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## **Feeling good and being inspired on campus: Meaningful work in academia**

### **Abstract**

Theories related to good and caring organisations have gained interest amongst researchers. In particular, the concept of meaningful work has been under discussion recently in academia. This study contributes to knowledge of the concept of meaningful work by examining it from the perspective of good and caring organisations in the higher education context. Our focus in this chapter is on the positive opportunities individual lecturers have to make their own work meaningful and to promote their students' experiences of meaningfulness. The empirical

findings are based on the analysis of qualitative data collected from a management course with special attention to relational features, such as dialogue, collaboration and communication, that have been found to be crucial to meaningful work and good organisations.

## **Introduction**

In this chapter, we explore meaningful work in a university context. In particular, the focus is relational features, such as dialogue, expertise, interaction and collaboration that have been found to be crucial to good organisations (Addleson, 2000), high-quality learning (e.g. Packer and Goicoechea, 2000) and creativity (e.g. Eteläpelto and Lahti, 2008). In addition, prior research has shown that meaningfulness at work has an overall importance to professional agency and career construction (e.g. Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Furthermore, developing a good and caring organisation ultimately requires maintaining and fostering relationships, understanding the feelings and needs of others within the organisation and fulfilling responsibilities (Simola, 2005, p.343).

Studies on meaningfulness and good organisations in the higher education context are much needed. Several indicators show that work in academia is changing, and research suggests that not all of the changes are desirable or beneficial. Contemporary higher education is developing in a direction that has been largely criticised, especially regarding the concepts of neoliberal and academic capitalism (e.g. Fotaki and Prasad, 2015; Alajoutsijärvi, Juusola and Siltaoja, 2013; Cantwell and Kauppinen, 2014). We acknowledge the risks these changes pose for different actors, but for this study, the focus was the positive opportunities individual lecturers have to make their own work meaningful and to promote their students' experiences of meaningfulness.

We analyse the idea of meaningful work in the context of a management course at a business school. Studying—the work of students (Wardley, Bélanger and Nadeau, 2016)—and teaching—the work of faculty—are not separate procedures. Both entail similar elements of meaningfulness and therefore should be considered to understand meaningful work in academia. This particular course was constructed with an emphasis on cooperation, interaction and shared learning, which are all pivotal elements of meaningful work. All courses of action, including teaching methods, were chosen to support these objectives. For example, course meetings were planned, taught and further developed in collaboration by the three lecturers from different units at the university. In addition, students worked in multidisciplinary peer groups throughout the course and course meetings were organised so that instead of listening the course required active participation (e.g. group tasks and discussions). The entire course can be characterised as interactive in nature with an emphasis on individual and group work in multidisciplinary groups and students' peer evaluations. To analyse and to further conceptualise the idea of meaningful work in a university context, we applied the four-quadrant model by Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009), which is presented in more detail in the third section entitled 'Four quadrants of meaningful work'.

In the following sections, a brief overview of the concept of meaningful work from the perspective of good and caring organisations is first provided. Next, the four-quadrant model used for analysis is introduced, and the research context and materials gathered are described. To conclude, the findings are summarised, and the implications for practice are discussed.

### **Good organisations and meaningful work**

The phenomena of good organisations and meaningful work are intertwined through concepts such as care, dialogue, expertise, collaboration and communication. According to Addleson (2000), good organisations are not only dependent on materials or profitability but also on the concept of operating well: doing what is good and right, including moral aspects. Organisations have an ethical duty to provide work that can be voluntarily chosen, is autonomous and provides a fair salary and opportunities for moral development (Bowie, 1998); that is, the work should be meaningful. Ciulla (2009) posits that care can also be viewed as a duty: maintaining a good organisation can be done based on duty, which can be learned, or based on care, which involves feelings. Hence, a good and caring organisation not only involves fulfilling responsibilities but also maintaining and fostering relationships and understanding the feelings and needs of others within the organisation (Simola, 2005, p.343). Organisations that emphasise care, including trust, interaction and sharing, are also more likely to foster innovative outputs (Gössling and Liedekerke, 2014).

One of the core ideas involved in the goodness of organisations is dialogue and communication. Communication and interaction are essential characteristics of good organisations, and they provide ways to make sense of organisation members' thoughts, the way they view things and what they say. Socially constructed interaction provides a shared space for defining concepts such as 'good' or 'right', which form a basis for the organisation's culture and everyday behaviours. Dialogue and communication provide a forum for organisation members to give and share meanings and to express and learn values while interacting with others (Addleson, 2000). Communication plays a key role in supporting well-being at work. Therefore, it is important not only for individuals but also for organisations and their success (Kokkonen and Almonkari, 2015). In addition to interaction, good organisations are also developed based on cooperation, which is associated with good relationships and active participation at work.

Dialogue, interaction and cooperation are important for getting things done well, in a good and right way (Addleson, 2000).

The concept of *meaningful work* has received considerable attention within the organisational studies field (e.g. Michaelson et al., 2014, Lepisto and Pratt, 2016), and some scholars even find it to be ‘one of the most important questions for organisational scholarship’ (Podolny, Khurana and Hill-Popper, 2005, p.1). In summary, meaningful work is based on the reasons that justify the worthiness of work, and research on meaningful work ultimately focuses on the question: ‘Why is my work worth doing?’ (see Lepisto and Pratt, 2016).

Meaningful work includes both good working conditions and subjective involvement (Michaelson et al., 2014). From an individual’s perspective, meaningful work is something that the individual finds interesting, likes to do and spends time completing (e.g. Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010). It is also a source of personal satisfaction (Tablan, 2015). According to Ciulla (2015), meaningful work refers to work that is worthwhile, significant and satisfying and that is conducive to personal growth, self-efficacy, self-esteem, belongingness and well-being. Yeoman (2014) defines meaningful work from the human needs perspective, which emphasises the role of freedom, autonomy and dignity. The concept of meaningful work is also closely related to the concept of agency, which includes individuals’ intentionality, sense of capability and power to act purposefully and to play contributing roles as workers and citizens (Goller and Paloniemi, 2017).

Meaningful work can also be defined from an objective perspective, which allows for distinguishing between meaningful and non-meaningful work (Tablan, 2015). For this approach, the focus is more on the physical or material conditions of the job that do not self-

evidently depend on the individual's subjective ideas or feelings. The objective perspective builds on the concept that work tasks and the organisation of work play crucial roles in human flourishing or fulfilment and thus make work meaningful; however, individual evaluations and experiences are also needed, as different people have different views regarding fulfilment that are dependent on their values, interests, needs and personal conditions (Tablan, 2015, p.294).

Meaningful work also promotes several positive organisational outcomes (Michaelson et al., 2014; Weeks and Schaffert, 2017), such as intrinsic motivation (Fried and Ferris, 1987), motivation and attachment to work (May, Gilson and Harter, 2004), job satisfaction, organisational commitment (Cardador, Dane and Pratt, 2011), organisational citizenship behaviour (Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006) and a decrease in turnover intentions (Scroggins, 2008). On the other hand, prior research has shown that a lack of meaningfulness at work is linked with negative organisational outcomes, such as job dissatisfaction (Tablan, 2015). It can be stated that if meaningful work is essential to individual well-being, organisations have an ethical requirement to provide this to their members (Tablan, 2015).

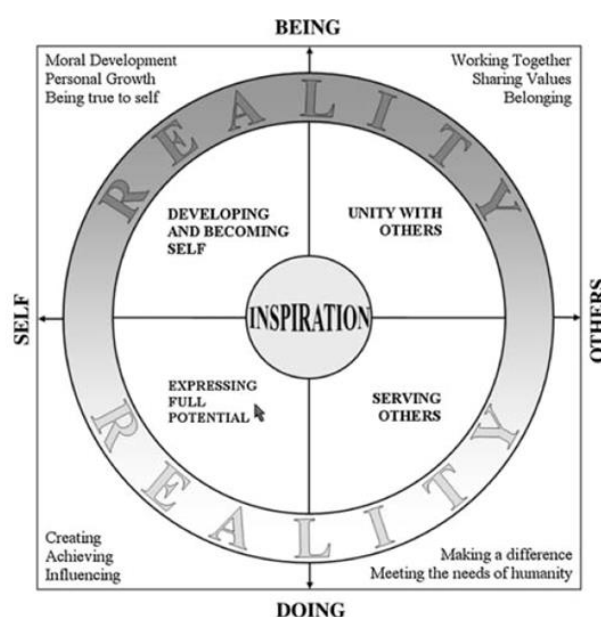
As explained, the focus of this study was the positive opportunities individual lecturers and students have to make their university a good place to work. To answer the question 'Why is my work worth doing', we apply the four-quadrant model of meaningful work by Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009). This model is introduced in the next section.

### **Four quadrants of meaningful work**

We approach meaningful work in the university context by applying the meaningful work model by Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009). In their model (see Figure 1), meaningful work is

based on four quadrants: (1) developing and becoming self (self/being), (2) expressing full potential (self/doing), (3) unity with others (others/being) and (4) serving others (others/doing). Meaningfulness is derived from all four sources as well as from balancing the tensions between ‘being’ versus ‘doing’ and between ‘self’ and ‘other’.

Figure 1 The holistic developed framework of meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009, p.496)



The first quadrant, *developing and becoming self*, includes characteristics such as moral development, personal growth and being true to self. This quadrant exists between self and being. Moral development refers to an individual’s experiences of meaningful work through practicing principles or virtues. Personal growth involves ongoing learning. Being true to self refers to an individual’s unique identity and the possibility of being an individual as a part of an organisation. In the university context, both faculty and student experiences related to developing and becoming self are essential when meaningful work is examined. All members of the university community should have equal possibilities to maintain and to develop their



individual identities as members of the organisation. Prior research has noted that encouragement and respect support self-fulfilment and the maintenance of meaningfulness (Konu and Rimpelä 2002).

The second quadrant, *expressing full potential*, exists between self and doing and includes characteristics such as creating, achieving and influencing. Creating refers to meaningful experiences related to doing, acting or combining new things or ideas. Achievement refers to mastery or expertise for some specific issue or area. Influencing creates meaningfulness through the use of power: having the power to make a difference in a situation or to change a viewpoint. In the university context, expressing full potential refers to both faculty and students' abilities to be creative and to use their expertise and power in everyday situations.

The third quadrant, *unity with others*, exists between being and others; it consists of elements such as working together, sharing values and belonging. Working together is an important feature of meaningful work because completing tasks together connects people and gives them an experience of a common purpose. Sharing values involves identifying with others and being able to use these common values as sources of action. Belonging refers to reciprocity between people and experiences of care: individuals are able to care for others and to be cared for. In the university context, unity with others includes the social learning environment, relationships between (and among) faculty and students, team/group dynamics, cooperation and atmosphere (cf. Konu and Rimpelä, 2002).

The fourth quadrant, *serving others*, is related to doing and others: making a difference and meeting the needs of humanity. Making a difference refers to experiences of meaningfulness that are developed when making a contribution to others within the organisation. In the

university context, both faculty and students should feel that they can make a difference and can participate in decision making and planning, for example. Meeting the needs of humanity refers to a situation in which individuals can see their work as a meaningful part of a wider entity, such as addressing social, economic or environmental issues. In the university context, meeting the needs of humanity refers to faculty and students' perceptions of the university as an organisation that does good work.

### **Research context and material**

The research material was gathered from a management course at a business school. The main idea in this course's development was to position the students not as objects of teaching but as subjects of their own learning and understanding. Despite the roles adopted, all participants were co-learners. Allowing students the role of co-workers in terms of shared learning and course development actually emphasises the holistic nature of people, as Butler (1997) suggests. Shared learning allows the students to use their full capacity and knowledge '...for posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world' (Freire, 2005, p.79). Education based on problem posing is a humanist praxis, which enables both teachers and students to become subjects of the educational process (Freire, 2005).

Our research material consists of both lecturers and students' descriptions of their experiences of meaningfulness. This material includes three narratives written by the lecturers (totalling nine pages of text) and open course feedback from 184 students (13 pages of text) (2015,  $n = 64$ ; 2016,  $n = 70$ ; 2017,  $n = 25$ ; 2018,  $n = 25$ ). We conducted a directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) in order to describe and to identify the central factors of meaningful work for both datasets.

From the faculty perspective, we analysed the lecturers' written narratives, especially their descriptions of their experiences of cooperation, mutual learning and dialogue during the course. The lecturers' narratives were written under the same theme and title: 'Making work meaningful'. The narratives covered individual lecturers' experiences of meaningful work regarding a specific university course. The lecturers wrote their narratives without having read those of the others to avoid any influence on their individual thoughts.

The research material representing the students' perspectives consists of students' responses to two open questions included in the annual online course feedback questionnaire (Agency of University Students Scale) with a specific focus on the students' experiences of the resources for agency during the course (Jääskelä et al., 2017). The first question asked the students: 'Which factors empowered you as a student in this course'? The second question was formulated as follows: 'Which factors limited your learning and development in this course'?

In the first stage of the analysis, we analysed the data individually. We read and reviewed the data, and highlighted all the material that seemed to express features of meaningful work. Following the individual analysis, we met to conduct the final analysis. During this stage, we coded the highlighted parts of the text using predetermined codes applied from Lips-Wiersma and Morris' (2009) four-quadrants model for the analysis of the research material. The material was examined for parts of the text that fit the quadrants to evaluate and to understand the factors of meaningful work. Next, the results of the empirical analysis are presented.

## **Findings**

### ***Developing and becoming self: Moral development, personal growth, being true to self***

As described previously, developing and becoming self refers to characteristics between self and being: moral development, personal growth and being true to self. In their narratives, the lecturers described their principles, values and experiences of belongingness and respect that maintain meaningfulness at work. They also mentioned high self-esteem as a feature of meaningful work. These features are highlighted in the following excerpt:

Respecting each other's work and experiences of being respected has made our collaboration meaningful. Our collaboration has created the experience that we appreciate our own and each other's pedagogic expertise. This also means that one can be oneself as a pedagogue. (Lecturer 2)

Practicing principles or virtues is one of the core elements in the quadrant of developing and becoming self. As the previous excerpt shows, it is also important that these individual features are shared in the work community to enhance the experiences of meaningfulness at work. Building and maintaining relationships and sharing feelings and needs in a safe and appreciative environment are also essential elements of good and caring organisations (Simola 2005).

In addition, teaching along with colleagues intensified the lecturers' attachment both to the teacher team and to the organisation. Collaborative teaching provided them with positive learning experiences, opportunities to participate in decision-making and possibilities to influence others. The lecturers expressed that it is crucial to have the possibility of making their own decisions and influencing work practices to maintain meaningfulness at work. In the four-

quadrants model, these features form the core of developing and becoming self: ongoing learning is a key feature of personal growth, and positive experiences of participation support the maintenance and development of individual identity as a part of an organisation. Learning is also linked with creating good organisations as a duty (Ciulla 2009).

In terms of students' experiences of developing and becoming self, they noted in the annual course feedback that interactive work methods during the course provided them with possibilities to continuous learning, to influence and to experience different levels of individual autonomy. This is illustrated by the following excerpts about empowering factors:

Group discussions that give new insight. Encouragement and support from teachers to present your own ideas. Discussing and thinking about things together. (Anonymous student 2015)

Different ways to learn individually and as a group. (Anonymous student 2016)

Possibility to choose a topic based on your own interests. Group work with students from other faculties. (Anonymous student 2016)

Individual and group autonomy, such as the possibility to choose work methods or the specific phenomenon a group studied, were viewed as good opportunities to learn individually and as a group. The students stated that autonomy also enhanced their personal courage to express and to justify their own opinions.

***Expressing full potential: Creating, achieving, influencing***

Expressing full potential (self and doing) involves creating, achieving and influencing. In their narratives, the lecturers described empowerment and creativity as essential features for making work meaningful. Continuous collaboration over time made it possible for the lecturers to express their full potential: getting to know each other helped the lecturers build a good, trusting and open work atmosphere in which it was easy to share ideas, thoughts and personal feelings with others. Good team spirit was viewed as key to empowerment and joy:

Working together has provided me with moments of joy and happiness. I have very much enjoyed the moments of collaboration when we have gained new insights and shared our ideas together. (Lecturer 1)

We have enjoyed success together. Success in handling a challenging situation, delightful feedback from students or other success, such as in meeting urgent deadlines, have provided experiences of success. (Lecturer 2)

The lecturers noted that working together and sharing work duties and responsibilities (e.g. planning, developing, teaching, evaluating, administrative tasks) increased their experiences of meaningfulness and well-being. In addition, fulfilling and sharing responsibilities was found to be a key feature of a good and caring organisation (Simola 2005). These features also enhance both individual and team creativity. For a team whose members can trust each other, use their expertise and focus on their special interests, there is the possibility to create something new, as the following excerpt shows:

One important thing is creativity. It is very rewarding when you can think and develop new ideas for the course without being immediately rejected. (Lecturer 2)

From the students' perspectives, expressing full potential was made possible through a well-structured course schedule, inspiring course materials and course assignments and content that supported various types of learning that allowed students to achieve their personal objectives and learning goals. These features are mentioned in the following excerpts:

Flexible completion possibilities and timetables and clear instructions for course content and completion that are always available. I will attend lectures if I find the content relevant. (Anonymous student 2015)

Motivating and inspiring teachers, well-planned lectures and shared materials. (Anonymous student 2015)

Learning tasks inspired me personally, they pushed me to work hard and I really motivated from that. (Anonymous student 2015)

In addition, challenging tasks during the course, high-quality teaching and both teachers and students' own interest, motivation and enthusiasm towards the course content were mentioned by the students. These features enhanced students' experiences of creativity, mastery and expertise as well as their ability to exercise power over their own learning. Students were also pleased with the possibility to exert influence through dialogic and interactive work methods.

***Unity with others: Working together, sharing values and belonging***

Unity with others (being and others) consists of working together, sharing values and belonging. Both lecturers and students highlighted that working together was a crucial factor in providing experiences of meaningfulness. Collaboration was viewed as crucial for experiences of meaningfulness, which is highlighted in the following excerpts from lecturers:

Collaboration in this course has provided support and encouragement and has created and maintained individual as well as shared well-being. (Lecturer 1)

Collaboration motivates. Motivation is like a spiral: a feeling of success fosters motivation to develop new ideas and processes. When you receive good feedback about the development, it motivates you to develop more. (Lecturer 3)

Sharing values and belonging are also relevant elements for unity with others. The lecturers highlighted that it is not only important to do the right things but also to do things right. The importance of shared values is noted in the following excerpts:

Our collaboration started in another co-operation network with common discussions. We noticed that we share the same ideas, values, teaching philosophy and interests. This was an excellent start for collaboration. (Lecturer 2)

We noticed rather quickly that we share similar interests and ideas about learning, teaching, cooperation and many other things... We all value diversity and multidisciplinary as a resource and a possibility that widened our perspectives and learning. (Lecturer 1)



In addition to sharing values, the lecturers described different types of sharing to support meaningfulness at work: the sharing of knowledge, shared interests in teaching and pedagogy, the willingness to collaborate, sharing a variety of ideas and perspectives and shared tasks and responsibilities. For example, in the lecturers' narratives, sharing—both telling and listening—everyday life stories and experiences was viewed as part of building meaningfulness at work. Getting to know each other better both as colleagues and as individuals enhanced the lecturers' experiences of empathy and care towards others:

During our collaboration, we have heard and learnt about each other's everyday lives with both happy and sad things. This has improved trust and has also deepened our communication and collaboration. Sometimes, these things make it easier to understand each other and our feelings and behaviours. (Lecturer 2)

We have not only shared information and competences, but we have also learned to share success and failures and happiness and worries—different emotions and feelings. The experience of mutual support has been strong. (Lecturer 3)

The data suggest that sharing as part of unity with others could be expanded to cover different types and forms of sharing that support and maintain meaningfulness at work.

From the students' perspectives, working together in groups throughout the course provided them with experiences of meaningfulness: shared discussions with the group, group assignments and group work allowed them to share a common purpose. It also enhanced students' collaboration as well as the process of doing and learning together. Successful group

work was often mentioned as empowering feature in the students' feedback. The students commented these aspects, for example, in the following ways:

We have done a lot of group works during this course. It has empowered me as a student. (Anonymous student 2018)

Noticing similar interests and ways to think with my group members. My group has given me the most support for my own learning. (Anonymous student 2016)

Students also mentioned that support from the group as well as from the lecturers was important to enhancing the positive atmosphere. Therefore, it is important that when group work is expected from students, it should also be guided and supported.

### ***Serving others: Making a difference, meeting the needs of humanity***

Serving others (doing and others) involves making a difference and meeting the needs of humanity. In terms of making a difference, the lecturers mentioned that multidisciplinary expertise (e.g. field-specific knowledge and pedagogical expertise) made it possible for them to make a contribution at the organisational level. They also noted that the organisation supported their multidisciplinary collaboration and made it possible for the lecturers both as individuals and as a team to make a difference and to participate in decision making and planning concerning the course.

Multidisciplinary provides a wider perspective on issues. By accident, we as individuals also represented this kind of multidisciplinary based on our units in the university, education, interests and other competences. (Lecturer 1)

For some of the students, working together in multidisciplinary groups with people they did not know in advance was a first-time experience. One of the very first questions the students were asked to answer in the group was: ‘What are the skills and the knowledge you can bring to this group’? Students felt that it was an eye-opening and positive experience to realise that everyone can contribute and can make a difference through specific knowledge from their own fields. As a group, they had to learn how to contend with various opinions and to make decisions together so that all could be heard and could have the feeling of being an essential part of the group. The following excerpts describe students’ experiences of working in groups and how the experiences supported meaningfulness at work from students’ perspectives:

Multidisciplinary group work was an excellent possibility to learn; however, this requires competent group members, which was fulfilled in my case and hopefully also for others. (Anonymous student 2016)

Functioning and hard-working group where we discussed and communicated a lot. It was very good that the groups had been formed in advance and cross-disciplinary had been taken into account. (Anonymous student 2016)

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In organisational studies, the concept of meaningful work is typically based on the premise that meaningful work is a good thing (Michaelson et al., 2014). This study also emphasises the positive aspects of the concept. Dialogue, expertise, interaction and collaboration are not only features of good organisations but also features that constitute meaningfulness at work. The four-quadrant model used to analyse the research material showed that meaningfulness at work was evident in all four sources both for faculty and students: developing and becoming self, expressing self, unity with others and serving others. These sources are positive in nature and require dialogical, interactive and collaborative actions to become true. These same features have also been found to be crucial in creating, maintaining and developing good and caring organisations.

This study highlights the importance of support as a feature of meaningful work. Both lecturers and students described the importance of support: students highlighted the role of support they received from their small peer groups and the support from the lecturers through guidance and instructions. Lecturers noted the importance of support from students through feedback and the role of collegial, e.g. emotional, support. They also acknowledged the significance of organisational support that made the collaboration possible. The findings show that support in its various forms is one of the central features of providing meaningfulness at work, producing experiences of well-being and creating an organisation that is a good place to work.

In addition, based on the findings, the concept of sharing should be viewed as a broader concept as illustrated by the four-quadrant model. As the findings indicate, sharing as a part of creating and maintaining unity with others was not only limited to sharing values but also included other elements and content. Sharing different types of knowledge, ideas, experiences and feelings were considered important to enhancing experiences of meaningfulness, well-being and

belonging to the work community. Sharing responsibilities, feelings and needs are also essential in forming and maintaining trust, which is a central feature of good and caring organisations. Sharing is also needed to facilitate learning. This study also supports the assertion of Gössling and Liedekerke (2014), who noted that caring organisations, i.e. organisations that emphasise trust, collaboration and sharing, provide a fruitful environment for creativity and innovative outcomes.

Often, developmental actions in organisations focus on problem solving and analysing errors or mistakes, which means that the starting point for dialogical or collaborative actions is negative in nature. We argue that fostering meaningfulness at work and developing a caring organisation through collaborative and dialogic actions cannot be based on problem solving. Problem solving merely refers to single-loop learning (Argyris, 1976), which does not allow for questioning fundamental assumptions, strategies and actions. Problem solving as single-loop learning is based on the assumptions of the student as an object of teaching, which Freire calls the ‘banking method of education’ and which is anti-dialogical and non-communicative in nature (Freire, 2005, pp.91-109). Unlike the banking method, the problem-posing method is dialogic in nature and allows students to become critical thinkers. Once the participants can engage in true dialogue and are allowed to question the status quo, they have the understanding and the means to identify transformations needed for developmental actions; however, true dialogue cannot exist without hope. True dialogue provides positive opportunities for all members of an organisation to make their work meaningful and for the organisation to be a good place to work.

### **Implications for policy makers**

- True dialogue, collaboration and communication are crucial features both for meaningfulness at work and for creating good and caring organisations
- Support and sharing form a basis for experiences of meaningfulness, trust and well-being at work
- In the higher education context the elements of meaningful work (e.g. dialogue, collaboration, support) are important both for faculty and students. For example, peer support plays a crucial role when students tackle with difficult questions
- In good and caring organisations, meaningfulness at work is not limited to objective measures and features of work, and individual experiences, feelings and needs are taken into account as well to support individual human flourishing. This applies also in the context of higher education where recent changes have been largely criticised.

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