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**Abstract**

This article shows how the professional discourse on quality assurance in higher education is building on latent meaning structures that can be competing with each other and even subvert the messages on the manifest level. Taking the case of the Austrian higher education system as an example and employing a reconstructive-interpretative approach rooted in social science hermeneutics, five different meaning patterns are presented: a consumer protection pattern, an educative pattern, an entrepreneurial pattern, a managerial pattern and a quality engineering pattern. By analysing and comparing these patterns, the study argues for paying more attention to latencies and implicit meanings that might be overlooked by focusing on the manifest level of the discourse, in order to not lose track of important contradictions and sources of potential conflict. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)