Yet this is also the point where the analogy usually gets into problems: as the processes of teaching and learning are barely tangible and accordingly difficult to standardise, the favoured norms and standards in most higher education QA schemes are either reduced to a level that is more easily approachable (e.g. regulating the kind of information that has to be made available such as learning outcomes, drop out rates or student service information) or refer to a meta-level where the mere existence of certain instruments and processes is already regarded as a reliable indicator for the institution's quality awareness (e.g. the isomorphic demand for student satisfaction surveys, graduate surveys and staff development programs). Surveys among students, graduates and employers are in general an important tool within a consumer protection culture, as are checklists derived from accreditation criteria or guidelines such as the ESG. Whereas the former group of instruments generates information on the clients' demands and the degree to which these demands have been met (i.e. to which their interests were 'protected'), the latter provide orientation for both parties - the reviewer/regulator and the reviewed - on which aspects might actually be important for choosing between different products and providers, comparable to the logic of the *Stiftung Warentest.*

Certificates and labels such as ISO, EFQM or EQUIS but also accreditations and audits in general have a similarly important orientation function by putting an official approval stamp or seal on the product, saving the clients time and effort

as they do not have to check everything themselves. Consequently, the clients can either put their trust in a particular and well-known brand (as shown by the example of Harvard above) or in a certificate that guarantees them a specific standard, which can be very useful in either vast and complicated markets or, as the Austrian discussion partly indicates, when a brand that carries itself still has to be created - hopefully with the help of a respective certificate (cf. B 6-50). On the other hand, with the trust/mistrust-theme being an evidently strong aspect of this interpretive pattern, such a system is far from self-sustaining, particularly at the beginning: One of the most pressing questions for this QA model's advocates is how to create and ensure trust in the approval seal itself. For if the higher education institutions cannot be completely trusted to cater to their clients' needs in an open and transparent manner, how can the quality assurance agencies be trusted to assess them objectively and reliably, especially when there is a lot of money involved as the complimentary entrepreneurial culture indicates? In addition, most agencies are not very well known by the public, which is further enforced by the increasing internationalisation.

Hence, who watches the watchers? Self-regulating networks such as ENQA can achieve part of this job, but their self-regulating constitution is inconsistent with the whole 'trust is good, control is better'-philosophy of the consumer protection culture. It is primarily within this interpretive pattern, that the much debated European Register for Quality Assurance Agencies develops its most meaningful potential: in order to enhance mutual trust among students, higher education institutions and agencies across Europe and to fight the emergence of accreditation mills (cf. A 4), the register includes only those agencies that meet the rather rigorous criteria and thereby creates a 'meta-seal' for consumers and clients on various levels. Whether this is a sustainable solution for the obviously dominating logic of mistrust in this interpretive pattern remains to be seen, though: the intended primary beneficiaries – students and employers – are hardly familiar with the European architecture of external quality assurance and the proof that the majority of accreditations and similar processes have a positive effect on the consumer-relevant output has yet to be provided. In a lot

of ways, the consumer protection culture seems to be self-perpetuating and self-expanding by increasing the very needs it is meant to fulfill.

Concludingly, we can observe that the increasing relevance of the consumer protection pattern is on the one hand an almost logical consequence (and, in reverse, driving factor) of the growing economisation and commercialisation of the higher education field, and not just in Austria; for this reason the pattern unfolds its greatest meaning potential when the respective discussions centre around the issue of further education/executive education, where we indeed find an actual market that is at least partly driven by the principles of supply and demand. On the other hand, the pattern can also be regarded as an answer to the increasing complexities of an expanding field, where personal trust has to be substituted by institutionalised and depersonalised forms of trust inducement – for, eventually, the stakeholders' confidence in the self-regulative power is far smaller than they might demonstratively claim: one of the unexpressed and inexpressible hopes seems to be that a suitable quality assurance scheme will also prevent the competitors from outsmarting the market. And last but not least, in a slightly ironic but also very fitting twist, even the pattern's quality assurance logic itself seems to be met with a certain degree of mistrust: taken seriously, any well-developed quality assurance system or model would actually have to be regarded as a competitive advantage, meaning that every institution that has gone through the labours of obtaining a suitable QA certificate could actually be rather happy if its competitors were lagging behind. But there is always the risk that the protection-needing students and employers will not appreciate the certificates and audit results in the intended way, meaning that all the efforts were mostly for nothing. Thus, the respective discourse is pervaded with regular (and rather loud) claims that all institutions need to go through the exact same process.

The educative quality culture pattern

The educative culture label does not so much refer to the educative core function of all higher education institutions but rather to the instructive logic that dominates the relationship of the various actors in this interpretive pattern. Its basic premise is of a decidedly patronising character; the universities may have been released into autonomy, but they cannot be left on their own for several reasons. First of all, the situation is rather new for them and the new rights and responsibilities could be too overwhelming, so the HEIs need a little support. Secondly, the tertiary sector is famous for being resistant to change and not very adaptive, so the HEIs need a little push. And, last but not least, they might not develop into the intended direction, so the HEIs need a little orientation. Some well-meaning body that has more experience and expertise in this matter – this could be an agency, the government itself or an issue-related consortium of experts and institutional representatives – incurs the task to facilitate the learning process and make the universities 'fit for purpose', using a mixture of rules and regulations, incentives, sanctions and learning opportunities. Yet the purpose is not always as self-imposed as the concept might originally imply, mirroring the UK experiences in the early 1990s:

> "Unpacking the notion of 'fitness for purpose' reveals that, in this terminology, the institution's purpose is tacitly seen as separate from its fitness; in other words, the purpose is extrinsic to the fitness. The fitness is achieved in order to be able to do something else. 'Fitness for purpose' turns out to be a coded form of educational instrumentalism." (Barnett 1992: 87)

Even the differing age and experience of the learners is taken into consideration: whereas the public universities are conceded a higher developmental stage (the need for further development notwithstanding), the much younger Fachhochschulen and private universities are regarded as being even more in need of orientation and gentle pressure (cf. B 2-4). On the other hand, the governance system is hard pressed to individualise its approach to the different institutional needs and performances, resulting in the equally strong but clearly juxtaposing demand that the same rules should apply to everyone (cf. B 6-12).

This permanent oscillation between performance orientation equality principles can be regarded as one of the most dominant characteristics of the Austrian political discourse on education as was already discussed in chapter two.

Yet the educative pattern does not only reflect the main political ideologies of our educational system, but also its functional logics and core values, being carried by rules and norms such as: „learning is always good", „everything can be learned", but also "the teacher knows best" and "everything good has to be earned". A closer look at the most important roles and concepts within the educative culture pattern reveals the indebtedness to classic educational concepts and learning theories:

- The higher education institutions hold the role of the learners – by external attribution as well as by voluntary adoption. However, we should not confuse this notion of organisations as learners with the idea of learning organisations: the type of learning in this pattern is always externally imposed and needs to be controlled. Even in those cases conceding that HEIs might change and develop in a self-dynamic and self-regulating way, the connotations are usually negative: There are good and bad developmental directions and the risk that a bad direction is taken is much higher if the organisation is left on its own. Accordingly, the learners have to be carefully shown what to learn and how to learn – in other words *be developed* instead of develop.

- This conditioning-oriented notion of learning is complimented by a social aspect reminiscent of Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura 1977): Observation, imitation and modelling are pivotal parts of the much-encouraged good practice exchanges and benchmarking processes that are currently emerging in the international QA toolboxes (cf. B 11, B 12) – which is, not least, one of the most important reasons for establishing QA conferences such as the ones featured in this study's data collection. At the 2005 Conference, for example, an entire forum track was dedicated to institutional comparisons and 'creative' benchmarking as a means of learning from each other in order to enhance one's quality (A 14, A 15,

A16, A 17). Yet, as in any achievement-oriented system the learners are also rivalling each other, competing for resources and appreciation, and thus, eventually, in need of finding ways to distinguish themselves (unless the intended learning outcomes are altogether in favour of conformity and compliance with standards, as more recent observations on the national and European level indicate, cf. Loukkola & Zhang 2010; Sursock 2011).

- The Ministry (and sometimes the agencies that act as its extended or subsidiary arm, such as the FHR or the AR) fulfils the role of the educators (albeit not as educational coaches!) As such, one of their most important tasks is to define the developmental objectives and learning outcomes, which are, for example, covered in the triannual performance contracts between the Ministry and the public universities or in the accreditation guidelines for the private universities and the *Fachhochschulen* (B 6 -12). Mirroring the Bologna Process inspired idea of more comparable qualifications across the European higher education area, some of the learning goals are also directly derived from a more general international 'curriculum' such as the European Standards & Guidelines for Higher Education (e.g. the establishment of staff development programs or the publication of learning outcomes and assessment criteria).

  Yet as the educational logic requires more than just educational goals, the educators are also responsible for providing adequate learning stimuli, either by promising rewards (in the form of additional resources but also reputation) or by threatening the unwilling with negative sanctions (in the form of less resources or legal retributions). Interestingly, the specific form of the sanction or reward does not appear to be of particular importance (which might explain the rather unimaginative focus on money): the logic is so deeply rooted in the field (cf. below), that sometimes the reward can even take a completely hypothetic form (meaning that there are no actual promises attached to a certain demand) and yet still achieves its stimulating function (cf. B 1). Thus, even if the learners' expectations for being rewarded are largely unfulfilled, the logic remains undisturbed as there might be an even greater reward at the end (potentially in the form

of 'increased international reputation', demonstrating once again that the issue field transgresses the borders of the national context).

- The educative relationship network is completed by the role of the examiners which in this case is usually taken by the QA agencies and external evaluators. As examiners they have to check and determine whether the educative goals have been achieved and document the results in a report or certificate. Have the institutions implemented the three-tiered Bologna architecture? Check. Do all programs and course syllabi have clearly defined learning outcomes and assessment procedures? Check. ISO certifications, accreditation labels and upper ranking positions are interpreted as positive performance records, with the latter being even able to distinguish the best pupils. Within this notion, a particularly renowned accreditation seal can even become a 'trophy' to be proudly presented to the co-competitors and the governmental parents (cf. B 7-1). In this logic, the criteria checklists embody both, the intended and the hidden curriculum, i.e. the explicitly stated political goals and the mimetically emerging patterns and procedures that are regarded as 'state of the art' (e.g. peer reviews in teaching, code of conduct documents for staff and students etc.). The agencies then either reward or sanction the institutions themselves or report the findings to some higher authority. During the process, areas for improvement are identified, resulting in 'homework' for the universities which have to be worked off until the re-examination.

The educative culture pattern clearly differentiates between internal and external quality assurance: internal QM or QA systems are but a part of the 'learning outcome' spectrum the higher education institutions have to achieve; not a purpose in themselves but a necessary step towards a higher developmental stage. External QA is not mainly intended as a complimentary part to the internal system but as a general vehicle for assisting the ministerial governance and control, albeit from a rather well-meaning and not overly power-driven perspective. Accordingly, the much-discussed difference between control, accountability and improvement (cf. chapter one, section II) does not play a role

here: in the educative culture pattern, everything is improvement-oriented, yet the decision what counts as an improvement and how this can be achieved, is very much a political top-down decision derived from the Ministry's or agency's paternal expert status. This observation is a further indicator that that quality improvement is as much a perception-bound, dynamic and interest-led construct as quality itself, and thus needs to be properly contextualised and specified (Vettori & Lueger 2008).

Dominant instruments and approaches in this pattern are accreditations, certifications and evaluations, with the latter usually being summative ex-post evaluations, e.g. for purposes of performance measurement. The educative culture's evaluation model is carried by a strong conviction that evaluations need consequences (cf. C 23 – 2) and that 'good' behaviour needs to be rewarded whereas misconduct must be penalised (although the severity of the punishment remains a debatable issue). Correspondingly, the often referenced diagnosis that most evaluations lack suitable follow up phases which reduces the 'sustainable learning effects' is of particular importance here.

Experts, in particular international experts, play a crucial role in this pattern. On the one hand, expertise constitutes the very basis on which the pattern's social order and relationships are based: Without acceptance that someone knows 'better' (and whose privileged knowledge status has been confirmed), the whole educator-learner-relation would soon become instable and problematic. On the other hand, experts can also work as process consultants, showing ways how the 'educators' can find more effective ways to impart their goals and knowledge and helping the institutions to find better ways of learning. Here, the as usual rather strong international dimension can also be read as an interesting analogy to the Bologna Process: Learning (from) abroad is considered as a particularly promising and worthwhile endeavour (cf. B 3-1), with the discourse tellingly favouring secondary experiences from other national contexts (specifically the so-called 'UK experience', the 'Scandinavian model' and the German program accreditations) over experiences from the Austrian context.

Overall, the pattern demonstrates a pronounced ability to stabilise itself, drawing on the core values of this particular issue field: Learning is generally regarded as something positive and for higher education it very much constitutes one of the core principles everything is built upon. Thus, by using the same basic logic that defines one of the key processes the issue field is interwoven with, the educative culture pattern arguably achieves a degree of unquestioned and unquestionable implicitness most other patterns (such as the economically oriented entrepreneurial culture or the politically infused costumer protection pattern) have not yet reached – and maybe will not reach in the near future. In other words: the educative culture pattern seems to be more deeply written into the underlying assumptions of the particular organisational network our observed issue field is connected to. In correspondence to this deeper level of latency (cf. Lüders & Meuser 1996), the pattern manifests itself far less obviously in the text material and its hardly brought up and referred to – in contrast to the economic foundations of the entrepreneurial and managerial patterns that are very much an 'issue' in the discourse. I will get back to the implications in my concluding sections.

In a probably related way, the educative culture pattern is also permeating the behaviour and rhetorics of the individual organisations. From the management perspective, it is the staff that needs to be educated and developed, with the reward-and-punishment theme being a constant in the universities' methods quiver: the reward logic shines through in the increasingly popular award schemes (e.g. teacher of the year, best graduate of the year, most-cited researcher, most successful third party fundraiser), the punishment logic defines the follow up logic of teaching evaluations (particularly in the FH and private universities sectors where lecturers are more regularly released than in the public universities sector), and the educative logic per se is the basis of any staff development training (e.g. institutional trainee programs, pedagogical trainings, didactic workshops). The pattern's core principles become even more visible as the bulk of the respective initiatives and measures seem to be tailored to the less experienced junior faculty and young academics.

The entrepreneurial quality culture pattern

As indicated by its labelling, the entrepreneurial quality culture is tightly linked to the concept of the 'entrepreneurial university' (cf. Badelt 2004). Correspondingly, market metaphors and corporate metaphors play a similarly important role as in the consumer culture pattern, which the entrepreneurial culture is closely, almost complementarily related to. This relationship is based on a rather simple assumption: as the HEIs start to go all 'entrepreneurial', they cannot be trusted to act solely in the interest of their customers anymore; hence, the field needs clear regulations (and dedicated regulators), as I have already described above. On the other hand, this relationship is not as one-sided as one might guess: by using the almost same language (though with differing connotations and foci), the two patterns are very much presupposing and strengthening each other as we will see in the comparative section XVI.

In further analogy to the consumer culture pattern, the higher education institutions are regarded as rivals in one big (international) market, competing for the best students (or the highest rate of international students), public and third party funds and, last but not least, reputation. With regard to our previous observations it is important to note that the market metaphor can only work in its international variant; the Austrian market itself is just "too small" (B 7-5). The language of the entrepreneurial culture pattern is pervaded by terms and expressions like 'competition', 'global market', 'efficiency', 'benchmarking', 'supply and demand' or 'customers'. Despite Klein's argument that the metaphor of the entrepreneurial university is more than a little deceptive, as the respective discourse has so far not managed to develop an alternative to business-related core concepts such as 'profit' or 'return' (Klein 2003), the idea is still getting bigger and more powerful.

But what are the connections to and implications for our issue field? Similarly to all other interpretive patterns, the entrepreneurial culture pattern 'uses' quality as a means of legitimising (and dressing up) its core objectives (cf. section XVI). The difference lies in its employment of various quality notions that on the one hand differ considerably from each other, yet on the other hand entirely stem

from business contexts and are rather detached from higher education's more endogenous quality concepts. Explicitly and implicitly, quality and quality assurance can take at least three different forms in the respective discourse:

- As a cost factor, quality has to be contrasted with other costs and with the intended benefits. Accreditations, audits and certifications are expensive, particularly when the internal costs for preparing the self-assessment reports and the site visits are calculated as well (cf. B 6-27). But the less debated costs for internal quality assurance are probably even more considerable: QA offices need to be staffed and equipped, internal evaluations and follow up procedures bind a lot of staff time, and the most visible efforts (e.g. raising the research output or improving teacher-student-ratios) require substantial investments. Against this background, quality (or at least quality assurance as the means to achieve it) is not something entirely positive but an expense that has to be measured against the potential pay-off. This image of quality appears almost like an inverted version of the 'value-for-money' notion described in chapter one: only this time it is the institution itself that weighs the advantages and disadvantages. The resulting discussion is further fuelled by the fact that it is yet almost impossible to determine and assess the impact of quality assurance (cf. Stensaker 2007b).

- Complementarily, quality is also discussed and conceptualised as a competitive factor that can abet the institution's financial or reputational performance. Basically, there are two variations to this notion: In one strand that is related to the cost-factor-notion described above, the competitive advantage can be achieved through more cost-effectiveness and efficiency. Although arguably a cost-factor itself, quality can also mean fewer costs in other areas. Accordingly, it is the purpose of a suitable quality management to identify such areas of improvements and support the respective process optimisation (the use of the term 'quality management' instead of 'quality assurance' already indicates that this characteristic would also fit very well into the managerial quality culture pattern I will present next). Management information systems, monitoring

schemes as well as efficiency and process analyses are the methods of choice here, blurring the borders between the 'new' QA offices and other functional units such as the Internal Revision office (with the head of the Performance and Quality Management Unit at the University of Graz doubling as the head of the university's Internal Revision, for example), or the Strategic or Financial Controlling Unit (at the Vienna University of Technology, for instance, evaluation and quality management duties are integrated in the Controlling Department and fall into the domain of the Vice-Rector for Financial Management), and leading to the adoption of approaches such as the 'Academic Scorecard' (cf. A 11).

In a second strand, high quality is an important image factor that could a) lead to more resources in a reward logic similar to the educative culture pattern, and will b) lead to a higher degree of recognition (or visibility, cf. B 7-7) and reputation, which can arguably be regarded as an even more important incentive or 'currency' in the science system than money (cf. Merton 1973). The calculation is a fairly simple one: If a higher education institution is considered to offer high quality programs, it will surly rise in the ranks (and rankings) of its co-competitors (cf. B 7-4). In this strand, quality assurance is not just a means for achieving such an intended outcome, but very much a means in itself: Demonstrating the coherence and effectiveness of one's quality assurance system becomes as important as demonstrating teaching competence, graduate employability and research output. Or, to use a direct quote from the 2007 conference: "*Every higher education institution that wants to position itself internationally in a European context, has to place quality assurance in the foreground*" (B6 – 12, translated by myself). This notion puts quality assurance close to the recently booming higher education marketing movement, using accreditations and certifications as a PR or marketing tool in order to support the creation of a brand that speaks for itself (cf. B 2, B 7; B 6 -49): WU (the Vienna University of Economics and Business) for example, has positioned the EQUIS seal prominently on any official document and even its homepage since the first accreditation in early

2007, with the use of the label being strictly regulated by the European Foundation for Management Development. The proximity to the trust-inducing branding logic of the consumer protection pattern is hardly a coincidence. The institutional handling of rankings shows very similar, though maybe more ambiguous traits: Although the continuously voiced criticism that rankings are highly inadequate for supporting quality assurance and quality improvement (cf. Harvey 2008, Hazelkorn 2007) is broadly accepted, many HEI's are nevertheless proudly advertising their ranking positions (unless there is little to boast about the results) and even actively aspire to be included in the more prestigious international rankings (cf. B 7): this 'multi-purpose-game' (Vettori 2008) is probably one of the prime examples for the far-reaching problems that arise from the incompatibility of interpretive patterns and the way this incompatibility is invisibilised and ignored in practice, as I will further discuss in chapter seven.

- Finally, in a third sub-notion within the entrepreneurial quality culture pattern - probably the most entrepreneurially oriented of them all - , quality is regarded as a business opportunity, with quality assurance in higher education emerging as a new business area. Understandably, this logic resonates far stronger with the Ministry and the QA agencies as with the other actor groups. Again, the basic premise is a very simple one: In a context where a) quality assurance is becoming more and more important, b) the national governments and the higher education institutions are willing or compelled to spend a lot of money on external quality assurance (whether for accountability of marketing purposes is not important at this point), and c) the professionalisation of the field is still in its infancy, an ambitious service provider with a clever business model should find plenty of opportunity to get its share of the cake (or, in a more cynically modest interpretation, at least justify its existence and reduce the need for public funds to maintain its operability). In other words: it should be possible to earn money by exporting the national know how to other countries – not least in the developing regions outside of Europe that still need support

and enlightenment (cf. B 1 – 11). This entrepreneurial logic is also mirrored in the language and labelling of the respective actors, e.g. when AQA presents its "positioning strategy" or "service portfolio" (cf. A-4, B-0, AQA 2009b). In order to hold their own or even succeed in this increasingly crowded market – ENQA, the European Network for Quality Assurance Agencies, alone is currently listing 39 members – the providers need not only to follow the self-imposed standards of their profession (such as the ESG), but also require a distinctive profile regarding their particular review approaches and criteria catalogues or information and support services. When the Austrian Network for Quality Management and Quality Development organised an 'agency fair' in late 2010, for example, in order to help the public universities choose a QA agency that would fit their internal needs and requirements, six agencies from all over Europe accepted the invitation and presented their models, laying the focus on the 'USP' of their approaches and on their institutional service quality. In a field where the basic logic of any external quality assurance procedure rather looks the same, competitive advantages have to be gained by other means, i.e. by the way institutions are prepared for the procedure, by the quality of the reviewer pool, by the flexibility of the criteria catalogue – and, last but not least, by the 'added value' HEI's receive through a particular accreditation seal or audit label, e.g. when the agency is internationally renowned.

Summing up, the role arrangement is much simpler in this interpretive pattern than in the others: higher education institutions and QA agencies take the role of entrepreneurs who employ certain QM and QA procedures in order to make a profit or reduce costs. Both groups primarily appear in their framing as business companies, everything and everyone else is reduced to a contextual function. Other actors or actor groups (especially those within the institutions such as academics, students or administrators) are barely relevant, other than being expected to support the scheme – which probably is one of the main reasons why this interpretive pattern finds such a fitting complementary partner in the managerial quality culture pattern as we will see). Correspondingly, 'higher

education' as a function or field is of little relevance here, apart from providing the basis as well as delimiting the options for making business.

The managerial quality culture pattern

Considering the diagnosis that higher education is in general taking a turn towards commercialism and managerialism (cf. Parker 2011, 2007; Ryan & Guthrie 2009) the relative prominence of an interpretive pattern with clearly managerial traits should not be overly surprising – particularly in an issue field that owes at least part of its existence to a struggle over the meaning of a concept termed 'quality management'. However, the main characteristics of the managerial quality culture pattern go far beyond the conceptual aspects that have already been discussed in chapter five, focusing once again on the field's social dynamics rather than on procedural details, as we will see. In my descriptions of the previous three interpretive patterns I have already shown obvious interferences and complementary relations with other patterns, and the managerial pattern does not make an exception here: on the one side it shares a lot of its characteristics with the engineering pattern in our next section, on the other hand it is a more than fitting complement to the entrepreneurial pattern described above, in particular when it comes to the issue of efficiency and profitability. In contrast to the entrepreneurial pattern, however, its 'meaning focus' is clearly directed towards the functionality of the single organisation.

The respective discourse may be characterised by continuous statements that higher education differs from other fields and that higher education institutions are 'very special organisations'. Yet the dominant quality notions of this interpretive pattern could stem from almost any other context that deals with issues of management and control: Sometimes explicitly, but mostly implicitly, quality is used as a synonym for 'effectiveness', 'efficiency' and 'productiveness'. It is the main purpose of any quality management and quality assurance scheme to improve the organisational performance – even though the specific performance goals are barely brought up. 'Higher education' is but a general

label for a certain kind of organisations, but eventually carries no particular meaning of its own: Even though the manifest discussion circles around key expressions such as 'teaching quality' and 'research quality', they are hardly at the core of this interpretive pattern, being superseded by a focus on the structures and processes of an organisation, where teaching and research are just a part of the daily business. In very simple words: Teaching and research would or at least could be better if they were better managed and organised. The distinction between this kind of quality management and the 'general' management of the HEIs ranges from blurry to non-existent: Quality management is either supporting the general management by providing specific information and 'reorganising' the organisational structures and processes in a more manageable manner or replacing other management modes by offering a 'wholesale' solution that can be regarded as a comprehensive management model of its own.

Overall, the underlying image of the field's main players – the higher education institutions - is little flattering and focuses on their inability to unfold their full potential unless their structural and processual problems have been brought under control: „It has not been too long, since universities were behaving like governmentally protected playing fields on which the flowers of knowledge were blooming in uncontrolled growth" (A 10-1, translation by myself). The basic premise being that teaching and research would be much better if they were more 'controlled', it is the job of the higher education manager and the purpose of a quality management system to bring order to the chaos and ensure institutional success. Leaving the quality of the teaching and research output to chance (or the engagement and capabilities of individuals), is almost unavoidably clashing with the idea of 'assuring' quality in the form of a guarantee. Again, we find a trust problem at the very roots of our interpretive pattern that is indeed similar to the one described in the section on the consumer protection pattern: How can the higher education institutions make sure that stakeholder expectations are met? Yet the group of relevant stakeholders is much broader here, including not only students and future employers, but also the government, the industry and the general (taxpaying) public: If the state and industrial

sponsors are investing their money in the production of knowledge that is innovative as well as relevant (or at least in graduates who will make it innovative and relevant in their future occupations), the beneficiaries of these investments have to find a way to ensure the outcome. No one wants to pay for a significant breakthrough that never happens or for the training of highly qualified professionals whose qualifications do not meet the requirements of the labour market. An adequate QA or QM system could be just the way to (re)assure the financiers that all will be well.

Yet despite the relative importance of the accountability dimension within this pattern, external stakeholders play only minor roles in the managerial culture's (inter)actors' network. As I have already mentioned above, the managerial culture unfolds its meaning potential primarily on the level of the single organisation (which we should not confuse with its significance for the field level discourse); consequently, all the usual QA-related actor groups I have identified in the previous patterns – QA agencies, the Ministry, interest groups or students – are reduced to mere contextual functions. In general, the managerial culture pattern knows only one important role distinction: there are managers and managed (and, slightly less important, those administrative units that support the managers). The engineering quality culture pattern to be described in the next section pushes this simplification and de-actorisation even one step further as we will see. But let us take a closer look on the managerial culture's most relevant roles first:

- The higher education managers are responsible for changing their institutions for the better – which could also work as the prime definition for quality assurance within the managerial culture logic (for 'better' just read 'more effective', 'more efficient', 'better reputed' or 'more profitable'). Most notably, it is always the senior management that is meant here: Quality management is perceived as a matter of strategy. Correspondingly, the managers' most important functions are the definition of (quality) goals, and to ensure that the goals are finally met – typically, by providing resources and persuading the other university members that the goals are in the institution's and therefore their own

best interest. In this regard, managing what Mintzberg (1979) would call a 'professional organisation' might even be considered an 'art' (Pellert 1999) from the outset, but the specifics of the quality assurance topos adds a further challenge to the already existing difficulties: The idea that quality assurance in higher education requires the active participation of all organisation members is by now almost commonly accepted (and is probably most fittingly represented in EUA's quality culture ideal as introduced in chapter one), leading to the pivotal but still unresolved question how bottom up ownership for top down ideas can be ensured with the help of bureaucratic means. The practical relevance of this slightly polemic question will become clearer once we have taken a look at how the role of the other organisation members is framed under the premises of the managerial quality culture pattern.

- The role of all university members who are not part of the top management is oriented at a simple premise: The organisation will only be able to prosper if individual or group interests are subordinated to the greater institutional good, i.e. the financial or reputational prosperity of the organisation (or, substitutionally, the top management's strategic goals). As I have already mentioned above, the managerial culture pattern redefines the purpose of a higher education institution (bringing the general issue of governance and control forward while redefining the particularities of higher education as a matter of context). The entire discourse is pervaded by expressions and concepts that were coined in other managerial contexts (see above). Correspondingly, the roles of the organisation members are rearranged, disregarding the higher education specific roles (i.e. researchers, teachers, students, administrators) and redefining them as employees, clients, stakeholders and support units (see also Waugh 1998). In a related way, areas of activities become areas of performance and management activities are – at least in theory - not targeted at actors but at structures and processes. By its very definition, a QA system has to function on a supra-individual level (an idea that is even more at the centre of the engineering culture pattern). It is not just that

individual actors and interests *are* irrelevant within the managerial culture pattern, they *have to be* irrelevant for it in order to work according to its own logic; the idea that organisations have an inherent dynamic of their own and change in a self-contained non-regulated manner is not so much ignored (many proponents of the managerial culture's structurally most important aspects come from the field of management science after all) but problematised. The results of inherently dynamic developments are seldom foreseeable and do not necessarily coincide with the goals that have been defined as having highest priority. It is thus no coincidence that this is the first role description in this part of the study where the described actors are not characterised by their actions and have received a passive label ('the managed') from the very beginning: Within the managerial quality culture pattern, everyone apart from the management just has to act along the lines that were set by the management or at least *re*act in a constructive way to the constitutive parameters. This is in no way framed as an issue of power (although the organisation of power seems to be at the very heart of this interpretive pattern), but as a matter of success and survival: The quality (of any process, area or aspect) can only be ensured or improved if every member of the organisation is contributing to the same goal by following the same rules.

Accordingly, centralisation is a key aspect of the managerial culture pattern, going even beyond the already known phenomenon of re-distributed power by touching and altering the very basis that bestows meaning on collective and individual actions: Traditionally, Austrian universities have been characterised by a strong decentralisation and a high degree of individualism (cf. Chapter two). The 'freedom of teaching and research' principle has usually been interpreted as a licence to align teaching and research with individual teaching and research interests. Individual careers were (and still are) closely connected with individual striving for quality and excellence (a successful career being its own quality assurance seal); as in the entire German-speaking area, the

separate chairs and departments were far more important than the institution as a whole. The past legal reforms (particularly the UOG 1993 and the UG 2002) have done a lot to change this situation, and institutional quality management systems can be interpreted as one of the key symbols and drivers of such change. Improving the quality of teaching and research has become an institutional quality goal and the ways of achieving this goal are being increasingly formalised and institutionalised. Resultantly, it is now the organisation that takes responsibility for the overall quality and instructs its members to improve their teaching and research. Hence, in a slightly paradoxical twist, the academics are doing what they have done before, but they do it for a different purpose, i.e. contributing to the overall goals of the university (now individual research and teaching interests have to be aligned with institutional requirements, among others). Within this logic, quality management and quality assurance schemes serve at least partly to clarify the roles and responsibillities of various actors in order to ensure their participation in achieving goals they were originally deprived of by the very same system. Being aware of such a change of the organisational culture sheds new light on the well-documented resistance of academics against matters of quality management and quality assurance (Houston et al. 2008; Newton 2002, 2000): It is not just a rebellion against increased bureaucracy or instrumentalism, but against a scheme that represents the most comprehensive change in the past decades, redefining not so much the academics' tasks but the meaning these tasks are imbued with.

- The QA offices and experts take some kind of special position within this arrangement: As 'architects' of the QA systems, they are on the one hand supporting the top management level by providing data and offering processual/structural solutions, which sets them apart from other administrative units who are subjected to the regulations of the system and brings them into a conflict with the academics who perceive themselves as being put under tutelage by a barely legitimated bureaucracy. Yet as the logic of the quality management system does not

stop at the management level, the experts are also becoming increasingly demanding of the management level, defining its role and responsibilities in the overall system and making an argument for more professionalisation even on the top level (cf. A 6). It will be interesting to observe how this rather young profession will deal with the related tension in the near future and how the emergence of *Third Space Professionals* similarly to the UK (cf. Whitchurch 2008) will affect the dynamics of the managerial culture pattern in the long run.

Summing up, we have by now clearly seen that the main purpose of quality assurance within the managerial culture pattern is to improve the performance of the higher education institution by way of increasing its manageability. In this regard, it is hardly surprising that this interpretive pattern leans heavily towards formalisation (similarly to the consumer protection pattern leaning towards standardisation): Clear definitions of the quality goals, the roles and responsibilities, the resources allotted to the goals as well as detailed internal rules, regulations and standards are on the top of the managerial culture's conceptual-methodical quiver. Informal structures are either perceived as threatening or inefficient - a healthy organisation requires formalised communication channels and centralised information systems. Learning and knowing more about one's own organisation is considered a conditio sine qua non, yet the knowledge has to be as structured and as easy to interpret as possible, making the search for higher-education-adequate key performance indicators one of the fastest-growing sub-discourses in the issue field in the past four years. The main purpose of all QA instruments is to support the institutional management and to ensure stakeholder-involvement (cf. A 8).

That the pattern's semantic core vocabulary seems to be increasingly taken as a matter of course could be interpreted as an early sign for its growing structural importance in the issue field. The UG 2002 certainly gave it an additional boost and many of its premises are already providing direction for action and perception patterns alike. However, as by now, the pattern's key characteristics are still far too openly referred to and debated to credit it with the level of

implicitness other competing patterns (such as the educative culture pattern for example) can make a claim on: In many ways it is still too "obvious", if we follow the argumentation of Lüders & Meuser (1991). I will come back to this argument in chapter seven, but before that I will introduce one final pattern which takes the depersonalisation logic of the managerial pattern even one step further: the engineering quality culture pattern.

The engineering quality culture pattern

In a lot of ways the engineering culture pattern can be regarded as a Tayloristic variant of the managerial culture: In analogy to the managerial culture pattern, it is oriented at values such as effectiveness and efficiency and is geared towards an objective-driven management of organisations, with the main objective again being an improvement of the organisation's performance. Yet in this case, the improvement premise is not only valid in relation to strategic performance goals, e.g. more research output or better ranking positions, but is also applied to the organisation as such: The engineering culture pattern is deeply entrenched with the idea of building or developing a 'better' organisation by ways of managing and re-engineering its internal processes and building self-sustaining structures. Hence, the underlying image of organisations shares a lot of traits with the machine metaphor as described by Gareth Morgan (1986), such as a routinisation of processes or instrumentalisation of people and ideas.

Relatedly, the engineering quality culture pattern is characterised by a strong belief in the rationality of organisational life and the causality of actions. In essence, the engineering culture is a culture of establishing and maintaining order: Inner-institutional plurality and dynamics have to be brought under control in order to make things better (there is, by the way, no denial that improvements can also take place on their own – but the unforeseeable randomness that characterises such unintended and unmanaged developments is not compatible with the effectiveness/efficiency notion that lies at the heart of the engineering pattern). In accordance with the engineering culture's rationality maxim, scientificity plays a major role here. It may not come as much of a

surprise, though, that the scientific paradigm the engineering culture is oriented at and whose ideas it is pervaded with, is largely a realistic/post-positivistic one with strong quantitative tendencies. In the engineering logic, quality is a phenomenon that has to be identified, defined, broken down into different characteristics and dimensions, operationalised, measured and ultimately regulated, increased and improved. Quality assurance and quality management are two functionally complimentary ways of achieving these purposes. As science-based or at least scientifcally-informed tasks they (have to) lie in the hands of properly trained and scholarly oriented experts and professionals. Higher education as the particular field which these organisations call home, is again only of contextual relevance.

In further analogy to the managerial culture pattern, the engineering culture focuses on the organisational level, yet in contrast is characterised by a clear depersonalisation and mechanisation: Actors and actor groups are mostly reduced to their functional contributions within an action-regulating system. It is the processes that are at the centre of the engineering culture pattern, following the well-known 'input-throughput-output-outcome' formula (cf. C1-9). Quality can be found if the functional chains between the different stages of the 'production process' work according to the pre-defined plan (C 2-4). On a more manifest level, such a system is only expected to inform the decisions and actions of the people within the HEIs, but latently the respective discursive elements seem to be carried by the hope that the system will 'show the way' and will ultimately take over a considerable part of the organisation's strategic management; a fully developed QM system is not only monitoring how well previously defined objectives have been achieved but also generates new objectives based on environmental and internal analyses.

Similarly to the managerial culture, most external stakeholders play only a minor role here (apart from providing data or setting the political, legal, economical or socio-cultural frame to which the system reacts). Other than in the managerial culture, however, the engineering pattern omits most of the inner-organisational actors as well: academics, students and administrative staff are but a component of the overall system, making it work, as well as being regulated by it. In

essence, there are only two important roles to be fulfilled here (with a third role, the external examiners, being some kind of silent partner that seldom appears in the respective discourse and is thus not presented here):

- The QA professionals are the system's architects and maintenance crew at once. It is their job (and sometimes self-proclaimed mission) to build and develop the system along the guidelines of their profession and external requirements such as the European Standards & Guidelines or the audit and accreditation criteria set by the government and the QA agencies. As a community, they work hard on their institutionalisation and professionalisation: The past ten to fifteen years have seen the emergence of a number of QA-related conferences and conventions as well as journals (e.g. Quality in Higher Education, Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and trainings or certified courses; it is probably only a question of time, until we experience the establishment of professional associations and the definition of professional standards that define what quality managers and quality assurance officers need to know and do in order to be such called. On a related downside, the QA professionals are often rather detached from the other parties within their organisations and their fondness of processes, structures, rules and responsibilities can easily bring them into conflict with traditional academic culture(s). It remains to be seen whether the increasing 'scientification' of quality assurance will change this situation or even reinforce it.

- In the logic of the engineering culture pattern, the higher education managers act on basis of the system's parameters; in this regard they are more an of an executive board than a steering body. The data which is generated from the automated and continuously operating evaluation, reporting and monitoring systems relieves the management from the uncertainties of decision-making by showing areas of improvement and opportunities: who is performing well and should thus be rewarded? Which numbers have dropped or increased? The fact that most of this quantified information tells little about the underlying causes or influential factors is usually blended out, as the engineering culture pattern is entrenched with

the belief that all informational shortcomings can be overcome with the help of more or better data; it is never the logic itself that is put into question, just the way it is applied.

Fully developed, the system starts to transform itself and – as I have already indicated above – takes control: Not even the definition and priorisation of the operational goals and objectives remains in the hands of the management; they are rather derived from a comparison of the nominal conditions and the actual conditions (although the nominal conditions have had to be defined from outside the system at one point). Of course there is always the possibility of deflecting from the system's logic (which, in practice, happens every day). In this regard, the field level discourse already shows the (latent) potential for additional future conflicts, in this case between the higher education managers and the QA/QM professionals: the demand for a professionalisation of higher education managers (who actually know how to use the systems and tools they are provided with) is a recurrent and not even timidly mentioned theme within the field. It may not come as much of a surprise that the demand seems to be predominantly raised by the QA professionals themselves.

Corresponding to the idea of a 'quality engine' which produces high quality education if it is suitably calibrated, the instrumentalist approaches to quality assurance within the engineering pattern are characterised by a strong 'toolbox mentality' that once again shows a pronounced rationalism and positivism: Once it is identified and defined, every problem can be solved – the actors responsible just need to find the right tool or approach for it. Consequently, the respective discourse is coined by the search for the most fitting tool, the most coherent design, the best way to calculate a specific indicator etc. Within the engineering quality culture pattern, considerable time and energy is invested in developing or improving instruments. The current dealings with student evaluations of teaching and graduate surveys can be regarded as a particularly obvious manifestation of this logic: There are always new techniques and methods in order to improve the data quality, to capture new dimensions of the student learning experience (cf. the recent trend towards a subjective evaluation of students' learning outcomes, e.g. Dorfer et al. 2010, Kernegger et al. 2009) or to increase return rates. Even

as – in the case of teaching evaluations – previous research suggests that the instruments are hardly capable of fulfilling the highflying expectations or improve the teaching quality (cf. Rindermann 2003, Hundt 2000), the conclusion seems to remain the same: if there is a problem with the instrument, the instrument just is not fully developed and has to be further engineered; the underlying purpose and whether the instrument actually fits the purpose are barely put into question. Ultimately, the same logic is also applied to social and interactional problems, resulting in a very socio-technical approach towards communication, for instance: Within the rationalistic engineering pattern, communication problems are usually perceived as information problems that can be solved through better communication channels, more reports, or a 'dumbing down' of the data so they would be understandable by everyone (that such a problem definition might miss the point and could cause even more troubles in the long run, is impressively shown in a case study by Froschauer & Lueger 2006). Among the most favoured approaches of the engineering quality culture patterns are indicator-based controlling schemes as part of the internal quality assurance, and more technical and process-oriented certifications such as ISO as part of the external quality assurance (B8, B9).

"Consequently, when a particular approach to quality assessment is being offered, it makes sense not only to enquire into the conception of higher education that it springs from, but also to ask: what set of interests is being defended? Precisely what form of partiality is being promoted?"

<div align="right">(Barnett 1992: 18)</div>

XVI

Taking the quality culture concept as a tool for analysis, as Harvey and Stensaker suggested (2008), we have by now seen that we can indeed find several interpretive patterns which combine different logics, values and approaches in coherent packages and provide – at least implicit – orientation for the actors in the field. Yet as none of these patterns exists in an isolated continuum but rather occupies the same social arena as the others, how do they get along? Are they really "clashing" as this study's title suggest? And if yes, are there exceptions? Do we find "alliances" or at least "peaceful co-existence" as well?

Some of the overlappings, shared characteristics and similarities (but also the more important differences) have already been indicated in the patterns' descriptions, yet the picture becomes a lot clearer when the results are focused and rearranged in the analytical grid presented in table 6.1. The grid is largely identical with the one used during the interpretive process (see my respective notice in chapter four) and was then further condensed and complemented with two additional dimensions, the 'main sponsors' and the 'structurally related patterns'. Overall, the grid contains nine dimensions which I found of particular relevance for a) providing a short yet coherent characterisation of every single pattern and b) helps to distinguish them from each other. I will first discuss each single dimension before moving on to analyse the overarching picture that emerges from this comparison and contrast.

The **quality notion** dimension is of particular heterogeneity, demonstrating once more that quality is a highly undetermined (yet on the other hand strangely determining) construct. Some of the patterns do not even provide a synonym or analogy for quality as suggested by the often rather figurative heuristics I have discussed in my state of the field review in chapter one. Most quality notions seem to mirror values, but whether such values are intrinsic (educative culture pattern), extrinsic (managerial culture pattern) or just a synonym for 'worth' (consumer culture pattern) remains undecided (and is obviously closely linked to the way quality is approached as I will discuss a little later). In the engineering culture pattern, the core quality notion is even based on the construct's ambiguity, abandoning any particular definition or image, yet on the other hand showing firm conviction that the concept is in principle definable and approachable.

In terms of causality, it is difficult to decide whether the respective quality notions are actually at the beginning /bottom of each interpretive pattern – much in the form of a core value –, or if they are rather a derivative of some deeper lying logic that is used for legitimising and argumentative purposes (possibly in a way not even the actors themselves are aware of). In light of the notions' heterogeneity as discussed above and with regard to the fact that not every of the notions can be counted as a value in a stricter sense, I would rather tend to the latter view; after all, 'quality' remains a discursive idea that is met with enthusiastic approval from all actors, regardless of its underlying meanings, which makes it a help- and powerful vehicle to convey political and personal interests (cf. Laske et al. 2000). Rather obviously, context plays a very important role here.

	Consumer Protection Quality Culture	**Educative Quality Culture**	**Entrepreneurial Quality Culture**	**Managerial Quality Culture**	**Engineering Quality Culture**
quality notion(s)	value for time or money	characteristic to be developed / value in itself (excellence)	cost factor / competitive factor / business opportunity	effectiveness / efficiency	phenomenon to be defined, operationalised, measured and controlled
higher education notion(s)	product or market / HEIs as producers	developmental field / HEIs as learners	market / HEIs as enterprises	management field / HEIs as organisations	management field / HEIs as organisations
quality assurance notion(s)	ensuring product quality; providing product information	facilitating institutional developments and improvements	reducing cost / marketing strengths / offering business opportunities	improving organisational performance	defining, operationalising, measuring and controlling quality
QA focus	programs / degrees / teaching & learning	various areas (teaching, research, internationali-sation…)	organisation / processes / output	organisation / processes / output	organisation / processes / output
main roles	producers / consumers / regulators	learners / educators / experts / examiners	entrepreneurs / competitors	managers / managed	functional parts of the system / system developers
main sponsors	Employers / Students / QA agencies	Ministry / QA agencies / senior management	Ministry / QA agencies / senior management	senior management / QA and management experts	senior management / QA and management experts
main approaches	standards and checklists / certifications and accreditations	benchmarking / rankings / evaluations	controlling / rankings / marketing tools	rules and regulations / management information systems	"toolbox": different instruments for different purposes
core problem(s)	establishing trust	controlling behaviour	increasing market success	improving manageability and control	establishing and maintaining order
structurally related patterns	entrepreneurial culture	managerial culture	consumer protection culture	entrepreneurial culture / educative culture / engineering culture	managerial culture

Table 6.1: Comparing the different cultures

Part of the contextualisation is provided by the way **higher education** is framed and understood in the respective interpretive patterns. Barnett (1992) has already addressed the question of how ideas of quality and higher education are related and identifies four dominant concepts of higher education which underlie contemporary approaches to quality: higher education as the production of qualified manpower, higher education as a training for a research career, higher education as the efficient management of teaching provision and higher education as a matter of extending life chances.

However, even though Barnett then laments the lack of alternative concepts grounded in the idea of education (e.g. the formation of general intellectual abilities and perspectives, the enhancement of the individual student's personal character), his findings are still rooted in a particular (if not to say traditional) understanding of higher education as a particular stage for learning and training.

The five interpretive patterns identified in my own study seem to have abandoned such an understanding in favour of more generic, commercialistic and managerialistic higher education notions. Even though the related notions may vary in the details, practically all patterns share a very similar comprehension here: In terms of a deeper logic, it does not make much of a difference if higher education is perceived (and treated?) as a market or as a management field, or if higher education institutions are considered as enterprises, producers or manageable organisations. Even the educative culture pattern, which arguably differs the most in this respect, uses a learning organisation concept that is very reminiscent from other contexts which have little to do with higher education per se. This observation is more than a little surprising, for even though the discourse shows ample acknowledgement that higher education is 'different' from other contexts, there is at least equal evidence that those differences go only so far and that HEIs could and should be treated as organisations (or even companies) in any other field. I will return to this strand of thoughts when discussing the general trends in the five patterns a little later.

The patterns' underlying **quality assurance notions** are closely related to both other notions, quality and higher education, and emerge in a strictly functionalist guise: though no formal definitions are given, quality assurance is expected to fulfil one or several clear purposes, from ensuring the quality of the higher education products (consumer protection culture) to aiding the organisation succeed in the market (entrepreneurial culture) or improving institutional performances (managerial culture). On a meta-level, all QA notions presented here could be subsumed under one of the two core purposes described in chapter one – accountability or improvement -, yet with regard to the latter it becomes once more apparent that improvement is a very relative concept with differing points of reference and areas of application (cf. Vettori & Lueger 2008).

Corresponding to the different QA functions, the **focus** of the QA-related activities may also vary across the five patterns, though not excessively so; in principle, the different foci can be arranged in two major categories: one category with its focus on different aspects of a university's performance portfolio such as its academic programs, teaching and learning activities, research or internationalisation strategy, and one category that aims its attention on the institutional level, concentrating on organisational structures, processes and input/output relations. In many ways, this picture mirrors the general dichotomy between quality assurance and quality management as discussed in chapter five, but also the international debate on the benefits and disadvantages of program accreditations in comparison with institutional accreditations.

Quality assurance approaches and instruments play a central role in the field's professional discourse and occupy the major part of the actors' interests and time. The field has come up with (or rather imported and adopted) a great variety of different tools and schemes with equally different purposes and scope. A closer look, however, reveals, that not all interpretive patterns are equally compatible with every approach, on the contrary: some instruments appear as the very embodiment of a pattern's underlying logic, providing a first hint that the problem(s) to be solved differ considerably in the respective meaning collectives – an aspect that is continuously ignored or even invisibilised as I will further discuss in my final chapter. Hence, although some information gathering

tools such as student evaluations of teaching or surveys can be found across all five patterns, each pattern favours its own combination and highlights different methods. The consumer protection culture's focus on product quality, for example, is mirrored in its reliance on accreditations and certifications based on pre-defined standards and criteria. The educative culture's basic premise that all institutions can learn to overcome their weaknesses is paralleled by the pattern's preference for evaluative approaches (which bring the weaknesses to the light) and benchmarking initiatives (as a means to learn from each other). The entrepreneurial culture's concentration on market success explains its closeness to marketing tools, which are admittedly no classic quality assurance instruments but share more than one trait with the concept of rankings. Rules and regulations that define structures, roles and positions and comprehensive management information systems are then at the basis of the managerial culture, demonstrating this pattern's need for institutional order and specifically presented data. The engineering culture, however, deviates a little bit from this principle; here, the pattern is less characterised by a particular combination of instruments but rather by its general approach, demonstrating a firm belief that there is an instrumental solution for every problem as long as the 'toolbox' is adequately filled. It is important to note, though, that the incompatibility of certain patterns and methods is nothing the actors and discourse participants seem to be particularly aware of (in the same way as they are not aware of the existence of differing interpretive patterns in the first place). In addition, the tendency to put the instrument itself in the centre instead of clarifying the problem first brings to mind Abraham Maslow's (1966: 15) often cited maxim that every problem tends to look like a nail if the only tool one knows is a hammer. Chapter seven will shed a little more light on why the solutions seem so much more obvious and popular than the problems in our field.

Taking a look at the next two dimensions – **roles and sponsors** –, we can see that the interpretive patterns go far beyond linking quality, higher education and quality assurance in coherent 'meaning packages', but also define and direct the roles and positions of various actors as well as their hierarchical and procedural relations. The 'roles' dimension is of particular importance, as it thus not so much

re-arrange the field's main players (as described in chapter three) but re-define them in a way that stabilises the respective interpretive pattern and ensures its functionality. In this regard, every quality culture sets its focus on a different role structure: The consumer protection culture differentiates between the producers and consumers of higher education goods, with the balance being kept by specialised market regulators. The educative quality culture's meaning core, on the other hand, rests on a special conception of learning, where better-informed or more experienced educators teach the learners how to achieve their goals (though it is usually unclear, whether the pronoun 'their' refers to the educators or learners). Particularly well-informed actors function as examiners who assess the learning success and potentially sanction the learners' behaviour. In the entrepreneurial quality culture we encounter entrepreneurial higher education institutions or QA agencies, whose ambition to succeed in the market makes them also compete with each other. The managerial quality culture is equally simply patterned with only two complementary roles: the managers and the managed. Finally, in the engineering quality culture, the roles and functions of each actor are defined by the quality assurance or quality management system, therefore resulting in different (though usually functionally-hierarchical) role arrangements in dependence of the system's specifics. The only role that is always stable (though not part of the system itself) is the system's developers (e.g. its 'architects' and 'maintenance crew).

As we can see, almost every pattern carries complementary roles. In addition, every structure is characterised by some hierarchical order, with one role that is attributed with more power than the others and thus able to dominate and control them or at least establish what is important or desirable (normative power). This observation shows the potential for two different kinds of role conflicts: one kind of conflict *within* each pattern that stems from the unequal distribution of power (particularly in academic contexts that have long been characterised by a collegiate approach to decision-making and control, cf. Morley 2003); and, more importantly, one kind of conflict *between* the different patterns, as they are not separate entities but overlapping structures of meaning and sense-making within the same field: firstly, because most of the roles each

pattern arranges for the field's actors would be taken by the same actor or actor group and not all roles are compatible with each other; secondly, because the main influence and power lie with different actor-role combinations in each pattern, as can be seen, for example, in the differences between the consumer protection culture and the entrepreneurial culture (even though both rely on the same ideology of higher education markets); and, last but not least, because not all actors would be satisfied with the type of role intended for them within a certain pattern.

This leads us to a relevant question with a strong cui-bono-flavour: Can a specific pattern be associated with certain actors who would particularly benefit from its respective arrangement of social, procedural and phenomenon-related aspects? And are those actors (either aware or unaware of this potential benefit) relatedly sponsoring or promoting such patterns? The '**sponsors**' dimension aims at offering a few hints in this direction – though we have to keep in mind that, for methodological reasons, such relations can only be regarded as conceptual: even though they do have some empirical ground, any correlations or causalities would have to be proven with a completely different approach than a hermeneutic one.

However, the ensuing picture is still rather telling: Very much in line with the name-providing importance of the consumers and their protectors in this pattern, the consumer protection quality culture resonates strongly with the students, the employers (represented by the social partners who have a clear tradition of protecting the interests of their clientele) and the QA agencies who fulfil the role of the regulators. The educative quality culture, on the other hand, finds its main allies with those who hold the most formal power in the field and would probably deem themselves the 'educators' and 'examiners' in this pattern – namely the Ministry, the QA agencies and the senior management of the HEIs. The same actor-combination forms the main sponsors of the entrepreneurial quality culture. On first view the Ministry's inclusion in this group may appear a little surprising, for in contrast to the QA agencies and the HEI's senior management it is less obvious, why and how the government wants to make money out of QA. A closer look, however, reveals that the Ministry is not only latently adhering to but

also manifestly arguing for an entrepreneurial approach to quality in higher education (cf. B 1), probably mirroring the Europe-wide search for alternative funding sources (cf. Estermann & Pruvot 2011).

The remaining two interpretive patterns – the managerial quality culture and the engineering quality culture – also share a specific combination of actors as their main sponsors: the senior management and the QA and higher education management experts. The latter's involvement is of particular interest here, as it demonstrates rather clearly, how the success and importance of a group of actors can be linked to the success and importance of a certain interpretive pattern. It is mainly within the logic of the managerial and engineering pattern that the experts hold power, influence and legitimacy, for example as the architects of the QA systems or advisors to the decision-makers. In the other patterns they hold less relevant positions, making it equally less attractive to advocate respective perspectives, neither explicitly nor implicitly.

Taking one final look at this dimension, yet this time across the five patterns, we can see that the senior management is represented as a sponsor in four out of five patterns. Considering that the same actor group would also fit rather well into the role-structure of each of these patterns (as benevolent educators, entrepreneurial visionaries, or simply as managers, tayloristic or otherwise), this observation is not completely unexpected, but can be read as a further indicator for the close relationship of the rise of quality assurance/quality management as an issue and the emergence of powerful and self-conscious university managers as envisioned by the UOG 1993 and the UG 2002.

Academics and students, on the other hand, barely appear in the patterns – correspondingly, their roles are mostly rather passive ones (e.g. as 'the educated' or 'the managed'). Considering that both groups are usually regarded as key actors within most – in theory rather participation-friendly – QA models, this seems quite interesting. Of course, part of these results can be ascribed to my field construct and the primary data material which kind of excluded the academics from the very start (despite the fact that the field is based on expert discourse). On the other hand, we could also take this observation as an

indicator that a) most QM and QA models are indeed managerial tools that are much more top down oriented than they would make the other actors believe (or tend to believe themselves); and b) that the action and meaning problems that lie at the heart of a particular interpretive pattern (and which the pattern is intended to deal with or even solve) hold less relevance for the main participants of higher education's core functions than they hold for politicians, managers and issue-related professionals. From this perspective the well-documented reluctance and mistrust of academics towards matters of quality assurance (Newton 2002, 2000; Waugh 1998) is little surprising; I will take up this thought when wrapping up the results in chapter seven.

Yet before taking such considerations one step further, there is one final but crucial comparative dimension that needs to be discussed: what are the actual **core problems** that each interpretive pattern is intended to solve or at least deal with? In chapter four we have already seen that interpretive patterns emerge in order to solve particular problems of action (or interpretation) that are firmly grounded and embedded in the respective life world. Individual actors may not explicitly refer to these problems (in fact they might not even be aware of them), but are still guided and driven by them in their actions and communications. From a methodological point of view, the reconstruction of the core problem is one of the most important steps in order to understand an interpretive pattern and its internal logic, but also one of the more difficult tasks, as it has to be deduced from the way(s) the problem is being dealt with. It is almost like the game show "Jeopardy!", where the players with are presented with answers and have to phrase the fitting questions to these answers (although the hermeneutic reconstruction process requires a little more arguing and a little less guesswork).

So what are the key problems that lie at the heart of our five interpretive patterns? By now it has probably become clear that the interpretive patterns' main function is not a simple assurance or improvement of quality. In the case of the consumer protection quality culture, the interpretive pattern seems to have emerged as an answer to the growing trust problem among the different stakeholder groups. The trust/distrust dilemma may be one of the dominant

characteristics of our entire issue field (cf. chapter five), but no other pattern is as dedicated to dealing with it as the consumer protection pattern. This is particularly well shown by the way quality assurance is handled and legitimised as a means for providing orientation and enticing confidence in an increasingly complex environment, by its fondness for the principles of transparency and advocacy and by its reliance on certificates and trustees in the form of quality assurance labels and agencies. That the problem is thus hardly solved has already been discussed, but this seems to rather invigorate the pattern instead of endangering it.

The educative quality culture's roots in classic educational concepts are paralleled by the equally 'classic' problem of action the pattern deals with: how to induce certain behaviour, if the actors are likely to develop their own preferences (behaviour control)? Here, QA appears as an instrument of dominance and discipline, with privileged actors (e.g. the government on the field level, the senior management on the organisational level) intending to influence the behaviour of entire organisations as well as individual actors. Again, the references to quality and the mostly 'soft' approaches familiar to the field provide legitimacy, this time for governmental and managerial actions that might otherwise be put even more into question than is already the case. Positive and negative sanctions are an important part of this logic, which overall seems well established and accepted. There may be many reasons why this pattern seems the least problematic (or, more accurately, least problematised), but at least partly it can be ascribed to the pattern's clever use of learning concepts and the terminology of education which clearly finds more resonance than the economically entrenched language of the entrepreneurial pattern. The increasingly popular benchmarking initiatives, for example, play with the desirability of 'learning from each other', but hardly make it explicit that the learning goals have already been set.

As I have already indicated, the problem at the heart of the entrepreneurial quality culture is an economic one: in this interpretive pattern, quality assurance becomes an instrument to help the universities succeed in an otherwise pretty undefined international higher education market. In other words, the emergence

of market logics (or the related rhetorics) require a way of dealing with the resulting challenges that were previously unknown to the sector, at least in the Austrian context. Luckily, other sectors had already discovered the importance of quality and quality management as competitive factors and provide solutions as well as interpretive 'building blocks' that can be imported and adapted. Consequently, the field is stripped of most of its specifics and becomes a business area where goods are produced and services offered. I found two related observations to be rather interesting during my research: On the one hand, this interpretive pattern – or rather its manifestations in the discourse – is probably the most contested one, with its business-orientation being a constant bone of contention. On the other hand, the pattern's language has seeped into the field's conversation in a comparably fast and barely challenged manner: terms like 'clients', 'services' or 'markets' are already becoming institutionalised in Austrian higher education. However, demonstrating the extent and concrete forms of this diffusion and the resulting confusions would require an analysis of its own.

Corresponding to their frequent overlappings, the managerial quality culture and the engineering quality culture deal with rather similar problems: the managerial quality culture offers an interpretive solution for a problem that might also be considered a classic in management sciences, but is of a rather new relevance in the context of Austrian higher education - the apparent necessity to improve the institutions manageability and controllability is largely owed to the structural changes brought by the reforms of the UOG 93 and the UG 02. The introduction of new government and management models almost automatically requires ways of implementing these models and of ensuring their success. Quality management/quality assurance as framed in the managerial culture pattern offer such means, not unlike the disciplining function of the educative quality culture, yet with different approaches and a logic that is less focused on the actors and more on structures and processes. This logic is brought to full fruition in the engineering culture pattern, which is geared to a similar problem of administration: how to establish and maintain order in an organisational environment, which by tradition and purpose is rather dynamic and complex,

involving a multitude of actors and interests. The engineering culture patterns seems almost fully dedicated to reducing this complexity and channelling the dynamics by use of scientific principles and socio-technical instruments. A strong belief in the rationality of organisational life and the causality of actions leads to a very functionalist framing of quality assurance as a means of exploring the deficiencies of organisational life and of 're-engineering' its structures and purposes in order to increase effectiveness and efficiency.

Taking a concluding look at these five core problems – establishing trust, controlling behaviour, increasing market success, improving manageability and establishing and maintaining order – it becomes particularly clear where the 'clash of quality cultures' emerges from and why quality assurance has so far been unable to fulfil the expectations it is confronted with; it is not on the level of the instruments and procedures that the five patterns demonstrate their incompatibility (although some conflicts and problems manifest themselves on the procedural level), but on the deeper, more latent level which the patterns ultimately owe their existence to and which infuses them with meaning. Solving issues of trust or increasing an institution's competitiveness on the market are two completely different problems of action and interpretation that cannot even be subsumed under the usual purposes of quality assurance such as accountability, improvement or compliance – probably because the question is a different one: Whereas the usual professional debate is concerned with the question what the purpose of quality assurance is or should be (a topic which I will address myself in the concluding chapter seven), this study was rather asking about the conditions that have led to the forming of different understandings of quality assurance. By thus changing the focus, it became possible to observe that our issue field – quality assurance in Austrian higher education – is just one possible arena where different interpretive patterns struggle over interpretative dominance, which is all the more relevant as most patterns favour different actors and actor-constellations, as I have shown. Hence, although on the surface, the discourse is predominantly involved with procedural, conceptual and political issues, it is ultimately fuelled by problems that are a) only marginally debated and mostly not even consciously so, b)

largely stem from outside the actual issue field (and would probably appear in other issue fields as well) c) have little to do with the phenomenon of quality assurance per se and are rather concerned with the future development of international higher education and d) require different interpretative handling and practical solutions.

On a manifest level, this struggle of different problems and the interpretive patterns they are related to, is not even apparent most of the time. There are several reasons for this phenomenon: Firstly, the problems at the heart of each interpretive pattern are only rarely consciously being dealt with. Even if trust issues are raised, they do not necessarily belong to the area of the consumer protection culture – there is an important distinction between trust as an explicitly mentioned topic in the discourse and the trust problems that form the latent fundament of particular interpretive and argumentative structures and patterns beneath the discourse. This can also work as an explanation, why the actors in the field are able to agree on certain mechanisms in order to resolve trust issues, while at the same time unwarily work at deepening the mutual distrust through their (communicative) acts during the same discussion. One could almost argue that the actors clash without even realising it, but this would on the other hand be rather misleading: it is not the actors that stand in a conflicting relation, but the frames of meaning their actions are embedded in. There is, of course, more than one connection between the two levels: In chapter one I have already shown that there are indeed explicit and manifest conflicts between various actor groups, not least between academics and managers. The interpretive pattern concept provides a helpful explanation why such conflicts are hardly resolvable: without being able to approach the latent fundament certain perspectives and arguments are based on (and which they are not necessarily referring to or explicitly connected with), the arguments have to remain in an antagonistic relationship. To borrow a picture from the previous chapter five: the actors may talk about different things yet believe they are talking about the same thing. In the best case, this misunderstanding never becomes problematic and everyone gets along, yet this does not happen too often, particularly when we regard the power issues involved in such conflicts. As I have shown by

comparing the five patterns, each of them favours different actor groups, yet with a rather clear imbalance: most interpretive patterns strengthen the position of the management and weaken or even invisibilise the academics. At least in the way the QA discourse is currently led, the academics hardly stand a chance to "win" – small wonder, then, that they find the entire QA issue rather suspicious and threatening.

The second reason, why the "clash of quality cultures" is not always obvious, is much simpler: the interpretive patterns do not necessarily clash in every regard. I have already indicated that some interpretive patterns are almost leading a complimentary relationship, where they are mutually strengthening or at least not obstructing each other. Table 6.1 shows which interpretive patterns have the closest structural relationship. In a nutshell, we can find that the patterns can be coalescing or simply coexisting as well as conflicting. The most obvious coalition concerns the consumer protection culture and the entrepreneurial culture: Both patterns are carried by a strong economical orientation and an almost capitalistic logic – hinting at a level of shared meaning that is even deeper seated than the interpretive pattern. As long as the two patterns are kept in balance – in order to avoid conflict the entrepreneurialism should neither be too controlled nor fully left to itself – they are quite compatible and even 'work together' when it comes to establishing the idea of a higher education market and related role structures. In a similar way, the governing principles of the educative culture go very well with the equally patronising logic of the managerial culture, and the relationship between the managerial culture and the engineering culture is so close that both patterns share most of their characteristics with each other. That the managerial culture is showing a high degree of compatibility and even mutual strengthening with almost all other patterns (and even with the consumer protection pattern if we count this pattern's close relation to the entrepreneurial pattern), can be interpreted as further evidence that the discourse is in general aiding the cause of managerialism and top down control.

Concludingly, however, I have to allude that these findings are just a snap-shot of the current situation, which probably change as dynamically in the next six years as it has changed in the previous six years. At the present, not all of the patterns are equally strong or well-established. It will be interesting to observe their further development, i.e. which of them will grow stronger, which of them will get weakened or problematised and what new patterns will supervene. This offers some important starting points for future research as we have already seen. In my concluding chapter I will summarise the most important findings and try to evaluate their academic relevance once more – most importantly, however I want to delve a little deeper into the question of how and why the results can be relevant from a practitioner's perspective.

Chapter seven: A culture to strive for?

"It is argued that until university management, university quality agencies and academic staff in universities draw on mutually agreed understandings of this contested concept – quality – academics will continue to resist quality processes, treating them as games to be played and systems to be fed."

(Anderson 2006: 161)

XVII

Quality assurance is in general a rather normative business. On the one hand, the entire concept relies on defining standards that have to be achieved, and even the ways of achieving these standards are increasingly divided into 'good' ways and 'not so good' ways: institutional accreditations are good, programme accreditations rather not so, rankings are the worst – and everything an institution does of its own accord (the so-called 'internal quality assurance') is laudable in principle. Yet even within institutions, we can find practices that seem 'better' than others: Most recently, even the normative-idealistic quality culture concept European universities were orienting themselves at in the past decade had to come to terms with the fact that not all institutional quality cultures might be desirable in themselves (cf. Sursock 2011). Hence, even acknowledging that my own use of the quality culture term as a label for different interpretive patterns differs from the one currently used by QA practitioners, this final part of the study will be dedicated to a question less fuelled by my scholarly role but by my practitioner identity: Is there a quality culture to strive for? Or, in other and probably less normative words: what practical conclusions can be drawn from my previous findings? Do they offer anything of relevance for managers,

practitioners and policymakers? Or has their worth to be assessed in academic terms only?

Yet before trying to link the results to practice, I want to take stock first: what are the actual key findings my examination of the issue field "Quality Assurance in Austrian Higher Education" brought to light? For this purpose, I have to lead you back to the research questions as posed in chapter one.

My primary research goal is firmly rooted in the hermeneutic tradition, aiming for a better understanding of the dynamics within a particular issue field – quality assurance in Austrian higher education – through a conceptual and empirical construction of the field and by reconstructing the discourse it is set upon. This was only possible by changing the focus of previous QA-related research, from a manifest contest of viewpoints to the latent struggle over meaning on a structural level. Accordingly, my main research questions were initially introduced as follows:

- What are the constitutive notions of quality, quality assurance and higher education in Austrian Higher Education?
- What are the actions and communications in the field orientated at and geared to?
- What are the field's main interpretive patterns and how do they integrate those notions as well as organise the relations between different actors/instruments/approaches?
- How are the different 'quality cultures' relating to/competing with each other?
- Are there dominant logics and is this dominance changing?
- And, finally: What are the practical implications for developing future quality assurance policies and procedures?

In order to answer these questions, I have reconstructed the interpretive patterns that underlie the discursive actions in a particular field that has evolved around the issue of quality assurance in Austrian higher education. The first result I want to point out in this regard may also be the most momentous: Even

though arguably one of the most powerful and influential issues in the current higher education discourse (cf. Westerheijden, Hulpiau & Waeytens 2007), it is almost completely unclear, what the issue is actually about. I am not talking about formal definitions here, which current literature is rather saturated with (cf. chapter one) and which usually provide at least procedural orientation, but about some explicit and shared meaning that the issue would be entrenched with. It rather appears that quality assurance – much like quality itself and probably partly due to the elusive nature of its conceptual relative– is very easy to refer to, yet it is mostly unclear what the reference is actually about. It is important to see, though, that the misunderstandings do not occur on a manifest level, but rather on a latent level. In simpler words: Actors in the field are having rather different ideas of what they are talking about, but these differences never come to light.   This is most clearly represented in the different logics of quality management (as a top down oriented management approach focused on organizational effectiveness and efficiency) and quality assurance (as a politically influenced compliance approach focusing on stakeholder involvement and common standards). Nevertheless, the potential conflicts between the two different logics never come to the surface, as by means of a common language and terminology the actors create an impression of apparent harmony and mutual appreciation and frame most potential conflicts as questions of methodological or political disagreement.

On the other hand, however, this superficial agreement is not able to overcome the trust issues that pervade the field on every level: None of the actors or actor groups seems to put very much trust in the actions or rhetorics of the others, leading to a situation where, paradoxically, every procedure or mechanism that is intended to re-establish trust among the field's participants is rather aggravating the situation by creating demand for new procedures and mechanisms that keep the previous ones in check.

The question 'who controls whom?' is of particular relevance in this regard, with power being an issue that is inseparably connected to the discourse: In a way, all the interpretive patterns that shape and drive the QA discourse in Austrian higher education (and not only the discourse but also practices and actions that

are related to the discourse as we can see by the way the patterns manifest themselves in specific instruments and approaches), are also playing their part in empowering certain actors while re-defining or depowering the roles of others. Practically all five interpretive patterns strengthen the role of the senior management, whereas the academics are disfavoured by all of them. This can partly be attributed to the construction of my issue field, which, although based on an expert discourse that is strongly following academic traditions, does not involve academics as an actor group per se. On the other hand, these findings are very consistent with previous results (cf. Newton 2007, Morley 2003), showing that quality assurance can indeed be regarded as a tool for propagating managerialism in higher education. Delving a little deeper into the relationship between different interpretive patterns and different actor groups could be a very valuable option for future research, in particular with regard to the question of how interpretive patterns emerge and find resonance; an issue that has hardly been tackled so far. However, in order to avoid a simple replication of typified actor perspectives on the meaning level, it would also be commendable to put a little more effort into investigating the different interpretive patterns *within one* specific actor group, for example the experts or students. Personally, I would assume that ideas of managerialism and consumerism are manifesting themselves even in the actions and perceptions of those actors that benefit the least from them, e.g. the traditional academics, yet the reconstruction and description of the relevant interpretive patterns on the field level provides little evidence in this respect. Enquiring the How and Why of such processes of meaning construction and stabilisation could thus offer some interesting insights into social order and social dynamics.

The five interpretive patterns and their various relations to each other are the second key result I want to revisit in this conclusion. As I have shown in chapter six, the field discourse is pervaded by five structurally distinct yet still overlapping interpretive patterns, which all organise actors, actions, instruments, argumentative structures, values and norms in coherent meaning packages. Every pattern can be regarded as a primarily interpretative yet still action-guiding solution for certain key problems that hold particular relevance for

Austrian higher education. And not only for Austria, as we have seen: Even though the patterns hold a strong 'local flavour', their structural core is not limited to the Austrian context but rather mirrors general key trends in European higher education, such as commercialisation, managerialism, consumerism or internationalisation. This raises again some interesting questions that are worth thinking about and which I have already brushed in chapter six: What is the relation between different field levels, i.e. the organisational level, the level of the national issue field or the European level, when it comes to the emergence and development of meaning structures? Meaning structures seem to be highly contextualised by specific socio-cultural and politico-legal settings, yet with the increased blurring of nation state boundaries and the dichotomous globalisation/localisation processes that pervade most of our societal sectors, the respective units of observation might be in need of a thorough conceptual redefinition. This goes hand in hand with the question of how different issue fields are connected to each other, on the manifest level – e.g. based on the similarities and differences between various topics and issues – as well as on the latent level: My research suggests that the different interpretive patterns seem themselves be influenced by some deeper-rooted logic(s) or value-frames that I have merely brushed yet. A conceptual and methodological differentiation between different levels of latency and social meaning would be a first step towards an even better understanding of the institutionalised fundament our actions and perceptions are based upon.

From a sociology of knowledge perspective, the five patterns are not so much different understandings of quality assurance or quality management but rather different ways of making sense of a particular section of our life-world that come to light through the particular opportunities that are provided by a conceptually indistinctive and interpretation-reliant idea such as quality. Consequently, such patterns hardly ever appear as manifest topics in the discourse, but rather function as latent drivers of its internal dynamics – and practical consequences. The five interpretive patterns I have identified in the course of my work are:

- The consumer protection quality culture pattern, which has emerged around the idea that higher education institutions are basically service or goods providers with a more or less specific group of clients or stakeholders whose interests have to be guarded against fraud or 'bad quality' that can result from (a lack of) competition among the providers. QA agencies, who work on behalf of the clients (or as representatives of a state that protects the clients) fulfil the role of market regulators and quality assessors who have to establish and check standards with regard to the product quality. Instrumentally, the consumer protection logic favours certifications and accreditations with clear standards and checklists as well as approaches that give the clients/stakeholders some influence over the creation or development of the services/goods they are delivered with. The core problem at the heart of the consumer protection quality culture seems to be the growing trust problem among the different stakeholder groups.

- The educative quality culture pattern, which is built on the premise that the Austrian universities may have been recently released into autonomy, but cannot be left on their own. Instead, they have to be carefully made fit for purpose, i.e. developing towards any goal that seems desirable at a given time. In other words, the purpose may change, whereas the underlying logic does not. The task of increasing the institutional fitness is incurred by a governmentally empowered expert body (e.g. a QA agency, Ministerial office or policy board) that uses a mixture of rules and regulations, incentives and sanctions to create learning paths and opportunities for the institutions, but also has to check whether a certain pre-defined learning outcome (or rather teaching objective?) was met. Approaches such as 'benchmarking' and 'good practice exchanges' reflect the related idea that the institutions should also learn from each other – and at least partly explain the widespread mimetic effects that can be stated in current higher education (cf. Vettori & Lueger 2011, Stensaker & Norgard 2001. External evaluations, audits and examinations complement

these QA procedures as a means of assessing the developmental status quo. The educative quality culture logic can be mostly regarded as a solution to problems of behavioural control, i.e. defining ways of how to induce certain behaviour, particularly if the actors are likely to develop their own preferences.

- The entrepreneurial quality culture pattern grounds on the persuasion that higher education institutions are rivalling each other in one big (international) market, where they compete for the best or most international students, public and third party funds and, last but not least, reputation. Quality is an important competitive factor in this regard, either as a cost-efficiency factor that has to be kept as balanced as possible or as an image factor that could – in an interesting take on the 'return of investment' concept – lead to more resources or at least a higher degree of international recognition and reputation, if properly used. In any case, within the entrepreneurial logic quality means business, which is also reflected by the increasing appeal of quality assurance as a business opportunity for QA agencies and consultants. Simply put, the pattern's main actors – i.e. higher education institutions and QA agencies - take the role of entrepreneurs and employ certain QM and QA procedures in order to make a profit or reduce costs. Again, accreditations and certifications are among the most favoured approaches in this quality culture, yet only if they can be associated with a particularly well renowned and prestigious label or agency. Instrumentally, the borders between instruments of quality assurance, management and marketing are increasingly blurred. Overall, the pattern deals with the traditional economical core problem of how to ensure success and survival in a market, albeit the Austrian higher education market seems to be still rather undefined and shares only a few traits with 'real' markets.

- The managerial quality culture pattern equals quality with other values such as 'effectiveness', 'efficiency' and 'productiveness'. Quality assurance

and quality management have the function to improve the institutional performance by helping the organisation (or rather its top management) to define and achieve the respective performance goals. Underneath this instrumentalism lies the belief that the unregulated decentralism that has characterised most higher education institutions for centuries is limiting the institutional capacities for innovative teaching and research and/or is simply too expensive. In this respect, the managerial interpretive pattern provides meaningful answers to the question of how to increase the universities' manageability and controllability. Within this logic, it is the job of the higher education manager and the purpose of a quality management system to bring order to the chaos and ensure institutional success. Correspondingly, the main actor groups in this pattern can all be found inside the higher education institutions and can be roughly differentiated into 'managers' and 'managed'. External stakeholders and external quality assurance procedures play a minor, mostly contextual role. The focus rather lies on organisational management information systems that 'feed' the managers and decision-makers with the necessary information, but even more on formalistic rules and guidelines (the so called 'strategies') that provide clear definitions of the quality goals, the roles and responsibilities, the resources allotted to the goals as well as detailed internal rules, regulations and standards.

- The engineering quality culture pattern builds on similar premises as the managerial pattern, yet develops them in a more Tayloristic and mechanistic direction. In a nutshell, the engineering quality culture is deeply entrenched with the idea of creating a 'better' organisation by ways of managing and re-engineering its internal processes and structures. Carried by a strong belief in the rationality of organisational life and the causality of actions, the pattern seeks to establish and maintain order by means of an all-encompassing scientifically informed quality management system. The corresponding core problem the pattern deals with, seems to be how to establish and maintain order in a dynamic and complex

organisational environment, which by tradition and purpose is rather dynamic and complex and involves a multitude of actors and interests. Here, quality is not regarded as a norm or value per se, but as a phenomenon that has to be identified, defined, broken down into different characteristics and dimensions, operationalised, measured and ultimately regulated, increased and improved. The depersonalisation within this logic is also reflected in the very mechanistic and instrumentalist approach to quality improvement: solving any organisational problems (even communicative ones) is just a matter of finding and using the right tool or approach. In this regard, all instruments hold equal value, although indicator-based controlling models are particularly appealing within this logic.

In the subsequent analysis I have shown where the main differences and similarities between the five patterns can be found, focusing on different dimensions such as the notions of quality, quality assurance and higher education each pattern seems to equally feed and feed off, the roles and role attributes that regulate the functions and relations of the actors within each logic, the pattern 'sponsors' that stems from the way certain actors or actor groups are empowered by a particular quality culture, and, last but not least, the main approaches and instruments that can be associated with the respective understanding of quality assurance.

Two of the most important findings in this respect were the observation that the patterns are a) not primarily conflicting on a manifest discourse level or on the level of the instruments and procedures (as the conflicts shown in the discourse itself might suggest), but on a deeper, more latent level which forms the structural core of each pattern and which infuses them with meaning; and that b) the patterns do not necessarily have to 'clash' but can also coalesce with others or complement them in certain aspects.

As can be seen from the analysis so far, all five 'quality cultures' have a different take on quality, yet not in the way that would result from different quality notions as the ones found in literature (cf. Harvey 2006, Harvey & Green 1993, Carstensen & Hofmann 2004) or that would result in different explicit quality goals: each of the quality cultures has emerged to deal with problems of action and interpretation that lie on a rather fundamental, deep seated meaning level and that have little to do with quality as it is thematised in the manifest discourse. In a way, every pattern rather 'uses' quality as a means of legitimising (and dressing up) its core objectives. Due to its conceptual and terminological indeterminacy, the quality assurance issue field is thus becoming a substitutional arena for other issues and concerns that are relevant for a much broader organisational field of which this issue field is only part of. In this respect, the relativity of the quality concept makes it possible to utilise it as an outlet for questions that tackle the very future of higher education and higher education institutions.

This observation could also work as an answer to another question which I have merely brushed yet: Why do we actually find five different interpretive patterns that deal with five different problems, which may all be connectable to the issue of quality assurance but are most certainly not limited to this issue field? Usually, the hermeneutic analysis of an interpretive pattern results in a detailed map of one particular pattern, yet here the process ended rather differently. After reconstructing the meaning patterns that underlie the QA discourse it almost seems as if the field had imported a variety of interpretive solutions that brought their original problems with them instead of developing an interpretive solution of its own that would deal with the problem of...? Of what, actually? In my understanding, here lies the main reason for the occurrence that my analysis did not result in the reconstruction of *one* singular interpretive pattern but a couple of them which are struggling for meaning dominance and the power of definition: there is no genuine problem of action to the field, other than making sense of a value that is bare of any inherent meaning. As I have already argued earlier, quality assurance and quality improvement are as relative and in need of a meaning anchor as quality itself. Seen like this, the issue field basically invites

interpretive patterns from other contexts to infuse its core concept with meaning - more than that; it depends on it. From themselves, neither the field nor its core concepts are able to generate enough meaning to keep the discourse and thus the field alive. In other words, the quality assurance issue field was and is in need of a problem of its own and thus lets itself be diffused by problems external to the field. This is a quite effective survival tactics that is rather well corresponding with the theoretical framework Westerheijden et al. have come up with (Westerheijden et al. 2007, Jeliazkova & 2002): Their phase model is similarly based on the assumption that quality assurance schemes are bound to social and political contexts in which certain issues are dominant: "The issues stand in more or less hierarchical relation to each other. Once a more basic problem has been 'solved' to a degree that is satisfactory for the policy discourse, the next problem often already emerges" (Westerheijden et al. 2007: 298). Although their theoretical model oversimplifies the discourse by claiming one single issue dominant and more or less stays on the manifest level of explicit policy goals, it makes an important contribution by demonstrating the importance of the temporal dimension: As I have already observed at the end of chapter six, the current state of our issue field is but a snap-shot which will probably change as dynamically in the near future as it has changed in the recent past. It will be interesting to watch which of our quality cultures will grow stronger, which of them will get weakened or problematised and what new cultures will emerge – though this will also pose a methodological challenge, as long term hermeneutical analyses are still a pretty untried field.

Turning to the manifest discourse level, however, the lack of a problem (or abundance of problems, depending on your point of view) is masked by the actors' preoccupation with procedures and instruments: A considerable part of the debates and presentations in my sample deals with the merits and shortcomings of different quality assurance approaches and quality management instruments. The focus lies on solutions, whereas the problems are taken for granted or at least not explicitly discussed – an occurrence that is largely owed to the pre-reflexive character of latent meaning structures such as the interpretive patterns presented in this study. In other words: the actors agree

that they already know *what* has to be done and just have to find similar agreement on *how* it can be done. Again, the universally acceptable goal of 'improving quality' unifies even divergent interest groups and simulates that there is a cause more common than a closer look at the underlying logics reveals – which leads us back to my dissection of the discourse logics in chapter five.

This shared construction and collective blinding out of social meaning has some considerable consequences for quality assurance in practice which can be observed in the more recent past: On the one hand, the interest in the impact of quality assurance is growing (Westerheijden, Hulpiau & Waeytens 2007, Stensaker 2007b). This is at least partly led by the suspicion that current approaches might lead to less improvement than was initially hoped for. And the difficulties to measure this impact are only adding to the suspicion and disappointment. Of course, there are a lot of valid methodological obstacles to a scientifically acceptable impact assessment, yet these obstacles are at least equalled by the fact that it was hardly ever discussed what specific effects should actually be achieved - a diagnosis that holds true for my entire discourse analysis. I remember a meeting of the Network for Quality Management and Quality Development in June 2011 in Klagenfurt which was dedicated to the interplay of internal QM systems and external QA procedures. A stock-taking exercise that was, among others, dealing with the question of what had been achieved so far, resulted in a collective and rather cynical state of disenchantment: the experts had obviously achieved a lot over the past four years, yet the question what they were actually hoping to achieve had somehow been forgotten along the journey. In a way, the internal QM systems and QA schemes were starting to become self-referential. However, this situation seems hardly limited to Austria: Achim Hopbach, director of the German Accreditation Council and current chair of ENQA, addressed a very similar question during a social partner event in Vienna, when arguing that the purpose of QA was becoming increasingly unclear. And former QAA president and ENQA chair Peter Williams brought it to the point in his keynote at the 2008 AQA conference:

„The first thing, I think, is that we ought to be very clear about what external quality assurance is trying to achieve. And that is not quite as obvious as it sounds, because very often I talk to people about quality assurance and they can't tell me what the purpose is. They can tell me about how they are doing it, they tell me about what they are doing, but they can't tell me why they are doing it." (Williams 2009: 17).

Clarifying my argument, it is not the problem that quality assurance was indeed without any function or purpose in practice: there are, as we have seen, always problems that are tackled by a certain approach, interests that are served and protected or political goals that are pursued. Yet these functions, interests and goals are hardly ever discussed or reflected – partly for tactical reasons and mostly because the actors and discussants are not fully aware of them themselves. The rather abstract 'accountability-versus-improvement'-debate is of little help here, as it seemingly juxtaposes different orientations and associates them with particular values, but rather muddies the discussion even further by using concepts that have the same indeterminacy weakness as quality itself and thus run in danger of becoming ideologised in the same way. To conclude this argument, the implicit purposes that are served here are in definite need to be further investigated and discussed more actively and explicitly.

There is, however, another side to this 'unclear-purpose-problem' which has some interesting effects of its own: As the question, what purpose should actually be achieved, is by trend overlooked in favour of procedural aspects, as I have argued above, we can find another phenomenon, namely the overload of quality assurance with different expectations and purposes – of which most are again not explicitly discussed. Here, I am not primarily talking about the latent problems of actions that underlie the discourse and action patterns (although there are definite connections to be found), but about political and organisational objectives that have increasingly manifested themselves in criteria catalogues and discourse niches: QA and QM are expected to stifle creativity, stimulate and deal with institutional and inner-institutional diversity, solve resource scarcity, overcome public trust problems, enable the government to control autonomous institutions, improve students' learning experiences, increase research outputs,

entice students from abroad, ensure graduate employability, polish images, allure corporate partners and make universities 'great places to work at'. It seems a safe thing to say that probably too many different expectations are taken to one single, not even very much specified concept – although the lack of specification has very likely a lot to do with the abundant wish list in the first place. Even though the ESG in their current form might suggest otherwise, external quality assurance approaches have quickly evolved from evaluating aspects of teaching and learning organisation and administration to covering a multitude of different aspects, from the availability of sports and recreational facilities to the gendered use of language in formal documents and classrooms. Reconstructing the different norms and values (and, potentially, conflicting interpretive patterns) that manifest themselves in such criteria collections and guidelines would offer some interesting and relevant options for future research.

The same can apparently be stated for internal QA instruments as well: My discourse analysis suggests that the problem of too many expectations is not limited to QA in general but can also be related to particular instruments. QA and QM instruments are mostly presented in a seemingly neutral, de-contextualised form, with a strong focus on how they were developed and how they work in practice. As their purpose is hardly clarified (or has not even been defined in the beginning?), the way they are discussed suggests that different actors have very different understandings of what the tools should be able to do. To borrow Maslow's hammer metaphor once more: it is as if all the actors would explicitly agree that a certain tool looks like a hammer, yet would silently expected it to not only batter nails but also screw something in and saw boards. About half a year ago, my team and I revisited our own course evaluation model at WU, as we had the impression that the model was no longer working in the way it had been designed to about seven years ago, and different stakeholders were voicing their concerns and disappointments. This was kind of surprising, because the instrument itself had not been changed since then. The ensuing analysis soon brought to light that the problems had less to do with the questionnaire and the evaluation procedure per se, but with the way the results were used – and

expected to work. We were telling teachers to use the results as personal feedback, while at the same time aggregating numbers to provide department heads and program directors with an overview of staff performance as well as publishing the results (in a rather shortened version) in order to give students the desired transparency and demonstrate to our external partners that we had a well-functioning system. The resultant compromise was not only falling short of any of these goals but did also act back on the instrument and related processes: Using one and the same tool for formative and summative purposes just did not work very well. Redesigning the instrument, however, made one thing abundantly clear: Without a clear definition, reduction and priorisation of the expected purposes, any rehaul would soon be confronted with similar difficulties.

And this gets even more problematic when we take a look at instruments such as key performance indicators, which by their very construction cannot even serve purposes that are incompatible with the logic that manifests itself in the instrument: I think the analysis in chapter six has already shown that particular methods and approaches have a close relationship with particular interpretive patterns – and the incongruity on the meaning level shows itself again on the procedural level. Even the engineering quality culture pattern, with its 'toolbox-logic' and its openness for any kind of instrument, does not provide a solution for the problem that instruments can be incompatible with the purpose they are attributed to.

By now, we have seen that most of the difficulties and practical problems in the field arise from a lack of awareness on the part of the actors, and, considering the pre-reflexive and latent character of the structures and processes they are not aware of, the actors themselves are hardly to blame: As has already been established in chapter four, interpretive patterns and related meaning concepts belong to a knowledge level that lies below or beyond the consciously available intentions, opinions and attitudes of single actors (cf. Lüders & Meuser 1996). Whether it is the use of the same terms for different logics, the silent agreement that certain objectives are desirable per se, or the blanking of latent yet still potent meaning structures that underlie the seemingly 'neutral' approaches or instruments, the mechanisms are usually the same: With the help of explicit

values and norms – such as 'improvement is always a good thing' or 'we have a quality problem in higher education that needs to be solved' – and due to the fact that the implicit values and norms that underlie these 'first-order-values' hardly come to light, conflicts are either avoided or interpreted as a power struggle between traditionalists (usually the old school academics) and progressives (usually the managers and 'new professionals'). In simpler words: The clash of quality cultures seldom becomes apparent on the manifest level – though many of the conflicts and misunderstandings that do become apparent can be traced back to incompatibilities and interdependences on the level of the meaning structures. Yet without being able to consciously approach this level – neither in talk nor action – experts, policy-makers and new professionals alike have to act and interact within the boundaries of the field's primary meaning structures.

It is not simply a lack of reflexivity that hinders the emergence of new discursive directions or innovative solutions – yet the unquestioned logics the field is built upon are more and more eluding any efforts of conscious reflection. For, although questions such as 'what is quality' are still debated in academically entrenched sub-discourses, the potentially more relevant questions such as 'what is this market we are always referring to?' and 'what kind of competition are we talking about?' receive little attention – at least not in this particular arena.

Concluding from a practitioner's perspective, one possible solution could lie in a re-contextualisation of quality assurance, which means not only putting more emphasis on the question of the purpose of QA as argued above, but also treating it as a particular part of higher education policy instead of a policy area in itself. In this respect, the question of improving the quality of higher education cannot be separated from questions concerning the future of higher education per se: What is the current and future role of higher education in our society? Whose and which interests shall be served and thus prioritised? And how can higher education cater to the diversity of these interests and expectations? It is on this strategic level that different stakeholder perspectives should be integrated and made use of, not within the limits of specific evaluative procedures. Once the goals and directions have been defined, quality assurance

could then fulfil an important function by offering instruments and criteria for observing the respective course of action or by making it observable in the first place. However, without defining and contextualising the role of quality assurance – and thereby leading an open discourse on the divergent notions of higher education that can be globally observed – quality will continue to be used as an interpretative fig leaf for any kind of political agenda, and quality assurance will continue to disappoint expectations: An empty concept, that has first to be filled with meaning, is hardly able to solve problems of disorientation. Hence, if there is any kind of quality culture to strive for, it is probably one of continuous caution and reflexivity.

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Abstract

This study's research questions are firmly rooted in the hermeneutic tradition, aiming for a better understanding of the dynamics within a particular issue field – quality assurance in Austrian higher education – through a conceptual and empirical construction of the field and by reconstructing the discourse it is set upon. In this regard, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on the nature of 'quality' and 'quality assurance' in higher education, taking the respective analysis to a level of latencies that has hardly found attention in previous research. By taking a reconstructive-interpretative approach, the in-depth analysis shifts the focus from formal and explicit definitions to processes of sense-making and meaning-construction, thus intending to shed light on the mostly implicit underlying assumptions that shape actions, interactions and communications in the field. On a more abstract level, this work can be seen as a contribution to gain a more thorough understanding of the interplay of manifest and latent meaning levels in organisational fields and how such fields relate to similar entities and contextual factors in their relevant environments. Methodologically, the study is strongly influenced by modern social science hermeneutics, conceiving the analysis of interpretive patterns rather as a *context* analysis than a mere *text* analysis. Based on data that was generated within the research field – most notably the printed documentations of three conferences organised by the Austrian Quality Assurance Agency between 2005 and 2009 – the multi-step analysis resulted in a reconstruction of five different 'quality cultures' that function as latent drivers of the field's internal dynamics:

- A consumer protection quality culture pattern, which has emerged around the idea that higher education institutions are basically service or goods providers with a more or less specific group of clients or stakeholders whose interests have to be guarded against fraud or 'bad quality' that can result from (a lack of) competition among the providers;
- an educative quality culture pattern, which is built on the premise that the Austrian universities may have been recently released into autonomy, but

cannot be left on their own. Instead, they have to be carefully made fit for purpose;

- an entrepreneurial quality culture pattern, that is grounded on the persuasion that higher education institutions are rivalling each other in one big (international) market, where they compete for the best or most international students, public and third party funds and, last but not least, reputation;

- a managerial quality culture pattern, which equals quality with other values such as 'effectiveness', 'efficiency' and 'productiveness'. Here, where quality assurance and quality management have the function to improve the institutional performance by helping the organisation (or rather its top management) to define and achieve the respective performance goals;

- and an engineering quality culture pattern builds on similar premises as the managerial pattern, yet develops them in a more Tayloristic and mechanistic direction. The engineering quality culture is deeply entrenched with the idea of creating a 'better' organisation by ways of managing and re-engineering its internal processes and structures.

A subsequent comparative analysis of the five patterns and their relations showed that the 'clash of quality cultures' seldom becomes apparent on the manifest level – though many of the conflicts that do become apparent can be traced back to incompatibilities and interdependences on the level of the meaning structures. This is strongly related to the finding that there is no genuine problem of action to the field, other than making sense of a value that is bare of any inherent meaning. Seen like this, the issue field basically invites interpretive patterns from other contexts to infuse its core concept with meaning. From themselves, neither the field nor its core concepts seem to be able to generate enough meaning to keep the discourse and thus the field alive. In other words, the quality assurance issue field was and is in need of a problem of its own and thus lets itself be diffused by problems external to the field. As a consequence, the field is becoming a substitutional arena for other issues and concerns that are relevant for a much broader organisational field of which this issue field is only part of, providing an outlet for questions that tackle the very future of higher education and higher education institutions.

Abstract German

Ausgangspunkt dieser Studie ist der stark normativ geführte wissenschaftliche und praktische Diskurs über Qualitätssicherung und Qualitätsmanagement im internationalen tertiären Sektor: Latente Bedeutungsebenen im Sinne der hermeneutischen Wissenssoziologie fanden hier in der einschlägigen Hochschulforschung bislang nur wenig Beachtung. Damit blieben allerdings auch wesentliche Konfliktebenen innerhalb und zwischen verschiedenen Organisationen und Institutionen unbeleuchtet. In der vorliegenden Analyse eines ganz konkreten *issue fields* – Qualitätssicherung im österreichischen Hochschulbereich – werden die relevanten sinnerzeugenden und interpretativen Prozesse erfasst und beschrieben. Mittels einer hermeneutisch orientierten Rekonstruktion jener Deutungsmuster, auf welchen die kommunikativen und interpretativen Handlungen in diesem Feld wesentlich aufbauen, wird so nicht nur ein besseres Verständnis dieser Handlungen abseits einer vereinfachenden Gegenüberstellung von Akteursperspektiven ermöglicht, sondern auch ein Beitrag zur Analyse des oftmals sehr komplexen Zusammenspiels von manifesten und latenten Ebenen in und zwischen organisationalen Feldern geleistet.

Methodisch ist diese Studie stark von der modernen sozialwissenschaftlichen Hermeneutik in der Tradition Ulrich Oevermanns geprägt, welche die Deutungsmusteranalyse eher als Kontextanalyse denn als Textanalyse begreift. Basierend auf natürlichen Daten aus dem Forschungsfeld selbst – v. a. den gedruckten in verbatim Dokumentationen dreier Tagungen, die von der Österreichischen Qualitätssicherungsagentur AQA zwischen 2005 und 2009 veranstaltet worden waren – konnten so fünf unterschiedliche „Qualitätskulturen" rekonstruiert werden, welche den Diskurs und die internen Dynamiken des Feldes wesentlich beeinflussen:

- eine Konsumentenschutzkultur, die Hochschulen im Wesentlichen als Produzenten oder Dienstleister begreift, welche durch entsprechende Maßnahmen daran gehindert werden müssen, ihre KundInnen oder Stakeholder zu (ent-)täuschen;

- eine erzieherische Qualitätskultur, die auf der Prämisse fußt, dass die österreichischen Hochschulen noch nicht in der Lage sind, mit ihrer neuen Autonomie zum Wohle aller umzugehen, und daher erst noch entsprechend „entwickelt" werden müssen;

- eine unternehmerische Qualitätskultur, im Sinne derer sich Hochschulen im Wettkampf um Ressourcen, Studierende und Reputation auf einem internationalen Markt miteinander messen müssen und Qualitätsmanagement als Wettbewerbsfaktor und/oder Geschäftsfeld begriffen werden kann;

- eine managerialistische Qualitätskultur, die Qualität mit „Effektivität", „Effizienz" und „Produktivität" gleichsetzt, und in welcher Qualitätsmanagement primär der Leistungsverbesserung dient;

- und eine mechanistische Qualitätskultur, die als eine Variante des managerialistischen Deutungsmuster mit ausgeprägt tayloristischen Zügen betrachtet werden kann, und von der Idee getragen wird, die Hochschule durch eine Umgestaltung ihrer internen Prozesse und Strukturen zu verändern.

Eine daran anknüpfende komparative Analyse der fünf Deutungsmuster und ihrer konstituierenden Elemente zeigte Gemeinsamkeiten auf, verdeutlichte aber auch ihr grundsätzliches Konfliktpotenzial, welches allerdings selten auf der manifesten (Diskurs-)Ebene zum Tragen kommt, sondern eher auf den darunterliegenden Bedeutungsebenen wirksam wird. Erst indem diese Interdependenzen und Interkompatibilitäten sichtbar gemacht werden, lassen sich die Widersprüche in den darauf aufbauenden Handlungen auch vollends als solche begreifen. Die Wurzel dieses Konflikts hängt nicht zuletzt mit der Beschaffenheit dieses speziellen *issue fields* zusammen: Für sich genommen ist der Qualitätsbegriff eine reine Projektionsfläche ohne eigenen Bedeutungsgehalt. Ohne konkretes Handlungsproblem, dem das Feld seine Existenz verdankt oder das die Entstehung eines eigenen Deutungsmusters bedingen würde, wird es zur stellvertretenden Arena für unterschiedliche Interpretationsrahmen mit prinzipiell feldexmanenten Ursprüngen. Der Qualitätsdiskurs wird somit zum Ventil für die – oft unbemerkte – Aushandlung unterschiedlicher Vorstellungen über das Wesen und die Zukunft des Konzepts Hochschule an sich.

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