

Reflections on contemporary trends in Dutch higher education research

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1 Introduction

With the expansion of higher education in the last decades, research interest in higher education has grown as well (Brennan & Teichler, 2008; Tight, 2012). Research into higher education is not just conducted by actors inside higher education institutes, a lot is undertaken outside of higher education (e.g., by policy-makers and academic developers). As such, research into higher education has a multidisciplinary character, reflecting different interests and backgrounds. However, research projects are not always fully informed by findings of research conducted in different settings or framed within a broader comparative, international context (Brennan & Teichler, 2008). The aim of this paper, therefore, is to provide insight into the multidisciplinary and broad context of higher education research by describing current trends in higher education research in the Netherlands and by examining how these relate to trends internationally.

Educational research within the area of higher education consists of diverse themes and issues and many of them overlap with the areas of educational research in general (Kandlbinder, 2013; Tight, 2005, 2013). The issues in the field of research into higher education are related to topics such as learning environments, retention and dropout of students, professional development of teachers, curriculum development, organizational context, assessment, quality assurance, and evaluation. Apart from these more generic topics of educational research, issues specifically related to higher education research can be identified, such as the role of research in university teaching, research supervision, and the scholarship of teaching and learning (e.g., Macfarlane, 2012).

A well-recognised categorization of themes and methods in higher education research internationally was provided by Tight (2005). This categorization classifies the themes and methods of a plethora of research studies published in the main higher education research journals indexed in the social science citation index (SSCI) in a period from 1999 to 2006. Tight (2005, 2013, 2014) identified the following themes: teaching and learning, course design, student experience, quality, system policy, institutional management, academic work, and knowledge and research. A variety of qualitative and quantitative methodologies were represented in higher education research: documentary, interviews, surveys and multivariate analyses, conceptual, auto/biographical and observational studies, and phenomenography (Tight, 2013; 2014). Several literature review studies reproduced Tight's categorization (e.g. Jung & Horta, 2013; Tight, 2014) and many handbooks on research into higher education have used it (e.g. Huisman & Tight, 2018).

In the present study, current studies into higher education in the Netherlands will be related to Tight's categorization of themes and to the trends internationally. The overall aim of this paper is to inspire academics in the Netherlands, Flanders and beyond to further develop their research interests and to strengthen the community of researchers surrounding higher education.

2 Method

The current trends in higher education research in the Netherlands are mapped out based on the research projects of the PhD students of the Interuniversity Center for Educational Sciences (ICO). ICO is the graduate school for educational sciences in the Netherlands and Flanders and represents educational research activities in the Netherlands and Flanders.

Besides PhD students, 254 faculty members and 41 postdoctoral researchers are affiliated with the ICO (ICO, 2019). Furthermore, there are also higher education related PhD-projects that are outside ICO and as a result these projects are more difficult to locate. Therefore, this study focuses on the ICO PhD-projects as the ICO is the one research community specifically dedicated to educational research. Since our paper focuses on the Dutch context and Flanders is currently underrepresented in the ICO, we will only focus on research from the Netherlands.

PhD students enrolled at the ICO follow a thorough training during their four year projects. The ICO-program includes both compulsory and elective activities. PhD students are required to participate in the following modules: Introductory Course, two thematic master classes related to the ICO research themes, at least one master class related to research methodology and techniques, the ICO national and international Fall Schools to present their research. In sum, PhD students spend at least 504 hours on the educational program and receive additional guidance and training at their local institutions. At the beginning of each project the PhD students submit their research plan to the ICO which is evaluated by two senior staff members.

In the Netherlands academics in higher education research are part of a broad educational research community; the Netherlands Educational Research Association. Within this association the special interest group on Higher Education Research represents the higher education community of practicing academics. Many of these academics are also affiliated with the ICO-theme group 'Research into higher education'. Academics participating in this theme group use a variety of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches to study a broad selection of aspects of contemporary higher education. Overall, 79 academics are associated with the theme group, of which 37 are PhD students. In Table 1 an overview is presented of the institutional affiliation of all academics participating in the theme group. The higher education theme group aims at strengthening relationships with national and international affiliates in the field of higher education research and practice in order to improve the educational experience of the participating PhD students.

Table I. Number of academics participating in ICO theme group *Higher education* in the academic year 2018-2019

University	PhD's	Postdocs	Stafmembers	Total
Maastricht University	9	2	6	17
Open University	2	.	9	11
University of Groningen	1	2	5	8
Leiden University	3	2	3	8
Utrecht University	6	.	2	8
VU Amsterdam	4	1	2	7
Erasmus University Rotterdam	4	.	2	6
Wageningen University	2	1	1	4
Eindhoven University of Technology	1	.	1	2
University of Twente	2	.	.	2
University of Amsterdam	2	.	.	2
Radboud University	1	.	.	1
Total	37	8	31	76

Every two year period the ICO theme group 'Research into higher education' organizes a Master class course for PhD students. The main focus of this master class is to get acquainted with themes, topics and methodologies in higher education research, to discuss the PhD projects and relate the projects to international trends. During the academic year 2018-2019 a group of eight PhD students participated in the master class, three keynote speakers were invited and two senior researchers coordinated the meetings. During the meetings PhD students compared their projects and constructed mindmaps to explicate both similarities and differences between projects. The products from the discussions are reflected in this manuscript.

3 Results

The PhD projects of students at ICO national graduate school of educational sciences represent a diverse set of research areas and interests. Table 2 shows the number of projects in each research theme as identified by Tight (2014). The data in Table 2 indicates that most

research projects have research questions concerning teaching and learning in higher education. Second most projects are related to student experiences. Five or less projects concern course design, academic work, quality and system policy. None of the projects covered the themes of institutional management and the nature of knowledge and research.

Table 2. Area of research projects (based on Tight, 2014) from PhD candidates participating in ICO theme group *Higher Education* during academic year 2018-2019

Theme	Areas associated with theme	ICO-projects (%)	Division of Tight (2014)
<i>Teaching and learning</i>	<i>Student learning; different kinds of students; teaching</i>	14 (38%)	4
<i>Student experience</i>	<i>Accessing higher education; student choice; widening participation; financial support; the on-course experience; success and non-completion; international students; the postgraduate experience</i>	11 (30%)	24
<i>Course design</i>	<i>Curriculum; technologies for learning; student writing; assessment</i>	7 (19%)	31
<i>Academic work</i>	<i>Academic careers, development and roles; women and ethnic minority academics; international academics; changes in academic work</i>	3 (8%)	13
<i>Quality assurance</i>	<i>Course evaluation; grading and outcomes; national monitoring practises; league tables; system standards</i>	1 (1%)	7
<i>System policy</i>	<i>Policy context; national policies; comparative policy studies; historical policy studies; funding relationships</i>	1 (1%)	10
<i>Institutional management</i>	<i>Management; leadership; institutional development and structure; relations with community and industry</i>	0	9
<i>Knowledge and research</i>	<i>Nature of research; disciplinarity; forms of knowledge; nature of the university</i>	0	3
Total		37 (100%)	

Below four thick descriptions of research trends are provided of the four most represented themes in Dutch higher education research. These trends were identified during discussions at the master class meetings. The central question of these discussion was: how do the current

PhD projects relate to the themes as identified by Tight (2014)? The purpose of these discussions was to see what trends in higher education research could be identified.

3.1 Teaching and Learning - Supporting student learning

Stimulating student learning in education generally has three purposes: to prepare students for functioning in a complex society by certification, to promote citizenship by engaging students in traditions and practices and to foster personal development (Biesta, 2012). In order to achieve this, student learning should focus on both acquisition of domain-specific knowledge and skills as acquisition of metacognitive skills (e.g., self-regulation, planning, and seeking feedback) and critical thinking skills. These skills are essential for successful functioning in one's personal, educational, and professional life and, thus, development of these skills is considered to be a major ambition of higher education (Billings & Roberts, 2014). With the goal of addressing these skills in mind, teachers in higher education design their lessons, homework, and assessment by applying various instructional designs and making use of many means and resources.

Several lines of evidence suggest that long-term performance and transfer of learned skills can be enhanced by methods that add some sort of hurdle during learning and may seem to temporarily hold back performance gains (i.e., desirable difficulties; e.g., Bjork & Bjork, 2011). However, conditions that support immediately observable signs of performance improvement often only support momentary performance gains and do not encourage deeper processing needed for long-term learning. It is challenging, though, to convince both teachers and students to search for conditions that confront students with desirable difficulties and thereby facilitate learning and transfer (Yan, Clark, & Bjork, 2016; Soderstrom & Bjork, 2011). Such conditions include, for example, mixing practice-task categories rather than practicing one task category before the next (i.e., interleaving effect) and generating an answer, solution, or produce actively rather than the mere passive reception of it (i.e., generation effect) (Richland, Bjork, & Linn, 2007). However, cognitive challenges should not evoke learners to invest additional effort on processes that are not directly relevant for learning and learners should possess relevant knowledge or skills to successfully deal with them (McDaniel & Butler, 2010; Metcalfe, 2011).

For students who experience difficulties in self-regulation, individual guidance and feedback is essential. An important aspect of instructional design is, therefore, the design of appropriate feedback on student work. Supporting student learning is a trending topic within the projects of PhD students in the Netherlands. One project for example focuses on understanding how critical thinking skills best be taught to higher education students. In this project it is examined which kind of instructions and/or practice activities are effective to foster transfer to authentic professional tasks and to make learning last. Another project focuses on the delivery of feedback through online learning environments, or so-called Intelligent Tutoring Systems (Ma, Adesope, Nesbit, & Liu, 2014).

During the discussions in the masterclasses it became apparent that the topics discussed in teaching and learning appear to have a direct relationship with the theme course design. Whereas projects within teaching and learning appear to focus more on effective learning, teaching, or use of technology to support this process, course design can determine

the context in which teaching and learning will take place. In the Netherlands, this context is greatly influenced by the internationalization of higher education.

3.2 Course design - Internationalization of higher education

In our globalizing world higher educational programs strive to keep up with changes related to increasing mobility of people and knowledge across borders, expanding interconnections between nations and people, and societies becoming more diverse (Leask, 2009). Through internationalization, higher education institutions set out to facilitate an effective international learning environment and prepare students to participate in this globalised world.

Internationalization of higher education can be defined as “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (de Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015, p. 29). It entails many different activities, such as study abroad, collaboration with international peers and inclusion of international learning outcomes in the curriculum, which can add value to students’ personal and professional development. Being exposed to the different perspectives in a diverse learning environment enables students to critically reflect on their beliefs, behaviors and professional approaches. Still, mobility across learning contexts can also be challenging as students come from a variety of educational backgrounds and programs are responsible to meet certain requirements. In order to truly increase the quality of education through internationalization, it seems both universities and students need to put in deliberate effort to create an effective international learning environment.

To increase these individual student’ experiences, students must actively engage in activities, such as small group discussions or work-related activities (Dornan et al, 2014). Exactly how students can engage in such an international learning environment in order to benefit from it is part of current research into Dutch higher education. For example, one research project investigates student’ participation during the initiation of clinical placements in healthcare settings worldwide, considering both incoming and outgoing international students. Another project aims to gain insight into student characteristics and factors within the international learning environment that help promote active engagement in intercultural group work.

While the course design is primarily focused on adding a specific content to the learning environment, students are the ones experiencing it. Hence, most research projects on student experience also take the course design into account. While teaching and learning and course design shape the curriculum of higher education, students experience starts with the transition to higher education.

3.3 The student experience - Challenges in the transition to higher education

Choosing a university program is not something that happens overnight. It is a process of orientation, initial choices, reflection, and finally confirmation of the choice. In some countries choices are limited because of explicit selection criteria. In such countries, having more students in higher education provides benefits from several perspectives. Eggins (2010) stated that higher education has important implications for the economic, political and social-

cultural development, sustainability and global competitiveness of nations. However, the chances are not the same for all students. Especially factors such as gender, socioeconomic status and urban-rural are associated with differences in access and equity to higher education.

There are a number of things that affect the low enrolment rates in universities, one of which is admission systems. Wang and Shulruf (2013) stated that a range of admission policies have been implemented that are aimed at increasing student enrolment in higher education from traditionally underrepresented populations. This is called widening participation. Widening participation means assisting more people from under-represented groups, particularly low socioeconomic groups, to participate successfully in higher education (Schwartz report 2004). Increasing access is not just confined to the very able, well qualified from poor backgrounds or women but all those who could benefit from higher education. This includes pupils who underachieved in school due to their disadvantaged circumstances and, implicitly, their poor-quality schooling or lack of awareness and support from family in many cases (Gorard, Boliver, Siddiqui & Banerjee, 2017).

In many countries, including the Netherlands, all higher education programs are freely accessible for those with the right diploma. Widening participation is therefore less of an issue. However, in these countries implicit selection criteria or self-selection are common. Prospective students in these countries self-select into universities and programs that fit them. This premise follows from the person-environment fit interaction theory, which states that outcomes are a function of the interaction between individuals and their environments. Some research suggests that congruence between the student and the program is paramount to the academic success of college students (Feldman, Smart & Ethington, 1999). In other words, students who lack feelings of fit are less likely to graduate. Student dropout is indeed a problem in countries without explicit selection criteria. That is why a fit between student and program is important. Prospective students may consciously or unconsciously assess their fit on their ability beliefs and interests. Choosing to perform a certain achievement-related task can be explained by ability beliefs (i.e., how well I can perform on the task) and the value of the activity (e.g., interest in the course materials) (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). There is also a social component in adjusting to a new environment. This social component, commonly referred to as relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008), i.e., developing social connections with others, or a sense of belonging (Freeman, Anderman & Jensen 2007), is related to, among other things, intrinsic motivation. Experiencing a sense of belonging can be comforting on both social and academic aspects and allows for enhanced ability to cope with the demands of the transition to higher education.

All-in-all, research on person-environment fit is vital to all students in their program choice, whether they come from countries with explicit or implicit selection criteria. In the Netherlands, research studies focus on both contexts. One project examines students' experience regarding access to higher education in the context of minorities students while another project examines how the Dutch selection criteria influences drop out numbers. Both studies, gathering their data from admission system but one project is how to get in and the other is how the admission system can contribute to decreasing of drop out numbers.

3.4 Academic work - Teachers' professional development

The last theme focuses on professional development of higher education teachers. In light of developments in higher education regarding teaching quality, professional development has gained importance as a research topic and is being explored in a variety of ways (e.g., Brand-Gruwel, Bos, & Van der Graaf, 2019; Visser-Wijnveen, Stes & Petegem, 2011).

In teaching there is a variety of task domains, including but not limited to teaching delivery, student assessment, research into education and educational design. Within these domains, there are several tasks, which may change over time due to societal and technological developments. Hence, expertise can be described in terms of teachers' performance on these professional tasks (Ericsson, Hoffman, Kozbelt, & Williams, 2018). In order to increase their performance on these tasks, several types of professional development activities are offered to teachers. These activities can range from formal learning via structured and planned activities like workshops or training programs to more implicit informal learning via talking to colleagues or through classroom observations. The effects of collaboration on teachers professional developments as well as school improvements has been substantial (Lomos, Hofman, Bosker, 2011; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomans, 2006). Key elements for teacher learning and realizing changes in teachers' practice are collaboration and interaction between teachers over an extended period of time (März et al., 2018). Although extensive research has been undertaken on teacher communities and learning, most research focused on formal teacher communities with pre-set goals, regular meetings, and facilitators (Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer, & Kyndt, 2017). How teachers develop through informal learning is part of Dutch research into higher education.

One of the projects within this area of interest aims to provide an overview of teaching tasks domains for higher education teachers using a systematic review. In subsequent studies of this project, the order in which teachers develop themselves in and across these domains will be explored using quantitative and qualitative methods. Another project focuses on value a community of practice in which teachers develop, share, use and discuss open educational resources can have on teacher learning and adoption of these resources in curricula.

4 Discussion

In this paper we characterised and described the landscape of research into higher education in The Netherlands. PhD research projects within the Dutch national graduate school for educational research (ICO) with a focus on higher education were taken as a point of departure. The categorization of Tight (2014) was used to identify themes across these PhD projects, that vary widely in research topics, addressed issues, and methodological approaches. Furthermore, Tight's (2014) classification of international research themes provided us with a basis for comparison with the Dutch perspective.

Our findings provide an overview and illustrate the different research topics currently researched in the Netherlands. Most research projects into higher education in the Netherlands focus on Tight's themes teaching & learning and student experience. A smaller body of research concerns the themes course design, academic work, quality, and system policy, while the themes institutional management and nature of knowledge and research were not addressed in any of the current Dutch PhD projects studied. Overall, this outcome resembles the international perspective, apart from two differences: A considerably large

proportion of Dutch studies focuses on teaching and learning, while remarkably few studies focus on course design. However, based on the thick descriptions it can be inferred that many PhD research projects address multiple themes, since they consist of three to five individual studies combined. For example, studies that address teaching and learning of specific concepts or skills often involve design and evaluation of course material, meaning these could also be classified as course design. Studies within the theme student experience, especially transition of students into higher education, are often influenced directly or indirectly by the institutional system the students are part of, hence also touch on system policy.

With regard to the topic of transition into higher education, it seems this is highly system-dependent: The structure of higher education and admission systems in a country can affect the scope and relevance of existing research. Student transition into higher education in The Netherlands is rather comparable to other Northern European countries like Denmark, yet different than Anglo-Saxon traditions existing in the United States and United Kingdom. Dutch higher education is easily accessible without further selection procedures and fees are relatively low compared to, for example, Asian standards. Therefore the issue of assisting students in selecting an appropriate educational program is deemed much more important than the issue of increasing enrolment rates. On another note, in countries where distances are relatively small, such as the Netherlands, access to higher education can differ countries such as the United States or Australia.

Additionally, it seems that topics, national debates and discourses with regard to higher education are also represented in the PhD projects. For example, the projects focusing on understanding teacher expertise of academic teachers relates to recent debates about raising teaching quality and about a minimum percentage of teachers that must obtain the University Teaching Qualifications (UTQ) certificate (VSNU, 2018). Another example is the topic of internationalization, which is currently broadly debated within and outside universities (VSNU, 2014), and is also an important part of two of the research projects discussed in the findings.

4.1 Limitations

The PhD research projects included in this paper were selected to provide insight into contemporary trends in Dutch higher education research. For example, the findings in this paper do not reflect research into teaching intensive universities or higher education policy studies. The projects presented in this paper are currently registered within the ICO graduate school and the thick descriptions focused on eight of them. This implies that the resulting image should be interpreted as exemplary rather than as comprehensive. Furthermore, the studies were categorised based on research proposals, which means the actual research might address different or multiple themes, as it evolves over time. Nevertheless, the described research projects may provide a more complete picture than Tight's classification, due to his selection of general higher education journals. This could explain why, in comparison to Tight's classification, the number of Dutch studies focusing on teaching and learning is relatively high. Although studies on teaching and learning form an essential part of research into higher education, these may be more likely to be published in domain-specific journals (e.g., medical education) than in the general higher education journals that Tight selected.

4.2 Concluding remark

The findings suggest that Dutch research projects into higher education focus mainly but not solely on teaching & learning and the student experience. A smaller body of research concerns the themes course design, academic work, quality, and system policy. The themes institutional management and nature of knowledge and research as identified in higher education research internationally were not addressed in any of the current Dutch PhD projects studied. All in all, this paper shows how local Dutch higher education systems shape both the context and focus of contemporary research. Current Dutch research projects into higher education are well embedded in theoretical frameworks from the field of educational sciences and beyond, such as social sciences, psychology and computer science. The strong research interest in higher education internationally over the last decades (Brennan & Teichler, 2008) is well observable in the Netherlands as well. This could result in a wider variety of research themes addressed in the future, both in the Netherlands and internationally.

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