Research in higher professional education: A staff perspective

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CHAPTER 9

Summary, Discussion and Future Perspectives

This study on research in professional higher education (HPE) was based on five themes that were central to the public debate on this topic during the period 2001-2006, as explained in the introductory Chapter 1:

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

Furthermore, these topics were addressed from the perspective of the lecturer, who constituted the hinge in the organizational changes in institutes of professional higher education.

Chapter 2 deepened the historical perspective on the balance between research and teaching in higher education, within professional institutes as well as within traditional universities. This chapter showed how the backgrounds of these two institutional types are different and how the choices (not) made in the past influence the structures of today’s educational practise. At the same time, it also showed how the stances of both institutional types today are closer to each other than most people think. An exchange of experiences on how to bring synergy to the responsibilities of research and teaching could result in suggestions for the improvement of both institutional types.

From the perspective of the five aforementioned themes, combined with the choice of lecturers as organizational hinges, the first quantitative chapters of this study pivoted around lecturers and their beliefs in organizational aims and in their own abilities.

Chapter 3 considered the accusations of academic drift—of striving to achieve a status comparable to that of traditional universities—directed towards institutes of professional higher education. This study examined the perceptions of both managers and lecturers in these institutes concerning the organisational aims of research activities. The intention was to provide an empirical base for the debate on academic drift, especially on the potential of academic drift at the staff level. The results indicate a moderate potential for academic drift at the staff level. In addition, managers were found to have more positive perceptions regarding all aims of research than lecturers, but both groups emphasize that the results of research should, first and foremost, be directed towards improving the quality of education.
Chapter 4 added an organizational perspective to lecturers’ perceptions of research-related aims. Theories on educational change have shown that executives can contribute positively to a professional’s sense of coping ability. Through a survey, this chapter studied lecturers’ perceptions regarding innovational goals and the organizational factors that influence these. More insight into these factors can improve goal achievement. The analysis was based on a full structural equation procedure. The results show that initiating lecturers’ participation in decision-making processes is an important influencing factor for executives, although the direct influence of executives is limited.

In Chapter 5, the belief of lecturers in higher professional education in their own research ability (research self-efficacy) was central. A survey conducted among Dutch lecturers in higher professional education measured their research self-efficacy using a newly developed construct. A structural equation path model showed the effects of personal aspects, mastery of experience and organisational context on the research self-efficacy of lecturers. Research self-efficacy was additionally modelled in relation to lecturers’ need to work on the professional development of research skills. The results show that research self-efficacy is mostly affected by the mastery of experience when the context is similar to the given task.

Chapter 6 combined the perspectives of Chapters 4 and 5. The purpose of this study was to examine factors that influence the judgements of lecturers about new organisational goals combined with their perceptions of their new research-related competencies. Lecturers’ judgements of new organisational goals and research self-efficacy related to newly expected competencies were arranged in a bio-ecological model and analysed in a full structural equation model. The findings suggest that lecturers’ perceptions of self-efficacy can be positively influenced by an open organisational culture, whereas lecturers’ judgements of new organisational goals can be positively influenced by decision-making systems. Both self-efficacy and the judgements of lecturers can be influenced by the professional development of lecturers through formal education and participation in research. Hence, direct executive managers have three steering mechanisms by which they can influence lecturers’ perceptions during the implementation of new organisational activities: a) educational policy, b) management policy, and c) developmental policy. Managers should nevertheless define their targets wisely and choose specifically which mechanisms they apply to certain purposes.

The last two chapters of this study considered the definition of research and the criteria for the quality of research as applied by lecturers in higher professional education and traditional universities.

Discursive frameworks on research are thought to influence the shaping and teaching
of research-related skills to students, implying the use of different discursive themes for different types of higher education. Chapter 7 described how, in interviews, lecturers of traditional universities as well as of higher professional education institutes were asked to evaluate their work-related activities as either ‘research’ or ‘not research’. The interview transcripts were coded and then analysed based on the principles of discourse-analysis and social network theory. The results show that all lecturers apply five similar discursive building blocks to arguments about ‘research’, indicating that they understand each other’s argumentation structure. Furthermore, three prominent discursive themes on ‘research’ and ‘non-research’ were visualized and described, demonstrating that the lecturers do not always agree on what is important in defining ‘research’ or ‘non-research’: a) ‘Research in phases versus transfer of existing knowledge’, which is dominated by lecturers in the natural sciences or behavioural strands of social sciences from traditional universities; b) ‘New versus educational routine’, which consists mostly of respondents engaged in work related to mathematical models, such as economy or applied math; and c) ‘Tangible versus invisible’, which mostly concerned lecturers in social and care-related disciplines from vocational institutes. The differences among lecturers in the different themes are somewhat based on institutional differences, but the differences between disciplinary fields seem much more prominent.

Research-criteria play an increasingly important role both within the curricula and outside the teaching-context, e.g., in the review of research work. Lecturers’ criteria for research have a potentially large influence on the judging of students’ research work; yet, little is known about these criteria. Chapter 8 explored the criteria for ‘good research’ employed by lecturers in traditional universities and institutes of higher professional education. In a focus group and interview study, participants were asked to elaborate on personal examples of ‘good’ and ‘not-good’ research. A content-based and grounded analysis resulted in six themes on ‘good research’: 1) the design of research; 2) the final product presenting the results of a study; 3) the conduct of research; 4) the value of the research and its outcomes; 5) researcher-related criteria; and 6) the topic as an important theme. An initial, brief comparison suggests that this is a broader perspective than that normally applied in formal frameworks for the grading of student research. The differences between lecturers of traditional and professional higher education are limited.

When the topics central to the public debate are again considered and combined with the results of this study, it is clear that lecturers and managers of higher professional education consider their institutes to be of an educational character. Therefore, when the first topic of debate, the goals that should be achieved by research, is examined, all formalized goals for research are considered to be of positive importance, but the goal to improve education is seen as the most important at all times. One therefore wonders whether institutes of
higher professional education have indeed become hybrid organizations of teaching and research or whether research is actually viewed as an extension of teaching responsibility. Furthermore, whereas managers and lecturers prioritize the different goals in a similar manner, the influence of the manager’s leadership style or of organizational constructions on the lecturers’ perceptions appears to be rather limited. The best option of influence for the manager is to create a system of decision-making procedures in which employees have a substantial say so that the actions of an intellectually stimulating leader can positively influence the lecturers’ perceptions of new organizational goals (management policy). Further research should consider what types of decision-making structures and procedures of implementation are relevant in this respect. Because the hereby presented studies on the influence of the direct executive manager were all based on large-scale surveys, an indication of relevant aspects can be distilled from the scales applied. This indication needs to be qualitatively elaborated to include awareness of work-related organizational structures and procedures for implementation in order to get at know-what and know-how types of knowledge. These types of empirical knowledge have so far been limited in the field of higher education management and leadership.

Based on the findings and the timing of the consideration of the second topic of debate, research culture and self-perceived qualified staff seem related. In other words, the way that lecturers perceive their own research ability can be influenced by a more academic culture of discussion and a culture of collaboration. This study introduced the construct of research self-efficacy, whereas previously, where teachers were concerned, the notion was limited to teaching efficacy, or teachers’ belief that they are able to make a difference in what children learn (Tschannen - Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). The findings show that lecturers in institutes of higher professional education see their own research abilities in a relatively positive light, which is externally and internally sometimes considered worrisome, because large groups of lecturers were not selected and employed based on their research-related skills. At the same time, the formal educational level of the lecturer is related to how the lecturer evaluates his or her own research abilities, which some consider somewhat reassuring (see also Griffioen & De Jong, 2009). A possible way to positively influence the research self-efficacy of lecturers is to create a culture of open debate and collaboration, which will give lecturers the opportunity to formulate a clearer view of what is expected of them as well as what their competencies are in relation to the competencies of their colleagues (educational policy). Further research should more qualitatively consider what collaboration among lecturers or having a culture of open debate actually means for higher educational institutions. One should determine what aspects are most relevant and whether perceptions of collaboration and open debate are dependent on (inter)disciplinary differences, because disciplines and professions each have their own culture (Becher &
The findings also suggest that lecturers are very willing to be trained in research-related skills. The analysis of the results for different research-related contexts in Chapter 5 suggests that some lecturers believe that they need to acquire new competencies in order to remain effective teachers. Others seem more interested in advancing their skills to collaborate with colleagues and/or external organizations. This broad willingness to be educated should be anticipated by institutes of higher professional education with a developmental policy that is part of a broader programme for academic development (e.g. University of Edinburgh, 2013) and educational development (e.g. University of Plymouth, 2013), following the example of several universities abroad. This developmental policy should enhance tailored offerings consisting of (combinations of) courses with longer durations, shorter master classes and learning-on-the-job directed towards improving research-related competencies, gaining knowledge of research-related institutional policy, and learning about tools for connecting research to teaching. Dutch higher educational institutes should try to learn from the experiences of their counterparts elsewhere. Furthermore, they should create a knowledge tradition of their own regarding the systematic evaluation and research of the design, execution and effects of developmental programmes for lecturers, especially in higher professional education (see also Visser-Wijnveen, in press). A more systematic approach to the training of lecturers could dramatically improve the teaching of research-related tasks to students. Until we measure the effects on the improved competencies of lecturers as well as the relation between their competencies and their teaching, and hence look beyond their individual enthusiasm for a master class, we will find ourselves working in the dark.

The actual shape and content of research-related training, as well as the content of educational programs for students, depend on how lecturers—and professional and related research fields—define research. Students’ perceptions of the position of research in their future professions can improve their learning motivation (Van der Linden, et al., 2012). The current study has shown that five different building blocks are applied by lecturers in this study apply to differentiate between ‘research’ and ‘non-research’. This notion of a kind of basic structure is similar to the meta-analysis of conceptions of research by Åkerlind (2008) and partly by Visser-Wijnveen and colleagues (2009). Other studies have indicated an underlying structure but have placed the content of the concepts more within the structure (e.g. Brew, 2001, 2003), whereas the current study has tried to look at discursive structure and content separately. Furthermore, previous studies on conceptions of research did not look beyond the traditional universities. Conversely, in the Netherlands, it is presumed that definitions of research should differ between the two types of institutes (De Weert & Leijnse, 2010), indicating that one should expect lecturers to have different perceptions.
as well. Based on the current findings on lecturers’ discourse, there are (at least) three different discursive themes to consider when defining ‘research’ in the context of institutes of higher education. The differences between the discursive themes on research seem mainly related to disciplinary differences, but these disciplines are actually of a broader character than the traditional constructs of university disciplines. These ‘broad disciplines’ can be considered as related to broader professional fields that include graduates of traditional universities as well as graduates of higher professional educational institutes or at least their lecturers. The broad fields of a) natural and technical sciences, including the behavioural strand of social sciences; b) mathematical model building, including economics and applied mathematics; and c) caring professions, including social work and pedagogy each seem to have their own discursive notions of research. These notions reveal subtle differences when individual statements or arguments are considered, but, when individual statements within single utterances and within individuals are combined, they portray rather different ‘worlds of research’ (see also Visser-Wijnveen, in press). Surely, the implications of these results are limited because this discursive study was conducted using a relatively small sample of lecturers, with only a somewhat structured selection, and a very new method of working. Further research based on a larger sample and a more standardized procedure should indicate whether these thematic differences persist. The findings also indicate that additional attention should be paid to differences within the broad disciplines defined in the current study. In analysing the results, a step in that direction has already been taken by describing lecturers’ disciplinary contexts more precisely than ‘natural sciences’ or ‘social sciences’, but this can be designed more deliberately (see e.g. Ochsner, Hug, & Daniel, 2012; Visser-Wijnveen, 2009). Nevertheless, for the present, they provide food for thought for all those who create higher educational programs for students that include research-related skills or training programs for lecturers to improve research-related competencies and for those who judge and grade research output within or outside their own discursive field.

In this last respect, the study of criteria for good research adds to the body of knowledge in this field. The results show that lecturers of both traditional universities and institutes of higher professional education consider six themes pertaining to the quality of research. One wonders whether the broad professional fields that have been found to have different discursive themes on research will also apply the identified six themes on good research differently. So far, the results suggest that there are no clear disciplinary differences among the six themes. Additional large-scale quantitative research can offer more insight into possible disciplinary and/or institutional differences in the perceived importance of criteria for ‘good research’ (see e.g. Ochsner, et al., 2012). Additionally, new qualitative research is needed to find out how these (or other) criteria are handled in action and lead to a positive or negative judgement of the quality of research (action as part of a discourse,
see e.g. Foucault, 2001; Latour, Woolgar, & Salk, 1986). A possibility for future research is to let lecturers grade student research (e.g. Bloxham & Boyd, 2011) or review the research of colleagues (e.g. Lamont, 2009)—for instance, in a think-aloud procedure (Bloxham & Boyd, 2011). The combination of quantitative and qualitative design can indicate the difference between which factors lecturers believe to be important and how they act upon them. The addition of the application of current procedures for grading to the mix would make the study even more interesting. Our quick comparison shows that only two of the six criteria are generally part of these procedures. One can therefore expect lecturers to base their judgements and grades on different themes than only those specified by accountability procedures. More in-depth, qualitative research should consider these types of differences and evaluate the actual transparency and comparability of grades or review results as effects of these types of procedures, again within their own disciplinary contexts.

All and all, this study contributes the first empirical base to each of the five themes in the Dutch public debate, although it constitutes only a beginning to finding the relevant answers. This study will ideally serve as part of a new tradition in studying aspects of higher professional education, at least for the Netherlands. Several recent studies conducted in the Netherlands (see e.g. Geerdink, 2012; Van der Linden, et al., 2012; Vink, Terlouw, & Pilot, in press) as well as elsewhere in Europe (see e.g. Boyd & Smith, 2011; Christensen & Erno-Kjolhede, 2011; Verburgh, et al., 2012) suggest that this is indeed an interesting field of study. It is very probable that future research in the field of higher professional education can built onto the content and methods of the current study.