‘Good research’ within professional higher education institutes

– the criteria of lecturers

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Abstract

Introduction: Research is becoming increasingly important within the institutes of higher professional education in the Netherlands (‘hoger beroepsonderwijs’), both within the curricula and outside the teaching-context. However, it is unclear how lecturers, who form the foundation of any educational institute, perceive research. Their views and beliefs are known to be very influential when it comes to the direction and the assessment of student research. One of the relevant questions concerns the criteria they apply in judging whether research is ‘good’. Method: To explore this question, a qualitative focus group study was conducted with 25 lecturers from 5 large Dutch institutes of higher professional education (‘hogescholen’) in groups of 4 to 8 lecturers. The participants were asked to bring up two specific research examples of their own which they consider “good” and “not good” research, and to individually elaborate on these. Furthermore, as a group the participants were stimulated to freely discuss their conceptions of ‘good’ and ‘not good’ research. The transcripts of the discussions were transcribed ad verbatim. The statements and qualifications they used to qualify research as “good” or “non-good” were labeled, categorized and compared, according to the method of grounded theory. Results: This resulted in 7 distinct categories of criteria, some of which had subcategories. These demarcation criteria were (ordered from most prevalent to less prevalent): 1) the design of research; 2) the final product that was the result of research; 3) the external value of the research; 4) the researcher as a person; 5) the conduct of the research. The other two less frequently used criteria concerned 6) the communication of the researcher about all of his research to a larger public, and 7) the theme or problem that was being researched.
Introduction

Over the last years, non-university institutions of higher education in the Netherlands (hogescholen), have increasingly begun to transform from teaching-only institutions into institutions that generate new knowledge and information. This knowledge generation mainly takes place through research (Kyvik & Skodvin, 2003). The idea behind the implementation of research is that in current Western knowledge societies, all students and certainly all graduates entering the job market have to be able possess some research-skills. As written by Scott (2002), the vice-chancellor of Kingston University (a former Polytechnic institution): “not only are [modern professionals] engaged in the production of knowledge; they must also be educated to cope with the risks and uncertainties generated by the advance of science”. Furthermore, the amount of information based on research has been rapidly growing in the last decades (Greer, 2000). In a knowledge economy, all professions require the ability to handle these large quantities of complex information, an ability which requires at least basic research skills (Murtonen & Lehtinen, 2005). Students, who are the future professionals, should learn these skills not only if they study at a university, but also when they study at a professional institution (Brew, 2006).

For the professional institutions to make the transition from only teaching to hybrids of teaching and research, it is imperative that the lecturers are taken into account. Modern theories of organizational and educational change describe how an organization’s employees belong to the most important stakeholders and acknowledge that their cooperation is therefore crucial for any change to succeed, as is the case for lecturers in educational organizations (see for example Fullan, 2007 or Jones, 2010). In the end lecturers are the persons that will be working in these transformed institutions, and they are the sole connection between the institution and its students. Hence, it is crucial that they support and work with these changes. However, there is almost no information available about how these lecturers think about
No research has been conducted investigating lecturers’ definition of research. Neither have their views been investigated about what constitutes “good research” within a context of professional higher education. This study will therefore extend the current scientific knowledge of research conceptions by researching the views of lecturers, specifically focusing on the question of what lecturers in hogescholen believe constitutes as good research.

**Theoretical Framework**

At this moment, only little research has been conducted regarding research conceptions in general. Most of this research has been conducted at universities, either focusing on the research conceptions of scientific staff (Kiley & Mullins, 2005; Visser-Wijnveen, van Driel, van der Rijst, Verloop & Visser, 2010) or students and PHD-students (Meyer, Shanahan & Laugksch, 2005; Pitcher, 2011). Most of these studies, however, focused on the definition of the concept ‘research’, and not on the issue of what constitutes as ‘good research’. Only Kiley and Mullins (2005) looked specifically at ‘good research criteria’. They found that university faculty use four types of criteria to distinguish good research: 1) the technical aspects of the research; its design and conduct, 2) the originality and creativity, 3) communication about the results, and 4) the explorative nature and the relevance of the study.

Recently, a different study was conducted by Albert, Laberge & McGuire (2012) on the same topic. This study focused on the way research was presented and researched whether groups of researchers from different disciplines differed in the way they ranked different types of publications, presentations and ways of funding research. On basis of the findings, Albert et al. (2012) concluded that most researchers adhered to classic forms of ‘quality control’ (through peer reviews, academic conferences etc.). Research that was aimed
at either industries or the larger public, what Gibbons et al. (1994) refer to as mode II knowledge production, was clearly believed to be of lower quality.

Lastly, other relevant research has been conducted by Lamont and Mallard (2005). These authors conducted a literature study on how researchers evaluated the quality of research when being a member of peer evaluation panels. One of their findings was that evaluators’ judgments are based, amongst other things, on epistemological criteria. Research that was in accordance with the preferred epistemological style of the evaluator were more often evaluated as ‘good quality research’. Lamont and Mallard distinguished four epistemological styles: “a) the constructivist style (used by scholars who seek to give voice to minorities or to embrace their indigenous concepts); b) the comprehensive style (used by scholars who adopt an interpretive or theoretical approach to understand social phenomena); c) the positivist style (used by social scientists who adopt a hypothetico-deductive approach and quantitative techniques to solve an empirical puzzle); and d) the utilitarian style (used by social scientists who adopt hypothetico-deductive and quantitative approaches to analyze social problems and generate policy-oriented knowledge)” (Lamont & Mallard, 2005, p.12). Furthermore, the authors describe how the styles are somewhat discipline-specific. The comprehensive and constructivist styles are dominant in the humanities, whereas the comprehensive and positivist styles are prominent within the social sciences.

Furthermore, Guetzkow, Lamont and Mallard (2004) explored the concept of “originality”, a criterion for good research that is also often used by panelists. They found that scholars in the social sciences and humanities see originality in various ways: “using a new approach, a new theory, a new method, or new data, studying a new topic, doing research in an understudied area, and producing new findings” (Lamont & Mallard, 2005, p.11). Guetzkow, Lamont and Mallard (2004) also found that peer evaluators tend to take personal attributes of the researcher into account when evaluating research proposals on
originality. Mostly their perception of the moral character of the researcher played a role, especially the researchers “integrity” and “risk-taking”.

This study will research whether similar criteria come to mind by lecturers at professional higher education institutes when they think about ‘good research’ and ‘non-good research’. Relevant is that these type of conceptions are not something solid. Depending on the situation, context and/or time, a person often holds different conceptions (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Hence, conceptions are context-specific. The goal of this research is therefore to get an overview of the different criteria, and the underlying concepts, lecturers in hogescholen use to qualify research as good research.

Methods

Sample

The participants in this research were approached because they already participated in a survey study one year earlier and were willing to participate in a follow-up study. From this survey sample, employees with teaching tasks from five relatively large-scale hogescholen were approached to participate in a focus group session and were selected when they were able to join at the scheduled time (N=25; for characteristics see table 1). One or two focus group meetings were held at each university (4 to 8 participants per meeting that lasted 1.5-2 hours). All focus group meetings were recorded and transcribed ad verbatim.

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<th>HBO-lecturers (N = 25)</th>
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<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Conducts Research</strong></td>
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*Table 1 Characteristics of the participants*
Design

To study lecturers’ conceptions of good research and non-good research, a method was chosen that could identify the most prominent beliefs among lecturers, but that would also urge the lecturers to discuss their own conceptions and come to a consensus beyond their discipline: the focus group. The data gathering was done in focus group sessions because it was expected that lecturers would be better able to construct and formulate their thoughts through interaction with other lecturers (see for example Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001). Most lecturers in hogescholen are not used to talk about research criteria and the sessions were supposed to be as open ended as possible. A possible downside is an underrepresentation of intra-group variations (Bloor, et al., 2001), which was avoided by splitting the sessions in two halves. In the first half, the lecturers were asked to only express their initial ideas about good and non-good research, without critical interruptions from their fellow participants. In the second half, the focus group moderator would step back and allow the participants to openly discuss and explore each other’s ideas.

Procedure

At the beginning of every focus group session, the participants were asked to come up with an example of good research and with an example of not-good research. This last phrasing was chosen instead of “bad research”, since bad research is more plural-interpretable than non-good (see also Kiley en Mullins, 2005). Taking turns, each lecturer explained what their example of good and non-good research was and why they qualified it that way. The other participants were asked not to react, but write down their questions and comments for later in the meeting. If the examples were apparently unclear or if the participants only explained one of the two examples, the focus group moderator would ask for further explanation. After all participants were done explaining their examples (usually after half an hour), the lecturers were asked, with as little interference as possible from the
moderator, to discuss what they consider good and non-good research. Only when the
discussion went off-topic for a long time (say 5 minutes), the moderator would lead the
discussion back to good and not good research. The discussion during the second half mostly
lasted one hour. At some moment, the group would begin to repeat previously discussed
topics and realise this themselves. At that moment, the moderator would step in and conclude
the meeting.

Analysis

The analysis was conducted using “content analysis” in accordance with the analysis
method of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). First, all separate arguments and statements
concerning criteria for good and non-good research of the first individual part of the
interviews were labelled in vivo. Afterwards, codes covering similar themes were grouped
and classified. This resulted in a classification system of seven themes that covered almost all
in vivo labels (see results section), by which the full transcripts were coded. Qualitative
analyses of each (sub-) category made it possible to create an in-depth qualitative description
of the different types of arguments based upon the sub-arguments and the concepts used by
the interviewees. All coding and structuring was done using Atlas.TI.

To assess the prevalence of each of the categories, simple counting would not suffice.
Since some teachers spoke more or had more statements that could be coded, their opinion
would be overrepresented in the category distribution. To avoid this, the percentual
distribution of coded statements over the 7 categories was calculated for every lecturer,
indicating what percentage of that lecturers’ statements belonged to each of the categories.
The average of all these distributions was used to as an indicator of the prevalence of every
category.
Findings

Categories

Through extensive discussions between two coders, seven categories were formulated and reformulated to include all statements that belong to that category. Table 2 lists all categories and subcategories.

Graph 1 shows the relative prevalence of statements belonging to each of these categories. All categories will now be described and explicated with examples.

Category 1: the topic of the research and its origin.

More than half of the lecturers talked about the origin of the topic/theme of the research. Some lecturers stated that the topic of a research is important in their judgment of research. Other lecturers concluded that the quality of research is not related to the topic or theme of the research but depends on other factors than the theme itself.

In the first group of lecturers who find the topic relevant for the quality of research, lecturers in business-related disciplines believed that good research investigates problems brought up by businesses in which their students are likely to work in the future. Others, however, preferred more generalizable themes.

Table 2. Categories of criteria for good research

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<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Topic of the research</td>
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| 2. Design of the research | a. Theoretical background, embedding in literature, formulation of research questions  
                             b. Methodological/technical set-up  
                             c. Formal requirements |
| 3. Researcher related criteria | a. Position of the researcher towards the research  
                                  b. Qualities of the researcher |
| 4. Conduct of the research | |
| 5. Quality of the final product (e.g. the research report) | a. Transparency about the conduct  
                                              b. The presentation  
                                              c. The content  
                                              d. The foundation |
| 6. External value of the research | |
| 7. Communication about the research | |

Graph 1. Average distribution of statements per category per lecturer.
Secondly, lecturers stated that good research should focus on ideas and problems brought up by other lecturers of the hogescholen, to make the transfer of research results to educational programs possible. Thirdly, several lecturers stated that they believe good research conducted by students should focus on topics in which they the students themselves are interested in as future professionals.

Category 2: the design of the research

Statements falling in this category were, by far, the most prevalent in every focus group session. Three subcategories were found: 1) statements about the theoretical background of the research, 2) statements about the methodological set-up of the research, and 3) formal requirements in the design phase of the research. The aspect of methodological setup of research was used by every single lecturer to demark research as good or not good.

Theoretical background. The most prominent theme in this subcategory concerned the research question and sub questions. Most lecturers believed they had to be well-phrased, demarcated and researchable.

The second sub-theme concerned literature coverage, in which most lecturers stated that good research can only be conducted when the researcher is well-aware of all literature of, and previous research conducted within, that specific topic. Many lecturers acknowledged this is often not possible in student research, because it takes too much time, but found it even though important. Related to literature usage is the idea that all concepts used in the research must be well-defined, which was agreed to be important in the two sessions where the topic came up.

The next theme that was brought up several times concerned the quality of the sources on which research was based. Not all sources had the same quality, some lecturers agreed. Therefore, research should only be based upon reliable sources of good-quality, such as articles in certain scientific journals. When discussing examples of non-good research,
several lecturers talked about students not basing their research on literature, but solely on their own assumptions, which was regarded as a clear example of low-quality research.

The last theme, within the subtheme theoretical background, concerns a discussion whether the research question should be based upon theory or on what happens in reality. Some lecturers believed that research questions should solely be based upon what happens in a certain company or organisation, while others believed that established theories should be used as a fundament in order to design good research questions. It seems this difference can be attributed to disciplinary differences, as the lecturer who was the strongest advocate of the second viewpoint taught laboratory studies, while the others lecturers taught in disciplines concerning social issues and economics.

*Methodological design.* This was clearly the most prominent discussion topic during every focus group meeting. On average, 18% of the statements of every participant concerned this subcategory. One criteria was agreed upon: good research has a design with the appropriate research methods to study the research question(s). In all meetings, lecturers stated that the research methods should have been tried out before and that there should be evidence that they are reliable and valid. In some of the focus groups, a discussion rose between clear advocates of qualitative and advocates of quantitative research methods.

The more quantitatively oriented lecturers agreed on a number of criteria of good research: 1) the methods used in good research are reliable and valid, meaning that they research what they intend to research and that the resulting results can be trusted, 2) good research is conducted with a sample that is large enough to draw trustworthy conclusions, 3) good research uses appropriate statistical methods to process and analyze the results. Two related statements were only stated in two sessions: 4) good research has the lowest possible error margin, 5) good research has double-blinded experiments and uses placebo´s, 6) in good research, the method chosen is approvable from the strictest scientific norms. 7) One lecturer
believed that research could only be good if it resulted in a measurable, quantitative outcome, but none of the other lecturers agreed in any of the sessions.

Some of the other lecturers with an apparent preference for more qualitative methods talked about another criterion. They believed good research used triangulation (different research methods to answer one question).

Moreover, some lecturers stated that good research is designed in such a way that is feasible within the time given to execute the research. Lastly, several lecturers stated that to be able to come up with a good design, a researcher needs to be aware of the pros and cons of the chosen research method and that (s)he also needs to be clear about this in the documentation of the research.

**Formal Requirements.** Six lecturers stated that they assess the quality of (student) research by looking at whether it meets certain formal requirements “*The chance that good research succeeds is much larger when [the researchers] have done a good preliminary inquiry. And when they have written a good research plan*“ (resp 5, session 4). Although these formal requirements were brought up during some focus groups, they were never discussed in detail. Probably most lecturers regarded formal requirements as factual (external) criteria, instead of internalised personal criteria. Or they simply agreed this aspect to be important.

**Category 3: researcher-related criteria**

The lecturers’ statements about how researcher-related criteria demark good and non-good research can be divided in two subcategories: 1) statements about the position of the researcher towards the research, and 2) statements about personal qualities of the researcher. Almost all lecturers (23) made statements belonging to one of these categories.

**Positioning of the researcher.** One third (5% out of 16%) of all statements related to researcher characteristics concerned the positioning of the researcher. First of all, several
lecturers explained that they believe that good research can only be conducted by a researcher who can think and act independently and objectively. Good researchers should not be too involved within their topic in real-life, to remain able to study it from a distance. Another lecturer believed the opposite, she stated that good research can only be conducted by a researcher who is very much involved with what is going on in reality.

A second theme related to the positioning of the researcher concerned research that was conducted commissioned by an external company or organization. Several lecturers phrased that a researcher should act independently from (incompany) instructors to conduct good research, while two other lecturers stated that a good researcher should be adaptive to the needs/wishes of his/her instructors. Lastly, several lecturers put forward the notion that research conducted by a researcher who is prejudiced on the outcomes can never be good.

**Qualities of the researcher.** Two-thirds of all quotes concerning characteristics of the researcher where about specific qualities a researcher should have to be able to conduct good research. Many lecturers (10) talked about specific knowledge that a researcher should have, such as on research methodology, statistical analysis, or the topic they are researching. Furthermore, several lecturers stressed the notion that a good researcher should have a curious nature, that (s)he should be critical and not be satisfied with a simple answer, but should dare to look deeper. It was also stressed by several lecturers that a good researcher has a research-mentality, and comes up with research questions during normal real-life situations.

In addition, several lecturers stressed that a good researcher is able to look at problems from multiple perspectives and can see multiple ways into researching a problem. One lecturer (resp 4, session 3) stated: “many students take a lot of things for granted, accepting that things are just the way they are. But if you look critical at the opportunities to do things a different way, to combine data differently, you can get a different outcome”. In addition, one lecturer described how a good researcher should be pro-active, and have the
guts to take another standpoint than his/her employer or supervisor.

Moreover, some lecturers stated how the intelligence of a researcher is important for him/her to be able to do research. “[To be able to] think outside the box, wield multiple perspectives and handle a bigger complexity, you simply need more brainpower” (resp 4, session 4). In one focus group all lecturers agreed that good information skills, such as the ability to read research articles and get the right information out of them, are a prerequisite of being a good researcher.

Lastly, when talking about fellow researchers at their own institutes, several lecturers believed that the ability to share your knowledge and to involve others was an important characteristic of a good researcher. This was related to the statement explained in the section about the subject or the theme of the research and its origin, where several lecturers stated that their researching colleagues were often not involving them in their research at all.

Category 4: conduct of the research

Although almost all lecturers (22) stated that they believe good research is well-conducted. However, there was almost no discussion on the topic, the opinions do not appear to be very diverse. The fact that on average only 10% of the statements of each lecturer falls within this category does therefore not indicate that the lecturers believe it is not important, but rather that they all – silently - agreed on what it means. Roughly four themes came up when the lecturers were talking about the conduct of the research during the meetings.

The first theme concerned ‘correctness’, data should be correctly processed, material and methods are applied correctly and analyses are conducted correctly.

A second theme that came up several times concerned the fact that during the conduct of research, the researcher should dare to make choices. Choices that were brought up were 1) to stop the research, if there are not going to be any useful results, 2) to change the
(methodological) design, if the chosen set-up is not working, and 3) to change the research questions, if another question turns out to be more relevant.

A third theme was that research should be conducted thoroughly. The results should be thoroughly examined: it is wrong to quickly jump to conclusions. One lecturer (resp 5, session 5) explained how many of his students do “quick and dirty” research, in which they came up with a solution for a problem without properly studying the problem itself first. According to him was the opposite of good thorough research.

The fourth theme that belonged to this category was that good research is conducted systematically, cyclically and continuously. When conducting research, the researcher should continuously reflect on, and re-assess the results. Furthermore, one lecturer described that she believes a good research is not conducted at one moment, but continuously, with follow-up measurements.

**Category 5: quality of the final product**

In every focus group meeting, a considerable amount of the conversation was about the final product of research. On average, 18% of every lecturer’s quotes concerned this category. Almost all lecturers explicitly, or implicitly, made clear that they separate good from not-good research by looking at the way the research is presented to them in the final product. Most lecturers talked about some kind of research rapport, but also advice rapports and (academic) articles came up. When judging these ‘final products’ a transparent explanation of how the research was carried out came up frequently. Other remarks concerned the style, the content and the substantiation.

*Transparency about the research conduct and accountability.* Most lecturers stressed that transparency about steps taken in the research, and clearness about the choices that were made by the researcher, are a prerequisite of good research. One lecturer (resp 1, session 2) stated that “the most important thing is to account for the different choices made, but what
those choices exactly are is less important”. Secondly, many lecturers stressed that good research is replicable or duplicable, which can also be seen as an indication of transparency. Thirdly, good argumentation, clearly visible results, and well-supported conclusions are also forms of transparency that many lecturers believe to be criteria of good research. Lastly, one group of lecturers discussed that colleagues conducting research at their institutes should be transparent towards their colleagues about the research they do and the results of their research.

Presentation of the final product. Many lecturers talked how they believe that good research rapports adhere to certain style-aspects. They made statements about how a good research rapport is well-structured, has cohesion, has no spelling or grammatical errors, should be written understandably. One lecturer stated that if the rapport does not adhere to such criteria, it is not good research. For other lecturers it was not clear whether this was a crucial criterion for good research, or whether it was only one aspect which they deemed important. Three lecturers stated that a publishable article is the final product of good research. One lecturer explained that good research is published and very often cited.

Content of the final product. Most lecturers also talked about the content of the final product. They stated how it should contain an answer to the research question, contain new insights, recommendations, a good story, and different perspectives on its findings?. One lecturer stated how good research should have a scheme of the results included in the rapport. Interestingly, some lecturers differed in their opinion whether the rapport should be tailor-made to the organization for which the research was conducted, or whether rapports that have recommendations for only one organization are not research rapports at all, but ‘advice rapports’. One lecturer (resp 5, session 5) stated: “an advice rapport is written with selected data. I do not call that research. That is writing an advice rapport or a policy paper. Most
policy papers are completely not based upon research”. Several other lecturers, however, saw the inclusion of usable recommendations as a positive thing.

The foundation of the results in the final product. Many lecturers stated how the foundation of the ‘story’ in the final product is very important. Several lecturers talked about a theoretical foundation, which should be based on the right sources, such as publications in certain approved academic journals. So, in the concept of the lecturers not only the research design should be based on a theoretical ground, but also the results should be theoretically supported.

Another important aspect of the foundation concerned the arguments used in the final product, which should be valid and applicable. Moreover, the conclusions should be based on the right data and results. Lastly, one lecturer described how she believed that there should be a model included that can illustrate the findings, in order for research to be good.

Category 6: External value of the research

In all five focus group meetings the lecturers talked about how they believed that good research should have external value, which was also considered the key difference between university research and professional higher education research. A couple of forms of external value where discussed during the focus group meetings.

The first form concerns research with an applicable or utilizable outcome. Often it was not explained whom should be able to use the results, but only the fact that some real-life usable outcome must be there, while also usefulness for businesses, professional organizations, or for ‘society at large’ were mentioned. During one focus group meeting, one lecturer (resp 4, session 2) explained how he disagreed with the notion that results always have to be useful for someone: “the applicability [of research results] is often not visible, in which case you do not know what it is useful for. Years later somebody might [run into a problem and] think ‘damn! Somebody already researched this, and then the research can be
re-used again[...] to answer this new problem”. Most other lecturers, however, seemed to be thinking about direct applicability, instead of applicability after many years.

During three focus group meetings, lecturers discussed that it would be good if research conducted by their colleagues has a value for their teaching and their department, for example to help them develop their curriculum, or if the findings can be taught to their students.

Another topic was the value of research in the perspective of the student-researcher, for instance for future professional careers. In good research, students are able to use what was found out in their future profession, and the skills students develop during research are also valuable in their future profession.

Last in the external category the usefulness for the company or organization that presented the problem or theme that the research was about was brought up. After all, the research was conducted on their behalf. However, some lecturers stated that the outcome should be generalizable beyond this one company, and that the researcher should be able to look beyond the simple answer and also find out the underlying problem and theory.

**Category 7: Communication about research**

This last category was only brought up during two focus groups meetings, and the average amount of statements per lecturer was 2%. The central issue in this category was that good communication about research was very important. Two lecturers seemed to have trouble with a researching colleague who did not communicate at all about what (s)he was doing, therefore not contributing in any useful way to their department and their teaching. “If [a researcher] is isolated and invisible, he can still be conducting very reliable and valid research, very intelligent and very clever, but I do not find that good research” (resp 1, session 4).
**Context specific criteria**

*Flexible and rigid criteria.* About two thirds of all lecturers made statements from which it can be inferred that what they qualify as ‘good research’ is not only determined by solid criteria, but also by context in which the research is conducted. These lecturers can be characterised as less rigid in their conception of good research. A large proportion of every group meeting was used to discuss what is good research in different contexts. Lecturers discussed for example how good research in a *hogeschool* setting is different from good research conducted at universities, and how research by students should be judged by different criteria than research by professional researchers. Some lecturers used criteria that were roughly the same, but they believed that the extent to which they should be met differed per context. Some lecturers (5 or 6) could be characterised as very rigid in their conception of good research. They did not use flexible criteria, and they stated that research could only be good research when all the criteria they discussed before were met. They indicated that several examples they heard during the session were therefore ‘simply’ not good research. One lecturer-researcher explained that “*the requirements* [of research at hogescholen] *should be the same as those that are set for traditional university research. What you measure should be equally valid and reliable*” (resp 6, session 4).

*Traditional universities versus hogescholen.* During all five focus groups meetings, lecturers used the research that is being conducted at traditional universities as a reference-point to establish what they believed to be good ‘*higher professional education-research*’.

With regards to the 7 categories of criteria, the most clear difference the lecturers made had to do with the ‘*theme of the research*’ and ‘*the external value of the research*’. Most lecturers phrased that university research does not need external value necessarily, nor does it has to be focussed on themes that are relevant beyond academia. Research in higher professional education, the general consensus seemed to be, should be relevant either for the
professions that the students will be working on, or within the educational institutes themselves.

Other differences had to do with the extent to which the criteria should be met. Some lecturers made references such as ‘In the research conducted in the university master program, we demand of all students that they provide a good overview of all international literature on the topic of their research. If they did not do that, they simply failed their research project. That is very clear. [...] at the bachelor study at the hogeschool we do not set such high standards. At least, they do not have to give an overview of academic literature. They do need to provide a good description of their research topic.’ (resp 5, session 5).

Discussion

The goal of this research was to explore the concepts and criteria used by lecturers in higher professional education to demark ‘good’ from ‘non-good’ research. Five focus group meetings were held with different groups of lecturers, in which they presented their criteria for ‘good’ and ‘non-good’ research, and discuss their different views.

The results show that the criteria lecturers in hogescholen use can be divided in 7 main categories, some of which had subcategories (ordered from most prevalent to less prevalent): 1) the design of research; 2) the final product that was the result of research; 3) the external value of the research; 4) the researcher as a person; 5) the way the research was conducted; 6) the theme or problem that was being researched, and 7) the communication of the research.

These seven categories are somewhat similar to the findings of Kiley and Mullins (2005), who looked at university faculty’s ‘good research criteria’. They also found that the design and conduct are important criteria which they grouped as ‘technical criteria. Secondly, they talked about the relevance of the study and the explorative nature, which is somewhat comparable to the external value category as used by the lecturers in this study. Furthermore,
the communication about the results is somewhat related to the category of final product-criteria, since both concern the way that results are communicated. Kiley and Mullins (2005) also found that originality and creativity were criteria often used by their participants. Although a few quotes by the participants in this study said something about this, it was not a prominent theme amongst the lecturers.

The criteria for assessing research quality based on the presentation of research, as found by Albert, Laberge & McGuire (2012), were not discussed at all during the focus group meetings. Although their findings were similar to how some lecturers believed ‘good sources of information’ could be established, they never made a link to whether those sources of information are good research.

With the seven category list as a result of this study, one should be aware that doing research with focus groups has certain limitations, according to Bloor et al. (2001): 1) not all intra-group variation may be expressed, 2) group dynamics can influence individual opinions, 3) different topics might be discussed in the different meetings and 4) the results say more about the sample than about the population at large. The first two limitations were partially intercepted by asking the participants to give their initial vision, without interaction with the other participants. In any case, the results should still be perceived as criteria that groups of lecturers came up with, instead of the research conceptions of individual lecturers. Furthermore, because the focus group sessions were explorative and open-ended, not every category as listed in table 2 was discussed in every meeting. Since the goal of the study was to come up with a category list, an open ended approach was the right choice. Further research is needed to test the newfound categories, and to possibly extent or merge the categories.

In future research, the link between conceptions and actions of lecturers needs to be researched as well. In the end a large scale quantitative study can be useful to ascertain to
what extent these categories of criteria for good research are shared by all teachers, or whether differences exist between groups. A more individual design with application of the criteria can give insight into how the different criteria are weighed in relation to each other when lecturers judge research. Such a follow-up study can also give an indication of the relation between conceptions and actions of lecturers, since in practice actions do not always logically follow conceptions (Visser-Wijnveen, 2009). And in the end, an understanding of the actions of lecturers by knowing their conceptions of research will help a focused implementation of research in the higher professional education.

References


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