Education for democracy: the promotion of societal-democratic values, knowledge and participation in higher education quality assurance

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If over the last two decades, the development of teaching and learning in higher education institutions has focused on employability and academic qualifications, the importance of a third function of higher education is being increasingly emphasised at European level: the promotion of societal-democratic engagement. In a qualitative analysis, we examine the importance that higher education institutions in Germany attach to the development of societal-democratic engagement in the context of their quality assurance processes. The results show that societal-democratic engagement as a dimension of quality is rather weakly embedded at both universities and universities of applied sciences. Considering the contemporary challenges to democracy worldwide, the results indicate that further attention to the development of societal-democratic engagement within the context of quality assurance processes is certainly merited.

Keywords: quality assurance, new institutionalism, democracy, accreditation, mission statement

1 Introduction: Societal-democratic engagement in the context of higher education policy

Since the start of the Bologna Process, there has been a growing debate about the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in social, economic and political terms.[1] *"The Sorbonne declaration of 25th of May 1998 [...] stressed the Universities' central role in developing European cultural dimensions. It emphasised the creation of the European area of higher education as a key way to promote citizens' mobility and employability and the Continent's overall development"* (European Higher Education

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Area (EHEA), 1999). The (employment) goals of the Bologna process were mainly achieved through the introduction of tiered study structures (Bachelor-Master programmes) with degrees that are comparable across Europe, an increase in mobility, and the introduction and improvement of quality assurance (QA) in teaching and learning. The issue of *citizenship* can also be found in each of the communiqués published from 1999 to the present (Marin, 2015). But, as the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) states,

> "*the role of universities in supporting other societal needs, such as strengthening democratic values and civic engagement, addressing the needs of vulnerable social groups, contributing to cultural development and addressing large-scale social challenges, has not been nearly as prominent in the past few decades*" (GUNI, 2022, p. 134).

The significance of strengthening democratic values and civic engagement has increased notably in the light of current developments marked by democracy coming under sustained pressure through the increasing radicalisation of groups in society that seek to challenge democratic values (e.g. Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Trubowitz & Burgoon, 2022). Globally, "*promoting humanist values and profiles in a changing world*" has been formulated as one of the seven "*main areas of transformation*" for universities by 2030 (GUNI, 2022, p. 118). The European University Association (EUA) also sees great potential for progress in making the strengthening of civic engagement one of the three action priorities for universities, which should be "*supporters of pluralistic and democratic societies*" and "*continue to uphold these values throughout all their missions and activities*" (EUA, 2021, p. 6). The Council of Europe considers that "*education, including higher education, is also essential for the development and preservation of democratic societies*" and published the "Reference Framework of Competencies for democratic culture in higher education" (Council of Europe, 2020).

In Germany, enabling *"civic participation"* (Akkreditierungsrat, 2006) or *"societal engagement"* (Akkreditierungsrat, 2013) represents some of the criteria for the accreditation of degree programmes since 2010. The implementation of these criteria essentially took place within the framework of quality assurance, which was institutionalised in corresponding units. In addition, general regulations on the objectives of degree programmes can be found in the higher education laws of the federal states (*Länder*). New accreditation regulation in 2017 emphasised the development of societal engagement less than prior versions insofar as it is no longer an independent qualification goal, but rather part of *"personal development"* (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2017, § 11 Abs. 1 S. 9 Musterrechtsverordnung).

About two decades ago, the question arose in Europe how societal-democratic engagement can be interpreted by HEIs: as part of their third mission or as an integrated

part of teaching and research (Gerholz et al., 2018, pp. 10–11). This question is embedded in a context in which societal-democratic engagement serves as a normative quality concept of higher education, while the independence and liberty of universities in research and teaching is an important legal principle (Gerholz et al., 2018, pp. 10–11) and the academic system is based upon greater distance from immediate societal demands, which reflects a different model than the United States, where HEIs traditionally have a stronger community orientation and civic engagement plays a greater role (Backhaus-Maul & Roth, 2013, p. 7).[2]

The main research question addressed in this article is therefore as follows: What importance do HEIs attribute to the development of societal-democratic engagement in the context of quality assurance for the area of teaching and learning?

The remainder of this article is divided into five sections. Section 2 outlines theoretical concepts based on systems theory, new institutionalism and organisation theory in relation to the functions of higher education and the organisational structures of quality assurance in HEIs. Based on this information, the analytical framework and research questions are presented in the section 3, and the data selection and methodology are explained in section 4. Section 5 presents and discusses the empirical results, and section 6 provides a conclusion and outlines implications for further research.

2 Theoretical concepts

2.1 Functions of higher education

We propose to conceptualise the functions of higher education along three dimensions: *academic qualification*, *professional qualification* and *qualification for societal-democratic engagement*. Qualification for societal-democratic engagement is thus not understood as a subdimension of personality development (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2017; Wissenschaftsrat, 2022) or as a subdimension of a professional qualification (Deželan & Pavlin, 2014), but as an independent task of higher education. The proposed concept is based on the work of Parsons and Platt (1973) on the functions of the university. They argue that the dimension of academic qualification refers to the *"primary function of 'pure' research and of graduate training for membership in the academic profession"* (Parsons & Platt, 1973, p. 93). The dimension of professional qualification refers to the *"training of professional practitioners"* (Parsons & Platt, 1973, p. 92). In the German higher education system, a difference is made between the more theory- and research-oriented universities and universities of applied sciences (HAW) with a more application- and professional-oriented focus. In the latter, professors must have gained professional experience outside the university world.

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[2]Translations of German-language citations by the authors.

The dimension of "*qualification for societal-democratic engagement*", which is the focus here, refers to the function of HEIs regarding their "*contributions to societal definitions of the situation at social and cultural level by ideologically oriented intellectuals*" (Parsons & Platt, 1973, p. 92 and 100–101).[3] When speaking of the cultural level, Parsons and Platt essentially refer to cognitive rationality in terms of the sense and degree to which the ideologically-oriented intellectual feels bound by these standards, while the social level refers to societal values. The cultural provision of moral standards, to the extent that these moral standards are institutionalised, forms the basis of an ongoing social system (Parsons & Platt, 1973, p. 271).[4] Intellectuals such as journalists, politicians, and artists usually hold a university degree. Therefore, "*the intellectual resources for ideological structuring have been provided by the universities […]. This circumstance gives the universities a different order of importance in shaping the process of ideological definition of the situation than was the case in the nineteenth century*" (Parsons & Platt, 1973, p. 286).

In Germany, over 80 percent of the current members of parliament hold a higher education degree. The corresponding proportion among members of the parliamentary group of the right-wing populist party *Alternative for Germany (AfD)* is even above 80 percent, including the third-highest proportion of members holding a PhD (18 %) and the highest proportion of parliamentarians who hold a *Habilitation* (5 %) (Schmermund, 2019). This might be an indication that possibly *"a not inconsiderable number of university graduates are academically socialised, but not necessarily democratically socialised"* (De Angelis et al., 2023, p. 7).

2.2 Quality assurance as part of the higher education institutional structure

Quality assurance at HEIs has played an important role in putting into practice the reforms towards output-oriented management in public administration (NPM) initiated in Germany at the beginning of the 1990s. This included accompanying the introduction of comparable educational qualifications, procedures, and instruments for reviewing the criteria of the accreditation council, and ensuring the fulfilment of higher education policy requirements and implementing the associated procedures and instruments. In the context of the Bologna reforms in Germany, this initially implied a strong focus on employability (Pasternack, 2006; Schneijderberg & Steinhardt, 2019; Reinbacher, 2021). It was expected that sub-units in charge of quality assurance would be in a better position than the existing traditional higher education administration to carry out the

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[3] The interest of intellectuals in ideology is not meant here in a "*pejorative sense. Cognitive standards are relevant to ideological pursuits, but the problems of ideological orientation transcend the cognitive complex in directions of value-commitment, of expressive symbolism, and indeed of religion*" (Parsons & Platt, 1973, p. 27).

[4] In our further analyses, knowledge and values represent sub-dimensions in terms of conditions regarding the ability to participate in society and democracy.

necessary translation work between the different internal organisational logics, actors, and status groups and to compensate for inconsistencies (Busse, 2020, p. 356). Quality assurance units within HEIs have made a substantial contribution to HEIs being perceived as organisational actors that can shape their own future (Bloch, 2021).

But the autonomy of HEIs in the area of teaching and learning was severely limited by a large number of legal requirements and accountability obligations. With the introduction of system accreditation into German higher education in 2008, HEIs were put in a stronger position to drive forward changes at the level of the entire organisation and to make steps towards a holistic quality assurance of teaching and learning (Suwalski, 2020; Wissenschaftsrat, 2008). Towards this end, HEIs in Germany were given the right, after successful completion of the system accreditation procedure, to independently accredit their own degree programmes. Beyond the obligation to ensure the legally required minimum standards, they were entitled to take greater account of HEI-specific features and to set their own priorities. As a result, the degree to which societal-democratic education is structurally embedded into the quality assurance of system-accredited HEIs varies between institutions. This can be better understood applying neo-institutional theory.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Brunsson (1994) distinguishes three forms of organisational output: talk, decision, and action. The systematic, functional, and everyday discrepancy between the three output dimensions ensures that the organisation has the necessary freedom to act (ibid.). Weick (1976) therefore also refers to universities as "*loosely coupled systems*": Both the individual actors (i. e., academics and students) and the outcomes of research and teaching can be controlled by management only to a limited extent.

Furthermore, the rationality of decisions made by HEIs is limited due to "*unclear goals, unclear technology, and fluid participants*" (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 11). Decisions are made primarily to establish legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Under conditions of incomplete or inconsistent information, unclear means-ends relations and many alternatives, irrational decisions may be more useful for organisational action (Brunsson, 1985; Brunsson, 2007).

HEIs cannot completely escape the external demands placed on them, and these include external demands relating to the quality of teaching and learning. According to Seyfried (2019), following Cohen et al. (1972), there are three elements in QA that affect the rationality of decision-making. First, various members of HEIs have different, sometimes conflicting, preferences, and interests regarding the definition and objectives of quality in teaching and learning. This is particularly likely to be the case with

the externally defined quality criterion of *empowerment for social and democratic engagement*, as this raises educational expectations that may conflict with other functions of higher education (see section 2.1) and with ideas of freedom of research and teaching.

Secondly, there are uncertainties about the objectives, the instruments to achieve the objectives, and their measurement. This means that it is not (always) clear how quality in teaching and learning can be managed. Thirdly, quality assurance in particular is confronted with the challenge of continuously changing membership, which entails new transaction costs and uncertainties of expectations that can influence the rationality of decision-making situations. Thus, it seems functional for quality assurance to adapt, at least in part, these conditions and adjust external requirements to the specifics of the organisation.

The differentiation between talk, decision, and action is similarly used by Kühl (2014). He distinguishes between the *display side,* the *formal side,* and the *informal side*. In our study, we focus on analysing the relationship between the *display side* and the *formal side*. This also means that the article does not deal with democracy education in specific teaching situations. Following Kühl, the display side describes how the organisation wishes to be perceived and which strategic interests it represents externally. Its function is to simultaneously serve contradictory demands that are placed upon an organisation and thereby to legitimise itself vis-a-vis various stakeholders (Kühl, 2011, pp. 138–142). The formal side describes elements including all decisions that serve as preconditions (premises) for other decisions made by organisational members. Through decisions, expectations of organisational members are formally codified (Kühl, 2011, p. 98). Because "*the display aspect and the formal aspect are each subject to different demands, organizations have no option but to decouple their 'formalized internal core processes' from the 'surface structures'*" (Kühl, 2014, p. 151).

Applying the theoretical framework of new institutionalism to quality assurance and the levels of analysis we analyse, this means that social-democratic engagement can become visible on the display side without being linked to the formal side, e.g. to concrete organisational decisions. It can also play a role in formal processes (i.e. in concrete organisational decisions such as internal accreditation decisions) without being linked to the display side.

3 Analytical framework and research questions

This study is thus dedicated to the question of *whether and, if so, how* efforts are made via the results of central quality assurance processes at HEIs to ensure that their degree programmes contribute to societal-democratic engagement and to what

extent HEIs see a responsibility for this area, both strategically (the display side) and concretely organisational decisions (the formal side). The *significance* assigned to the development of students' societal-democratic competences by HEIs as compared to other areas, such as the development of their professional and academic qualification, is also of interest.

For systematisation within the framework of the empirical analysis, we further differentiate the dimension *societal-democratic engagement* into three sub-dimensions: (1) *knowledge*, (2) *values and attitudes,* and (3) *participation*. Following Schmid and Watermann (2018, p. 1136), "*the first dimension, the cognitive, includes political knowledge and the understanding of democratic processes. The second dimension, the affective-motivational one, includes political attitudes […], but also trust in the political order, in political institutions and political authorities, as well as basic attitudes towards the field of politics (e. g. political interest)*" (Schmid & Watermann, 2018, p. 1136). The third dimension, the behavioural one, "*includes actual social and political participation as well as willingness to participate and often political information behaviour*" (Schmid & Watermann, 2018, p. 1136).

To examine the extent to which education for societal-democratic engagement as a criterion for quality has found its way into quality assurance, this study analyses key documents for the quality assurance processes of system-accredited higher education institutions in Germany, namely those institutions that assume responsibility for organising their own internal quality assurance processes. The key documents we analyse are the teaching mission statements (*Leitbilder Lehre*) and the official result reports of the internal accreditation (*Ergebnisberichte der internen Akkreditierung*). Following Seyfried and Pohlenz (2021, p. 5), mission statements are indicators for the talk-level, respectively the *display side*. As an indicator for the *formal side*, we use the official documents containing the results of the HEIs' internal accreditation decisions.

We use the following research questions to examine the importance quality assurance attaches to education for societal-democratic engagement from the perspective of new institutionalist organisational theory:

1. Which relevance is given by quality assurance to societal-democratic engagement in comparison to the promotion of professional and academic qualifications?

2. Do universities and universities of applied sciences differ with respect to the relevance attributed to education for societal-democratic engagement in comparison to the promotion of professional and academic qualifications?

3. Does the visibility of the sub-dimensions of social-democratic engagement (i. e., values and attitudes, knowledge and participation) differ between the display and formal levels of HEIs?

4. Does the degree of decoupling between the display and the formal level differ between the three dimensions of (1) societal-democratic engagement, (2) professional qualifications, and (3) academic qualifications?

5. Do universities and universities of applied sciences differ with respect to the degree of decoupling between the display and the formal level?

4   Methods

The data collection process involved the gathering of publicly accessible documents on the websites of the 24 sampled HEIs. The HEIs were selected based on a combination of representativeness and availability of documents. The sample was drawn exclusively from public, system-accredited HEIs. The sampling process considered several contextual factors to ensure heterogeneity and representativeness: size, number of students, federal state (*Bundesland*), proportion of international students, and date of system accreditation. The teaching parts of mission statements were used as the main source for analysing the display structure of HEIs in terms of teaching. Accreditation reports were used to analyse the formalised structure. For this reason, the sample was limited to those institutions for which both types of documents (teaching mission statements and internal accreditation reports) were available. For the selection of internal accreditation reports, we focused on Bachelor programmes (without teacher training) from 2017 onwards, as this is when the *Musterrechtsverordnung*, which regulates the criteria for the accreditation of study programmes, came into force. In accordance with the research questions, the subject of our analysis relates to the professional and content-related criteria for the accreditation of study programmes. Concretely, the conditions relating to the codes for *academic qualification*, *professional qualification,* and *societal-democratic engagement* with the sub dimensions *values and attitudes* and *knowledge* refer to the criteria *qualification objectives* and *implementation of the study concept*. The conditions relating to the code *societal-democratic engagement* with the sub dimension *participation* refer to the criteria *student participation* and *equal opportunities*. Most of the internal accreditation results reports contain both requirements and recommendations. The *Musterrechtsverordnung* also requires HEIs to have a teaching mission statement, which is reflected in the curricula of their degree programmes. In our sample, 3 out of 24 HEIs had already published a teaching mission statement before 2017.

To examine the importance of the development of societal-democratic engagement in the context of quality assurance at German HEI, we first thoroughly familiarised ourselves with the selected documents to gain a deeper understanding of their content and context. We then analysed these documents, using the method of qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is the systematic and rule-based collection and analysis of texts. This was done by interpreting manifest and latent meanings,

dividing the texts into categories (Schneijderberg et al., 2022, pp. 37–38). The categories were initially developed deductively, as the categories were determined reflecting the theoretically guided, predefined research questions (Schneijderberg et al., 2022, pp. 37–38). We used the codes *academic qualification*, *professional qualification*, and *societal-democratic engagement* with the subdimensions *values and attitudes*, *knowledge*, and *participation*. The qualitative material was analysed through quantification. This means that the text material was converted into predefined codes (first step) to enable quantitative analyses, e.g. frequency calculations.

In a second step, the relevant structural variables for answering the research question (type of HEI) were recoded, and a categorisation scheme was developed. The sample consisted of 13 universities and 11 universities of applied sciences. With the help of the category scheme, the coding of the characteristic values was determined based on key words or word stems, and instructions were formulated to determine how the text material was to be translated into codes. Multiple codes could be assigned to a single segment, if necessary.

The third step was to test the category scheme on the textual material. First, the test showed that it was necessary to increase the number of codes due to the frequency with which certain concepts appeared in the empirical material, namely by adding *teaching and learning conditions*. This code includes most formal regulations as well as general guidelines on the quality of teaching and student life referring to the formal criteria for degree programmes (e.g., the examination system, modularisation and the size of modules), which play a central role in accreditation decisions, and were therefore frequently found in accreditation documents. In teaching mission statements, too, we often found codes related to teaching and learning conditions, for example *adequate teaching and learning infrastructure* or *clearly structured degree programmes*.

Second, the wording of the accreditation requirements and recommendations generally did not distinguish whether they related to *values and attitudes* or *knowledge*. For this reason, they were assigned to both codes in the analysis. Theoretically, the dimensions of *values and attitudes* and *knowledge* together represent those passive participation conditions that are necessary for active participation (De Angelis et al., 2023, p. 10).

Third, the existing catalogue of keywords was extended when the text material showed a semantic proximity to the defined codes. In this sense, deductive and inductive approaches were combined in the process of developing the category scheme.

A total of 1,179 accreditation requirements and 2,048 accreditation recommendations was coded, as well as 1,469 segments within teaching mission statements. At the end of the process, the catalogue contained 20 to 30 keywords or word stems per code. Table 1 (see Annex) gives an overview of definitions, examples, and main keywords in the catalogue for each deductive category.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the analysis, triangulation techniques were employed through the engagement of two researchers in the coding of each sample of the corpus and through intercoder reliability checks. Any discrepancies or disagreements were resolved through consensus and the codebook was adapted to the results of the discussion. At the end of the coding process, each HEI in the sample was assigned an index for each dimension. The index resulted from the frequency of the coded segments.

5   Results

The analysis presented below enables a description and interpretation of the different ways in which the task of promoting societal-democratic engagement among university students is addressed by the quality assurance of system-accredited public HEIs in Germany. It enables us to answer the five research questions that guide our study; as formulated in section 3.

Research question 1

First, we asked which relevance is attributed by institutional quality assurance to education for societal-democratic engagement in comparison to the promotion of professional and academic qualifications. As can be seen in graph 1, the median values for the societal-democratic engagement dimension are low on both the display and formal levels. The corresponding values are only slightly lower than those for professional qualifications, while the promotion of academic qualifications has at least a certain relevance in the external presentation. Overall, this finding indicates that little importance is attached to both education for socio-democratic engagement and the development of professional qualifications in teaching mission statements and accreditation decisions. Instead, statements on teaching and study conditions dominate in these documents.

Graph1: Indexes for the promotion of societal-democratic engagement, professional qualifications, academic qualifications, and learning and teaching conditions by HEI
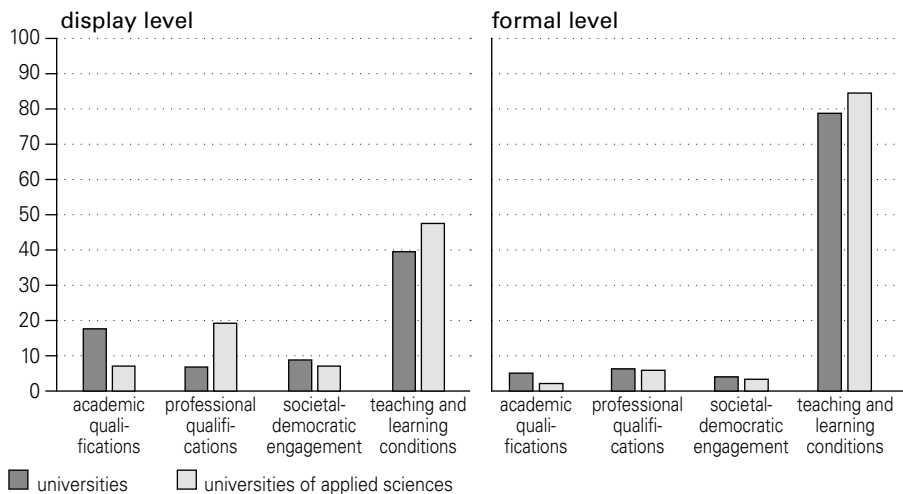

societal-democratic engagement

professional qualifications

academic qualifications

teaching and learning conditions

☐ Index display level ▨ Index formal level – – Median display level ── Median formal level
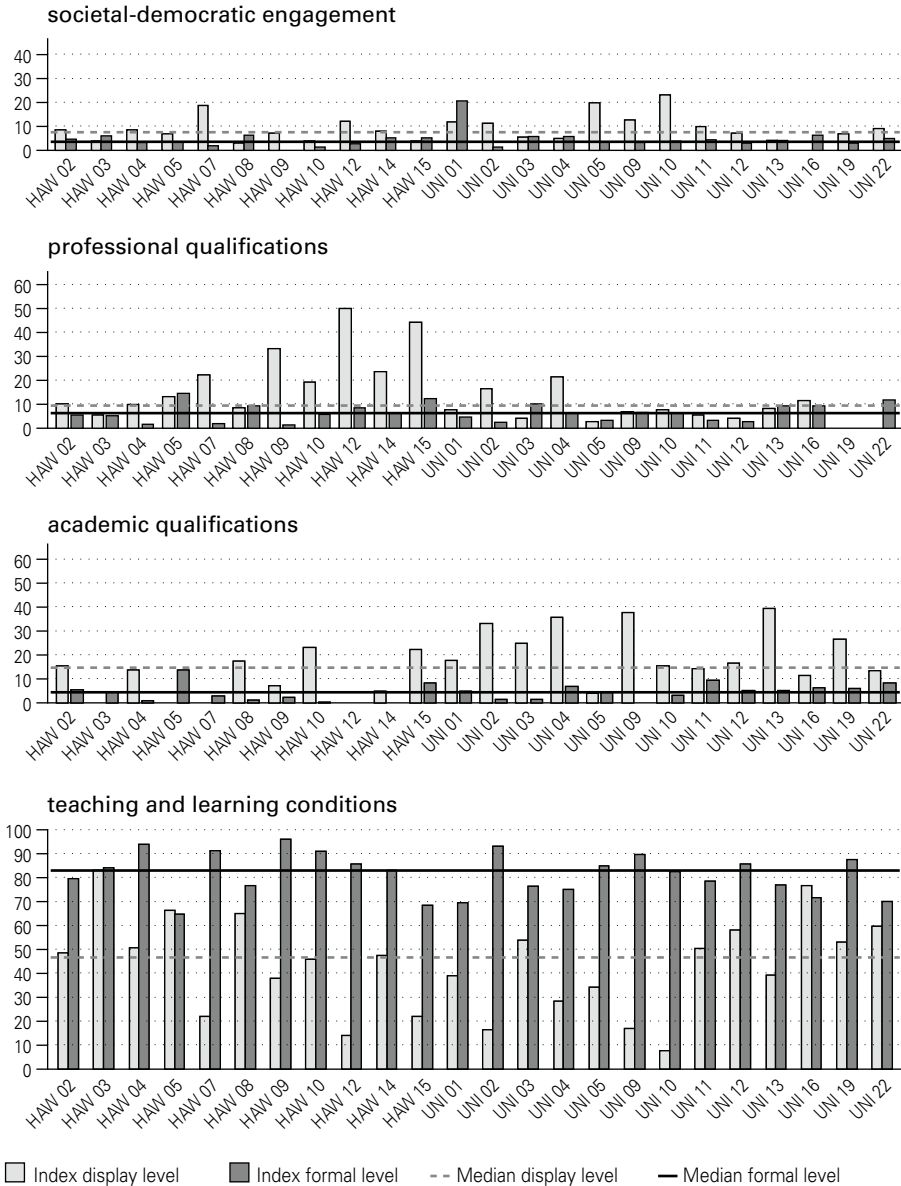
UNI = university; HAW = university of applied science. Percentages of coded segments relating to the dimensions *societal-democratic engagement, professional qualifications, academic qualifications* and *learning and teaching conditions within a document*. For the dimensions of *professional qualifications, academic qualifications,* and *learning and teaching conditions*, the figures show the percentage of coded segments relating to these respective dimensions. For the dimension *societal-democratic engagement,* the value shown corresponds to the average of the percentages for the subdimensions *values and attitudes, participation,* and *knowledge.*

Research question 2

No substantial differences exist between universities and universities of applied sciences regarding the median values for the dimension of education for societal-democratic engagement (see graph 2). We can observe, however, differences for the dimensions of academic and professional qualifications, in line with the different institutional types. Professional qualifications are more deeply embedded at universities of applied sciences, both at the display and formal level. At universities, we find higher median values for the dimension of academic qualifications. The differences are more pronounced at the display level, i. e., in mission statements, than at the formal level, i. e., in accreditation decision documents. This seems plausible as the formal quality criteria do not differ between types.

Graph 2: Median values according to type of HEI
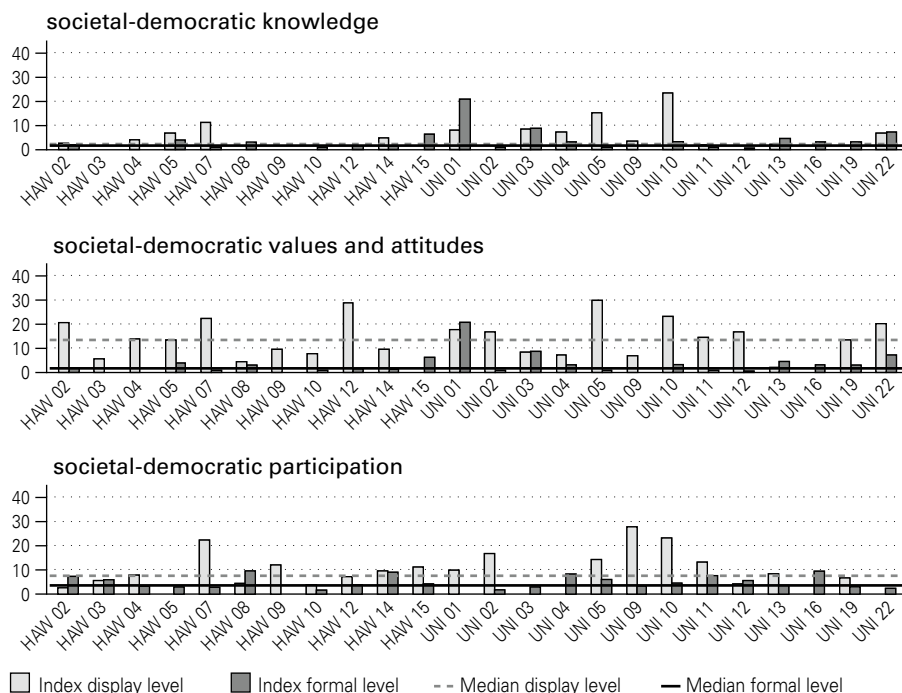

Data in percent. Percentages of coded segments relating to the dimensions *societal-democratic engagement, professional qualifications, academic qualifications,* and *learning and teaching conditions* across all documents within a type of HEI.

Research question 3

Thirdly, we asked if the visibility of the sub-dimensions of social-democratic engagement differ between the display and formal levels of HEIs. As shown in graph 2, for all dimensions except teaching and learning conditions, the values corresponding to the display level are higher than those corresponding to the formal level. This could be explained by the fact that teaching and learning conditions constitute the easiest dimension to formally verify and measure, for example through the examination system, modularisation, size of modules, and so on.

Graph 3: Indexes for societal-democratic knowledge, societal-democratic values and attitudes and societal-democratic participation by HEI

societal-democratic knowledge

societal-democratic values and attitudes

societal-democratic participation

Index display level   Index formal level   - - Median display level   — Median formal level

Percentages of coded segments relating to the dimensions societal-democratic knowledge, societal-democratic values and attitudes, and societal-democratic participation within a document (Multiple codes could be assigned to a single segment – see section 4).

A closer look at the three components of education for societal-democratic engagement as defined in this study provides further insights into how this dimension is approached at the display and formal level of HEIs. As graph 3 reveals, concerns with societal-democratic values and attitudes are mostly formulated at the display level (median value 13.3 as compared to 1.7 for the formal level). This is not surprising, as mission statements are the documents in which organisations express their values and attempt to differentiate themselves from their competitors while promoting their own identity. The importance given to societal-democratic knowledge is nearly similar at both the formal and the display level, yet with very low values for both (median values of 2.3 and 1.7, respectively). The promotion of societal-democratic participation has the highest values at the formal level, with a median of 3.7. This can be explained by the fact that this dimension is easier to formalise and to measure centrally, for example, by regulating the number of student representatives in committees (graph 1), than the spreading of societal-democratic values and attitudes or knowledge. Formalisation of the latter in central documents might be perceived as interference with the principle of teaching freedom by academic staff.

Research question 4

Furthermore, we have asked whether the degree of decoupling between the display and the formal level differs between the three dimensions of societal-democratic engagement, professional qualifications, and academic qualifications. As we can see in graph 4, there are differences between the median values of the display and formal levels in all dimensions. The difference is smallest in the dimension of societal-democratic engagement, both at universities and universities of applied sciences. This might be explained by the greater political expectations directed by higher education policy towards professional and academic qualifications, since the political expectations related to HEIs' involvement in education for societal-democratic engagement are comparatively low.

Research question 5

We also see that at universities, where academic qualifications play a greater role in the external representation, there is a high degree of decoupling between the display and formal levels of academic qualifications (graph 4). While the promotion of professional qualifications plays a major role in the external presentation, they play a much smaller role in the formalised result reports of internal accreditation.

Graph 4: Difference (median value) between the display and formal levels for each dimension according to type of HEI

6   Conclusions and perspectives for future research

The higher education system "*stands continuously in a state of precarious balance and potential conflict over different priorities*" (Smelser, 1973, p. 399). The introduction of quality assurance at German universities starting nearly 30 years ago in the context

of the implementation of Bachelor and Master programmes was primarily directed towards the fulfilment of formal requirements, fostering employability and academic excellence. The promotion of societal-democratic participation of students has taken a back seat, which might be seen as a deficit in view of current societal developments. This primarily exploratory study represents an attempt to describe the engagement of public, system-accredited HEIs in Germany in promoting the civic and democratic values and attitudes, knowledge and participation of their students through the anchoring of education for societal-democratic engagement in their quality assurance processes. It also compares the attention given to promoting societal-democratic engagement with the promotion of professional and academic qualifications, employability, and academic quality.

Our analysis of two document types, teaching mission statements, and official result reports of internal accreditation, yields the following results:

- The attention given to the promotion of students' societal-democratic engagement is (slightly) lower than the attention attributed to students' professional and academic qualification at both display and formal levels, that is, in mission statements as well as in reports of internal accreditation. What is more prominent than all these issues, however, is concerns with teaching and study conditions, both in teaching mission statements and in accreditation decisions.

- There is a decoupling between how HEIs present themselves externally and their formalised structures. Organisations tend to respond more quickly to external pressures, such as government directives or expectations of civil society, in their public self-expression, that is, in their mission statements, than at the formal decision-making level, i.e., in accreditation documents. We observed that the decoupling between the display and the formal level is more pronounced in those areas in which there is greater external, political pressure, such as increasing the employability of students and achieving research excellence, than for issues that receive less political attention, such as promoting democratic-societal engagement.

- There are no differences between universities and universities of applied sciences regarding the importance given to societal-democratic engagement, whether at the display or formal levels.

To understand the complex relationship between strongly institutionalised norms and values and equally forceful new demands, further research should examine the effect of different legal regulations at the level of the federal states upon HEIs.[5] It should also look into how organisational goal setting at the display and formal levels of HEIs is received and understood at the operating action level, in particular by activities of academic staff. The generalisability of this study's findings is partial, particularly due to the limited number of 24 HEIs for which all needed documents were publicly available.

Despite its limitations and unanswered questions, the findings presented are useful for increasing attention for the state of civic education within HEIs in Germany, and Europe as a whole, at a time when the promotion of societal participation and democratic competences is becoming increasingly urgent. Societal participation and democratic competences are relevant dimensions of normative quality concepts in the field of teaching and learning that need to be addressed without sacrificing core values such as freedom of research and teaching. There is a danger that "*the positivist self-understanding of science and its fragmented organisational form lead to a marginalisation of ethical questions*" (Vogt & Weber, 2020, p. 1). The reduction of educational systems, including higher education, to their economic utility impairs their democratic potential (Deželan & Pavlin, 2014). Quality assurance at public, system-accredited HEIs provides important opportunities for public communication and can serve as a key node in the discussion of ideas for a general higher education curriculum with the aim of fostering "*competences for a democratic culture*" (Council of Europe, 2020).

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[5] Further analyses, albeit with very limited case numbers, of our data indicates that, in only one state (Bremen), HEIs attach a significantly higher importance to societal-democratic engagement than in the other states, at least at the display level. This could be the result of a higher emphasis on this engagement in higher education law. In terms of organisational theory, this could be explained by the fact that the display side helps to create external legitimacy by demonstrating that the legal regulations of university policy are being met.

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Table 1: Definitions, examples, and keyword catalogue for each deductive category

Category *Professional qualification*	
Definition	The dimension refers to the *"training of professional practitioners"* (Parsons & Platt, 1973, p. 92).
Example – mission statement (display side)	*"Qualified academic education for national and international labour markets"*[6]
Examples – accreditation reports (formal side)	*„The relationship between the bachelor thesis and the internship in the company should be emphasised more."* *„It is recommended that there should be further clarification of the fit between qualification objectives and occupational fields in the relevant documents."*
Main keywords or word stems/ semantic references	Company, economy, practice, profession, occupational fields, presentation skills, labour market, training, project management, leadership, employment, market
Category *Academic qualification*	
Definition	The dimension refers to the *"primary function of 'pure' research and of graduate training for membership in the academic profession"* (Parsons & Platt, 1973, p. 93).
Example – mission statement (display side)	*„Orientation towards high academic standards"*
Examples – accreditation reports (formal side)	*„It is recommended that the curriculum be restructured so that modules with research content are placed at the beginning of the programme. An understanding of research should be developed in the early semesters."*
Main keywords or word stems/ semantic references	Science (*Wissenschaft*), research bases, research, theory, analysis, discipline, young scientists, analysis, research, findings, methods

[6]Translations from the German original texts by the authors.

Table 1 continued

Category *Societal-democratic engagement – knowledge*	
Definition	*"This cognitive dimension includes political knowledge and the understanding of democratic processes"* (Schmid & Watermann, 2018, p. 1136).
Example – mission statement (display side)	*"to reflect on the challenges and problems facing society as a whole"*
Examples – accreditation reports (formal side)	*"It is recommended that the use of examples and the presentation of facts on which the economic discourse is based should not reinforce common role clichés and gender stereotypes but, on the contrary, make them available for critical reflection."* *"Retention of the module 'Introduction to Bioethics' in the obligatory section and expansion of the options on offer."*
Main keywords or word stems/ semantic references	Politics, understanding, conspiracy theories, fake news, social categories, (societal) concepts and theories, democracy, gender, sustainability, reflection
Category *Societal-democratic engagement – values*	
Definition	*"This affective-motivational dimension "includes political attitudes […], but also trust in the political order, in political institutions and political authorities, as well as basic attitudes towards the field of politics"* (Schmid & Watermann, 2018, p. 1136).
Examples – mission statement (display side)	*"Pluralistic and inclusive understanding"* *"To assume societal responsibility"*
Examples – accreditation reports (formal side)	*"It is recommended that the use of examples and the presentation of facts on which the economic discourse is based should not reinforce common role clichés and gender stereotypes but, on the contrary, make them available for critical reflection."* *"Retention of the module 'Introduction to Bioethics' in the obligatory section and expansion of the options on offer."*
Main keywords or word stems/ semantic references	Empathy, social skills, equal opportunities, tolerance, openness, freedom, responsibility, diversity, inclusion, pluralism, cultural awareness, acceptance, ethics
Category *Societal-democratic engagement – participation*	
Definition	This behavioural dimension *"includes actual social and political participation as well as willingness to participate and often political information behaviour"* (Schmid & Watermann, 2018, p. 1136).
Examples – mission statement (display side)	*"To engage constructively in society"*
Examples – accreditation reports (formal side)	*"Establish a meeting at the end of the semester with participants from the student council, the teaching staff and the spokespersons of the semester groups."* *"A room should be provided for the initiative of the student council."*
Main keywords or word stems/ semantic references	Feedback, discussion, interaction, active, (student) organisation-, involvement-, commitment-, networking-, participation

Table 1 continued

Category *Teaching and learning conditions*	
Definition	This dimension refers to formal regulations as well as general guidelines on the quality of teaching and student life.
Examples – mission statement (display side)	*„Clearly structured degree programmes"* *„Adequate teaching/learning infrastructure"*
Examples – accreditation reports (formal side)	*"Coordinated assessment criteria for examinations should be drawn up for all degree programmes."* *"It is recommended that the modularisation concept for all degree programmes is reconsidered to avoid unnecessary fragmentation of modules."*
Main keywords or word stems/ semantic references	Advice, examinations, teaching, digitalisation, support, quality assurance, learning processes, forms of learning, stress, didactics, study design, infrastructure, module

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