Research in higher professional education: A staff perspective

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Research in Higher Professional Education
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Teaching has always been part of higher education. Research has not—although it seems in recent times that research is sometimes more valued as the embodiment of traditional universities¹ than teaching. Research has been part of higher professional education in The Netherlands since 1986, but it has gained shape and size since the beginning of the current century. Then, as a direct effect of the Lisbon and Bologna Agreements, research-related skills became publicly financed responsibilities of institutes of higher professional education, as laid down in an agreement between the Dutch Ministry of Education and the institutions of professional higher education (2001, 2004).

Previously, research activities usually only appeared in the final year of the curricula, and most institutions lacked any ‘research culture’ (Boei & Griffioen, 2011; Van der Linden, Bakx, Ros, Beijaard, & Vermeulen, 2012). In addition, research skills and experience usually constituted no ground for selection in application procedures for lecturers (De Jong & De Jager, 2007; Kyvik & Skodvin, 2003); large groups of lecturers had a professional bachelor’s degree as their highest formal qualification (Dutch Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 2011). Still, the institutes of HPE have been seen for some time as a less costly alternative for the growing number of students willing to attend traditional universities (Bijleveld & Buissink, 1985).

As part of the treaty between the Dutch Minister of Education and the institutes of HPE, the sector received financial support to start implementing research activities (nationally about 1.5 million euros in 2001, see also SKO, 2008), which had to be used to appoint new professional researchers (lectoren). These new employees helped to implement several new activities, such as the construction of groups of lecturer-researchers, a system for the evaluation of research quality, and many networks between institutes of HPE and external companies with research-based innovation as the goal. Another effect of the treaty was the increased pressure by executives of teaching staff to increase their academic qualifications (Kyvik, 2004). All these activities illustrate the changing context of lecturers’ surrounding environment, which more and more resembles that of traditional universities (Griffioen & De Jong, 2012).

The introduction of research in higher professional education unleashed a large

¹ Throughout this thesis ‘Traditional Universities’ is used for the 14 public funded Dutch universities, as opposed to the label ‘Higher Professional Education (HPE)’ which is applied for the Dutch Hogescholen. In the UK these type of institutes, the former Polytechnics, are called ‘New Universities’ since 1992.
public debate about the direction of professional higher education and the contribution of research activities to this direction. This debate had an emotional load, because publicly funded research in The Netherlands used to be the prerogative of the traditional universities. This situation gave the debate a rather political tone, increased by the lack of in-depth definitions of research. The present study started in 2006 with an overview on this debate. The aim was and is to contribute to the implementation of research in institutes of HPE by adding an empirical foundation to the debate to provide more clarity.

The rest of this chapter consists of an overview of the public debate from 2001-2006 as the main context for this study. This overview provides the central themes within the debate. Based on these themes, the chapter will describe the outline, research questions, and central notions in this research.

1.1 Context of this Study: The Public Debate on Research in Higher Professional Education

This paragraph provides an overview of the public debate on research in Dutch higher professional education between 2001 and 2006, as it has been present in national and university newspapers, as well as online. This debate has consisted of five themes.

Theme 1: Tasks of the Lectorates and Goals for Research

The first line of argumentation in the debate was about the tasks and goals for research in higher professional education in general, or for the *lectoren* in particular. *Lectoren* are the newly employed research professors in higher professional education. They are independent researchers, somewhat comparable to associate professors.

The first type of document of this theme made up the formal foundation of research in higher education institutes and was represented by ministerial agreements and formal advisories. These documents showed that research in higher professional education was expected to contribute to: a) knowledge, b) education, c) staff, and d) external orientation. While these four areas of contribution would seem to make the direction of research in higher rather clear, it has not been. The interpretation of these topics was rather diverse and diffuse, even in the more formal documents. The following paragraphs will describe the differences in interpretation of these goals in four documents to show the differences in interpretation (see also Table 1.1).

Introduction: Research in Higher Professional Education

Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, 2001), showed an internal focus for the research goals. It showed an explicit expected coherence between knowledge innovation and the improvement of the quality of higher professional education. Additionally, research was expected to stimulate the professionalization of the current employees. Next to this inward focus, there was a wish to improve the external orientation of the institutes through research.

The Covenant of 2004 (Dutch Ministry of Education Culture and Science & Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, 2004) showed an external focus: the first listed goal is to improve the external orientation of the institution by research. Contrary to the previous document, there was no explicit connection between knowledge circulation and the quality of education. Also, instead of a focus on the quality of education, the document showed a focus on improving the curriculum. Furthermore, the professionalization of all employees of 2001 has, in the document of 2004, been changed into just the professionalization of educational staff.

Table 1.1: Goals for research in the public debate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Convenant 2001</th>
<th>Convenant 2004</th>
<th>AWT 2005</th>
<th>SKO 2006</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Knowledge innovation in education (with 2)</td>
<td>4. To strengthen knowledge circulation and development in higher professional education</td>
<td>3. To contribute to theory</td>
<td>1. To have a position in the knowledge infrastructure</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To improve the quality of professional higher education</td>
<td>2. Curriculum-renewal</td>
<td>1. To improve the quality of education</td>
<td>4. To contribute to education</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. To stimulate the professionalization of the current employees</td>
<td>3. To professionalize educational staff</td>
<td>2. To stimulate the professionalization of the current employees</td>
<td></td>
<td>Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. To strengthen the external orientation</td>
<td>1. To improve the external orientation</td>
<td>4. To help companies and social organizations innovate</td>
<td>2. Receive input from economy and society</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In contrast to these two agreements, the Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy (AWT; 2005) in 2005 formulated a formal advisory for the Ministry of Education on the shape and size of research in professional higher education: research activities should contribute to the development of ‘theory’, where both covenants previously used the phrase ‘knowledge’. For education and staff, the AWT chose the formulation of the Covenant of
2001. The AWT also indicated a shift in the external theme. The two covenants formulated ‘external orientation’, the AWT formulated the task of lectoren to help companies and social organizations innovate. This focus was narrower than before, and was striking because the AWT considered solving practical issues no task for the institutes of higher professional education at all. ‘[T]o train well educated staff and to solve practical problems [...] are two sides of the same coin’, yet solving practical problems was ‘not the primary task of institutes of higher professional education’ (Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy, 2005). So, with their choice for a more specific formulation of the external and staff themes, they opened up options which they did not endorse.

The final formal document is the evaluation framework the Organization for Knowledge Development (SKO) formulated in 2006 to evaluate the functioning of the lectoren, based on four themes (SKO, 2006). Surprisingly, the development of (educational) staff was not formulated as a main theme.

The external orientation was rephrased as some kind of relational role in which the lectoren should be the hinges between the institute for professional higher education and the external world (Van Lieshout & Borgdorff, 2005). The debate has offered differing ideas about the character of this relationship: by connecting educators and professionals through research activities (Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy, 2005; Smeijsters, 2005) by having a dialogue (Smeijsters, 2005), or by providing answers to concrete practical questions (Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy, 2005), and therefore developing relevant knowledge (Smeijsters, 2005). As an effect, new practical knowledge entered the educational institutes, refreshing the knowledge of the educational staff, while helping external organizations innovate (Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy, 2005; Porcu, 18 november 2004). Sometimes–but not often–the traditional universities were included in this relational task. Lectoren would then have the responsibility to stimulate the development of relevant knowledge, also at traditional universities (Van Lieshout & Borgdorff, 2005). This should have then increased the collaboration between traditional and HPE institutes. On the other hand, the differences between lectoren and university professors have been consequently emphasized; lectoren were mainly allowed to exist if and when they were different from university professors (Duursma, 2005; Groene & Steyaert, 2002; Schimank & Winnes, 2000).

The second goal for research in the public debate was the professionalization of educational staff (Van Lieshout & Borgdorff, 2005). The professionalization of staff and others expanded through generating relevant knowledge for practise by practise-based research (Smeijsters, 2005). The knowledge circles (kenniskringen) of the lectoren— in which educational staff participated in research—each clustered knowledge in a specific field. Within this context, the improvement of educational staff took place by the practise-based
knowledge that renewed and developed their action competence (SKO, 2004; Smeijsters, 2005).

The third goal—to contribute to educational programs—has seemed important in the public debate. However, exactly how to connect research and teaching to achieve this goal has remained vague. Suggestions have included the following: to stimulate curriculum renewal or practise-based thesis assignments (Van Lieshout & Borgdorff, 2005); employ junior educational research staff (Weel, 2006); increase the professionalism of educational staff (Belleman, 2005; Het Platform Beroepsonderwijs (HPBO), 2006); and by the innovation or actualization of the educational programs through research (Smeijsters, 2005; Van Lieshout & Borgdorff, 2005).

Besides increasing the position of research within educational programs, the debate has offered additional ideas to intensify the connection between education and research. In HPE, research has been seen as a way to train students, but not as an end in itself (Mudde, 2005). Students in higher professional education, but also in lower levels of professional education should have the possibility to be part of knowledge development (Onderwijsraad, 2003).

Hence, the four goals for research in higher professional education have been identified as contributing to a) knowledge, b) education, c) staff, and d) external orientation, but there have been multiple interpretations of the desired results and methods to achieve them.

Theme 2: What is Research?
The second aspect that stands out in the public debate is that it uses diverse and poorly defined conceptions of research. Research is qualified as ‘scientific’ (Leijnse, 2005b; Mudde, 2005), ‘applied’ (Duursma, 2005; Punt, 2004), ‘fundamental’ (Duursma, 2005), and ‘practise-based’ (Duursma, 2005), without defining what are meant by those labels. Additionally, the AWT (2005) consequently uses ‘design and development’ to show their presumed difference between research within institutes of professional higher education and university research. It seems AWT applied the framework of Gibbons’ Mode 2 (Gibbons, et al., 1994), in which research was defined as ‘design’. The effort of AWT to give research in professional higher education a separate label has so far not resulted in a prominent new label in the public discourse on the topic. Furthermore, the label of ‘knowledge production’ has been used by the Rector Magnificus of the University of Amsterdam to show the economic load of research in higher professional education. So, all these different qualifications are used intertwined, sometimes as synonyms, sometimes contradicting one another, and consequently without actually defining what is meant (except for the AWT). All authors seemed to presume a common definition of the qualifications of research they use, which was not necessarily
common.

Parallel in the debate about how research was (not) defined, was the way in which research was valued. Practise-based research was supposed to show a more direct applicability (Dijstelbloem & Schuyt, 2003; Leijnse, 2005b). Underlying this label seemed to be the criticism that research within traditional universities showed a lack of support for the professional fields, which was expected to be an effect of too much specialisation and methods (Leijnse, 2005b). Others, however, argued that traditional universities also developed their research toward practice, and research at the two types of institutions were not so different (see also Gibbons, et al., 1994). Finally, research has been framed as an activity that could be applied by all on a daily basis (Weel, 2006).

**Theme 3: Research Culture and Staff Qualifications**

This part of the debate focused mainly on institutions and not on individuals. Some of the debate has been about who should be allowed to become a lector and therefore able to lead a research group in professional higher education, but most lines of argument have been on a systems level.

Within this debate, the central question was which type of institution should be allowed to conduct research. The function of higher professional institutes as research institutions has been questioned; the position of the traditional universities has not been part of the debate. The professional institutes received criticism on the quality of their staff and their preconditions to conduct research. They have been supposed to lack the time and knowledge to conduct good research (Punt, 2004), and a lack of staff with doctoral degrees (Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy, 2005). Possible reasons for this situation could include the recruitment policy to apply lecturers based on their professional and didactical expertise and not based on their research skills (Van Lieshout & Borgdorff, 2005). Additionally, the institutes of higher professional education lacked research climates to be able to conduct good research, to train researchers in general (Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy, 2005), and to train PhD candidates (Duursma, 2005). Some debaters have argued that even if the higher professional education institutions succeeded in conducting good research, the amount of research would be too little to employ all newly trained researchers (Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy, 2005).

Several universities explicitly feared research developments in the professional institutes (Duursma, 2005; Shamir, 2004a). They considered it disastrous to let professional institutes apply and train PhD’s. Some managers in traditional universities explicitly advised their professors not to collaborate with the professional institutes, and not to answer to requests for advice on research (Verbon, 2005). Others have asserted it was outdated to believe knowledge production to be only part of traditional universities, and knowledge
application to be part of professional institutes (Shamir, 2004b). Some have even stated it should be no problem for professional institutes to gain access to the public research funding of universities, as long as equal criteria are met (Punt, 2004). That seemed to be the problem, according to the universities: a lack of infrastructure, academic climate, and critical mass at professional institutes (Verbon, 2005).

The professional institutes have confirmed they do not have a research culture similar those ones at traditional universities (Smeijsters, 2005), but they wanted to adjust their image of being good at only practise-based education. The professional institutes have appeared willing to leave the fundamental research to the traditional universities, and to only be part of applied research. The professional institutes considered themselves better equipped to anticipate to questions of companies and social organisations in their own regions (Duursma, 2005). Scientific research could be conducted within a professional network (Leijnse, 2005a). Some even considered it unthinkable to prohibit institutes of professional education to conduct research while they have this important role within the affiliated professional fields (Smeijsters, 2005). At this point, research at professional institutions has been seen as obvious by the government and professional institutions themselves, as long as there was a connection between the research questions and the professional fields (Verbon, 2005).

However, the general idea has been that institutions for professional higher education should not act as traditional universities (Punt, 2004), and that the professional institutes have underestimated what is needed for good scientific research (Mudde, 2005). The tipping point in the debate seemed to be the qualification ‘scientific’, although this qualification has also not been defined. It also has remained unclear whether the institutes of professional higher education intended to conduct ‘scientific’ research—according to any definition whatsoever.

Theme 4: The Criteria for Research
The debate on the quality of research in general and that of research in professional institutes in particular has demonstrated three levels. The first level of the debate considered the acceptance of researchers from professional institutes to the (financed) research world of the traditional universities. Arguments considered leaving the institutional and disciplinary boundaries as criterion for quality (Groene & Steyaert, 2002). The basic argument seemed to be that research in professional institutes should be weighed by the same criteria as all other research (Punt, 2004). On the other hand, researchers within professional institutes were expected to be mediocre and therefore a threat to the quality of research. The increase in the number of researchers has also been seen as an indirect threat, because individual proposals would be approved less often, with a more negative balance between proposing
and approving as a consequence (and an increase in bureaucracy), without an increase in the actual level of research production.

The second aspect in this line or arguing was a reconsideration of the whole financial system of research. Some have stated there was no financial system based on quality, since every university and every faculty receive their primary income independent of their research impact, and based on their student numbers, otherwise it would become very clear what are the top-institutes and what the ordinary ones. International academic quality should be the collective criterion (Maassen, 2005; Verbon, 2005).

The third question remains: how to measure quality? The participants in the debate have seemed to find it rather easy to measure quality, as long as the best and worst research groups were considered (Belleman, 2005). Quotation indices then seemed an easy tool to indicate the best and the worst. The positions in between seemed more difficult. A system of accreditation seemed the best option, although trust in the researchers should be the foundation (Verbon, 2005); however, it has been debatable whether this should be part of a research or educational system of accreditation (Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy, 2005), and what the role of the professional field should be (Smeijsters, 2005).

Since 2009, a national system of research accreditation has been formalized (VKO, 2010). At the same time, the debate on the criteria for the quality of research has remained present.

Theme 5: The Relation between Education and Research
As mentioned earlier, one of the goals for the new lectoren was to improve the quality of educational programs. The last theme in the public debate questioned how this could be realized. One of the improvements was to add reflective skills to the educational programs. New demands have included requests for ‘new professionals’ (Leijnse, 2005a), or a more ‘reflexive knowledge worker’ (Van Lieshout & Borgdorff, 2005). Hence, a graduate of professional higher education should be capable of several tasks. Educational programs should better equipped to provide training in this perspective (Leijnse, 2005b). One of the new qualities for graduates in the professional field would be to think single-handedly and to be able to improve their own actions and the quality of their work through protocols and standards (Van Lieshout & Borgdorff, 2005). These reflective skills should be part of the centre of the educational programs (Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, 2004), with the character of a phased evaluative design cycle (Smeijsters, 2005).

Another type of improvement of education by research has been labelled research skills or research ability. Professional higher education should let students get involved in design and development activities (Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy, 2005). Students should be dared to translate theory to reality, to transfer scientific results to
a practical situation, or to interpret scientific results (Shamir, 2004c). Besides this translation of knowledge to praxis, classical research activities are needed, such as the formulation of a correct research question or how to reach a conclusion. These formal analytical skills are important for all professionals (Van Lieshout & Borgdorff, 2005). Therefore, besides the differences between more reflective or formal research skills, the base line in the debate has been that education could be improved by adding techniques from research into teaching.

In conclusion, five themes were central during the period 2001-2006, and were the foundation of this study in professional higher education:

1) The goals that should be achieved by research
2) The definition of research
3) Research culture and qualified staff
4) The quality of research
5) The relationship between research and teaching

1.2. Outline of this Study

The five aforementioned themes were the starting point for this thesis. Furthermore, chosen was to address these from the perspective of the lecturer. As in any organizational change, lecturers can be seen as the hinges in the organizational change in the institutes of professional higher education (Handal & Herrington, 2003). Lecturers are the most prominent connection between the educational organization, whether management or research, and the students. Most often, lecturers are also the main connection between the organization and the professional field. Therefore, one needs to get lecturers aboard when implementing change.

However, in many of the arguments of the public debate, no lecturer played a role; their group was not represented. One can say this was due to the specialized character a debate on research can have, or it was possible lecturers were simply not interested in the debate. But whatever the case may be, lecturers must play their role when implementing research into educational programs. Therefore, the main aim of this thesis is to give voice to the lecturer in higher professional education.

Lecturers are also a complex group to address when research is considered. With research activities virtually non-existent in the past and the means mostly absent in the institutes of higher professional education (Witte, Van der Wende, & Huisman, 2008), research skills and experience usually constituted no ground for selection in application procedures for lecturers (De Jong & De Jager, 2007). Still, today these lecturers are increasingly expected to be involved in research activities (Kyvik & Skodvin, 2003). Nevertheless, it has remained unclear how important research is to lecturers for their institutions or their students. Furthermore, it is unclear how lecturers judge their own research ability. However,
lecturers’ beliefs about their ability to perform the new tasks influenced their performance as lecturers to students in research, but also their own performance as (new) researchers. Both their agreement with the presence of research in their institutes and their works, combined with their beliefs in their own capabilities have therefore influenced the change of the HPE institutions into more research-based organisations (Runhaar, Sanders, & Yang, 2010).

From this perspective, the first chapters pivot around lecturers and their beliefs in the organizational aims and in their own abilities.

**Chapter 3** studies the perceptions of lecturers and managers on the goals for research given with the mandate for research activities (debate theme 1). Central in this chapter is the question of how lecturers and managers perceived the importance of these goals. Furthermore, it investigates whether these perceptions indicated academic drift, the striving of professional institutes to receive a status comparable to traditional universities.

Because lecturers are central in the current change in their institutes, it is relevant to find out whether direct executives also can influence the perception of lecturers on newly-formulated organisational aims. Therefore, **Chapter 4** studies whether participation in research or organisational aspects could influence the perceptions of lecturers on these research-related goals (debate theme 1 and 3).

As mentioned earlier, next to the perceptions of the lecturers on the research-related goals, the perceptions on their own research-related abilities would be relevant for the implementation of research in the institutes of higher professional education. **Chapter 5** questions the relationship between the self-beliefs of lecturers about their ability to conduct research-related activities (research self-efficacy), and their willingness to participate in research-related professionalization. Professionalization in research has been one of the goals of research in these institutions. Chapter 5 also examines which personal aspects, experience, and organizational characteristics is of influence on this research self-efficacy (debate theme 3).

**Chapter 6** combines the aforementioned aspects in a single model. This model studied the relationship between research self-efficacy and the perception of research-related goals—whether lecturers who believed they were more able to fulfil a research-related task were also more positive about research-related goals. It also investigated the influences of person, organisation (structure and culture), and mastery experiences on lecturers’ perceptions of goals and of research self-efficacy (debate theme 1 and 3).

The last two studies have been executed among lecturers of institutions for higher professional education, and lecturers (junior lecturers and assistant professors) of traditional universities. **Chapter 7** studies lecturers’ discourses on research to get closer to a real-life
definition of research (debate theme 2). This definition is relevant because it influences how lecturers help to shape research in education. The chapter identifies the arguments lecturers used to define an activity as research, whether both groups of lecturers were part of the same discursive field, and the differences between them.

The last topic studied was the quality of research (debate theme 4). Since lecturers judge research assignments of students (and sometimes colleagues) it was relevant to get an idea of the arguments they applied. In Chapter 8, lecturers from professional higher education and traditional universities were included to find out whether their judgement systems on ‘good research’ were similar or different.

Before addressing the empirical studies, Chapter 2 describes a historical overview of research and teaching in Dutch higher education, both in professional and traditional institutions (debate theme 5). This historical perspective can bring a more relative perspective on the newness of research in professional higher education, compared to the seemingly perpetual position of research in traditional universities.

The debate of more than a century on the position of research, teaching, and the social upbringing of students as primary responsibilities of higher educational institutions needs more shades of grey to be effective as a context for higher education development. Providers of higher education need to be willing to get more insight into what has been and why higher education is what it is today. A historical perspective can bring these nuances. An empirical base adds more insight into the situation today: the actions of lecturers can be explained better when there are clearer perspectives on their perceptions, conceptions, and discourses. This thesis intends to bring this perspective a bit closer.