Kasja Weenink

Higher education quality and its contexts

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Colophon

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Quality... you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist. What else are the grades based on? Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously some things are better than others... but what's the 'betterness'? So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere a place to get traction. What the hell is quality? What is it? (Pirsig, 1974/2006, p. 231)

Setting the scene

Pirsig's well-known fragment from *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance* was often quoted in the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, notions like total quality management (TQM), quality improvement, and quality assurance became fashionable in European higher education policy processes. The quality notion was easily accepted as a fashionable management concept given its vague and ambiguous character. Governmental and institutional policymakers recognised themselves in its different versions, without, however, further defining its meanings (Benders & Van Veen, 2001; Giroux, 2006; Stensaker, 2007).

The quality notion was used in the Netherlands to rearrange steering relations between the government and higher education institutions. As part of new public management (NPM) steering conceptions, higher education institutions were placed 'at a distance'. The Dutch governmental *Higher education autonomy and quality policy brief*, alias HOAK-nota (MinEd, 1985) stated that the higher education institutes would gain more autonomy. In turn, the institutions became formally accountable for the assurance and improvement of the quality of education. A system was to be developed that built upon evaluations by the institutions themselves. The interests of the government as well as the institutions were served, for who could be against more autonomy (Lips, 1996; Mertens, 2011; Weenink et al., 2018)?

The ambiguity and frivolity of management fashions can change institutional orders and practices (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996), and this is what happened with quality in higher education and other public sectors in Europe (Dahler-Larsen, 2019; Giroux, 2006; Giroux & Taylor, 2002; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 1995; Stensaker, 2007). Stensaker (2004, 2007) found for Norway that quality's acceptance depended on its general image, but also on institutional cultures and situated understandings of progressiveness and rationality. Concepts need to have a certain amount of vagueness and ambiguity to permeate more than one course of action and enable their broad dissemination (Benders & Van Veen, 2001; Giroux, 2006). According to Giroux (2006), building upon Callon (1986), it is not enough to unite different actors. The concept has to be actively translated whereby people find it interesting and also frame it to fit their values and interests.

Higher education quality has a positive connotation. It is a close synonym of good education; something that people try to achieve or 'make' (Dahler-Larsen, 2019; Ozga et al., 2011). As a positive and abstract notion, quality has the potentiality

to bind people and bring different perspectives together. Whether this is the case and people find it interesting enough to actively frame it in their interests depends on specific circumstances that differ per situation. Higher education quality in this respect holds the potential to change its environment, but it is also made by people in engagement with specific contexts. The specific role of quality in how people rearrange social orders is difficult to distinguish from how people make it in social interaction. These processes are mutually constitutive and interwoven.

Good things can end up badly though, and quality's positive character draws our attention away from the ambivalences involved. A specific notion of quality is always a choice of particular values, manifested in a general veil of goodness (Dahler-Larsen, 2019, pp. 6-7). Although quality sustained a positive narrative of change that bound policymakers and management, the changes in the 1980s and 1990s were also more critically related to larger shifts in interdependencies between institutional management, trade unions, and the state in several European countries (T. Newton, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 1995; Stensaker, 2007). In the Netherlands, corporatist negotiations deflected the diffusion of quality assurance as part of a 'hard' NPM approach. It was implemented as a process of self-evaluation organised by the higher education sector (Enders & Westerheijden, 2014).

The translation of the quality concept and concomitant developments of quality assurance systems also came with the articulation of opposing views in practice in several European countries (Stensaker, 2007; Westerheijden et al., 2007). Academics resisted the formal quality perspective and used denotations like bureaucracy, burden, and lack of mutual trust (J. Newton, 2002). In the United Kingdom, there were even fears that governmental policies would change higher education too drastically (Harvey & Knight, 1996). There was, however, no articulate counternarrative either, and academics did not have a meeting of minds in collective critique. They deployed different reactions towards quality monitoring. 'They respond, adapt or even resist, and while this may be patterned, it is not uniform' (J. Newton 2002, p. 59). Concepts can come into fashion again, but TQM lost its appeal as a fashionable management concept over the years in European frontrunning countries like the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Benders et al., 2019; Westerheijden, 1999; Westerheijden et al., 2007).

Problem statement

This dissertation is about the development of higher education quality in the Netherlands since 1985 and what happened after the concept went out of fashion. The research project was sparked by an interest in the ambiguities, ambivalences, and vagueness of higher education quality as an abstract concept 'made' by people in social processes that involve multiple actors within and beyond universities. Abstract concepts are hard to perceive with our senses or manipulate with our actions. They involve complex relations, introspective features, and social interactions, and exhibit great variation across contexts (Dove, 2023).

Higher education quality is in itself not a problematic notion, but it is very open to different ways of articulation and constitution in communicative practices in engagement with its environment. The same abstract characteristics that bind different perspectives and make quality a fashionable management concept make it elusive and difficult to capture or define. Because of its introspective, ambiguous, and ambivalent character, it is also understood as an individual notion in the eye of the beholder. Several scholars have identified it as an essentially contested concept (Gallie, 1956), characterised by endless and value-loaded debates about its proper uses (Calamet, 2022).

Higher education quality is furthermore a conjunction of *two* abstract concepts – quality and higher education – relating to multiple sites and contexts and further obfuscating its demarcation (Barnett, 1992). Thanks to the established quality assurance system, we know that the quality of Dutch higher education, as assessed primarily at programme level, is constantly on a high plateau (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2023). It is, however, also related to various social issues, different perspectives, power dynamics, and exertion of control. Krause (2012) even denotes it as a 'wicked problem' (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Such problems are socially complex, multifaceted, and articulated by different groups of actors within and beyond the institutions, thereby making them dilemmatic and intractable. What is considered problematic changes over time. The notion was initially lauded by management and policy analysts, but it has become critiqued for being elusive and lacking conceptual gravitas (Harvey & Newton, 2007).

The relationship between the constitution of higher education quality in situated practices and the larger social processes at stake has not yet been scrutinised. We do not know when and how it is adopted, contested, understood as ambivalent, or otherwise enacted by people in different situated contexts, and how

these enactments relate to issues, larger social developments, and power-ridden dynamics. This lack of knowledge regarding the constitution of higher education quality in interdependence with its contexts concerns two different but interwoven aspects. First, it concerns the understanding and enactment of higher education quality as an abstract concept by people *within* different higher education sites in engagement with their specific, dynamic, environment. Quality's elusive and introspective features and its great variation in social interactions within and across different contexts have obfuscated its analysis in (neo-)positivist analyses and also complicated interpretive approaches. Studies that concern specific actors' perceptions, for example, often start with the idea that people hold private quality views and do not pay much attention to the relevance of specific situations and environments in which quality is enacted (Weenink et al., 2022). Second, it concerns the evolvement of the notion, as it is constituted by people *across* differently evolving and configurating contexts in engagement and interdependence with one another and their environments. Studies that examine what matters for good quality teaching, for example, are not very well connected with more organisationally oriented quality studies and do not fully address the different and often overlapping roles that academics can undertake (d'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Elken & Wollscheid, 2019).

Both of these aspects – quality's challenging characteristics and choices in research problems and directions – have contributed to a lack of analytical perspective to grasp these empirics as situated and contingent but also complex and interrelated with larger contexts and social developments. Part of the wickedness is that this interrelationship is under-theorised, even though quality studies build upon many analytical sources (Krause, 2012; Morley, 2004).

Evolving analyses of quality and its contexts

Since the quality revolution in the 1980s and 1990s, the relationship between quality and its contexts has been studied from analytical perspectives such as neo-institutionalism and more or less critical sociological approaches. Social science develops within, and engages with, the society of which it is part though (Elias, 1970/1978; Giddens, 1987; Van Krieken, 1998). What is considered part of a research problem and which actions and methodological concepts are found apt to reach specific goals are not understood by the researchers alone and may also be informed by their environment (Lury, 2021). In the scattered higher education research field, quality studies have been driven by policy and management questions and have maintained a predominantly evidence-based approach. Theorising about quality has focused primarily on the notion of quality assurance and related

concepts like quality control, quality audit, continuous quality improvement, and total quality management (Beerkens, 2018; Daenekindt & Huisman, 2020; Dill, 1995; Morley, 2004; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 1995; Stensaker, 2007; Tight, 2014).

Scientific attention on higher education quality peaked between the second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, and in the first decade of this century (Daenekindt & Huisman, 2020). We can relate these two peaks in attention to several policy developments. First, NPM policies in the 1980s in countries like the UK, the Netherlands, France, and the Nordics initiated the rearrangement of steering relations between the government and higher education institutes, whereby quality frameworks were developed and implemented. A second peak in quality studies occurred at the turn of the century, when quality assurance systems were more broadly developed and new forms of quality assurance evolved around the globe. At that time, the European Bologna process aimed to facilitate student mobility and mutual recognition of diplomas through developing comparable higher education systems (Dill & Beerkens, 2013; Harvey & Williams, 2010a; Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002).

The first quality peak was accompanied by academic debate on how to rearrange steering relations and develop quality frameworks, with questions raised, such as: what the hell is quality (C. Ball, 1985) and how does one operationalise, measure, assure, and improve quality in engagement with different stakeholders (Barnett, 1992; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 1995; van Vught & Westerheijden, 1995)? Several attempts were undertaken to operationalise the quality notion and make it researchable, with or without a working definition.

Harvey and Green's (1993) seminal article, 'Defining quality', drew attention to quality as a relative concept. The quality concept is relative in that its meaning changes and is open to varying understandings and enacted by multiple actors in different situations. The notion itself changes, and it is in this sense a multiplicity. It is also relative in that it is judged, for example in exams where a specific threshold should be achieved or in assessing the quality of the educational process and its outcomes. Quality is a slippery concept, according to Harvey and Green, but the different conceptualisations in use can nevertheless be categorised into five discrete yet interrelated ways of thinking about quality in higher education: quality as excellence, efficiency, adherence to standards, transformation, or fitness for purpose.

The multi-actor perspective has gained ground since Harvey and Green (1993), as well as the viewpoints that quality is a relative concept and that theorising should link quality to its specific higher education contexts. The search for a quality definition was scrapped from the research agenda at the turn of the century. Quality's multiplicity, multidimensionality, and subjectivity became broadly accepted, as well as the idea that it can be studied following different categorisations and rationales in practice (Brockerhoff et al., 2015; Westerheijden, 1999).

The second peak of quality studies focused on questions about organising accreditation and evaluation frameworks across different countries (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2007). A European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies was established and European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) defined qualifications in terms of learning outcomes – statements of what students know and can do on completing their degrees. Questions were asked about the emergence of markets as tools of public policies and their relationship with academic professions in the further development of quality assurance frameworks (Amaral, 2007; Amaral & Rosa, 2014; Dill, 1995; Dill & Beerkens, 2013). J. Newton (2007, 2010) traced a shift in the quality discourse from attention on formal quality notions to more situated, practiced, and experienced understandings. After a period with much emphasis on design issues and the relationship between quality assurance systems and the governance of higher education, and a period that focused on methodological issues, studies concerning quality assurance became interested in the human factor (Stensaker, 2008).

Attention turned towards the establishment of quality cultures and the role of management in creating shared values and practices within institutions. This came with questions regarding ambivalences of management and stakeholder perspectives as well as control-oriented or development-oriented paradigms in evaluation (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Stensaker, 2008; Vettori et al., 2007). Issues regarding quality and its contexts concerned alignment and its realisation across different contexts, including different valuations, perceptions, and competing voices (J. Newton, 2007). Ambivalences concerned how abstract and distanced quality standards should be to support comparability across different situations and contexts and at the same time maintain a situation-specific perspective to evaluate and strengthen quality practices (Bloxham, 2012).

The effects of quality assurance on situated practices were critically assessed from different, interrelated perspectives. (Neo)positivist analyses questioned the existing evidence for positive effects and found mixed results, also concerning the

value of external quality assurance for encouraging improvement (Beerkens, 2018; Harvey & Williams, 2010b; Kleijnen et al., 2011). Social analyses paid attention to quality's abstract characteristics. Critical discourse analyses focused on the performative effects of quality's ambiguous and multiple meanings in policy-related discourses. Saarinen (2005, 2008b) noted that quality's meaning changed during the Bologna process from ideas of European openness and customer ideology towards technical rationalities. Academic staff and students therefore appeared only gradually as active actors, but the openness of the Bologna discourse allowed different actors to maintain their own quality perspective. In line therewith, Huisman and Westerheijden (2010) found that, from a neo-institutional perspective, the Bologna process and concomitant establishment of European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance provided a clear example of decoupling. They strengthen comparability at (supra-)national level, but are distant from, and alien to, organisational activities of teaching and learning.

Almost antithetical to the decoupling perspective is the view that quality is pervasive and operates as a meta-narrative that continually extends its domain and constitutes invisible webs of power. Because of its inherent association with goodness, it cannot be opposed (Dahler-Larsen, 2019; Morley, 2003, 2004). Drawing on Shore and Wright (1999) and Foucault (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982), Morley (2003, 2004) argues that quality processes and audit cultures are seen as undermining academic values by imposing new forms of coercive and authoritarian governmentality. Quality assurance is an interrogating power in terms of macro-systems of accountability, surveillance, and regulation, affecting microprocesses and changing the *habitus* of people within universities.

> Quality is a political technology functioning as regime and relay
> of power – that is, it serves as both a mechanism and ideology
> through which certain values, behaviours and structures are pre-
> scribed (Morley, 2004, pp. 2-3).

Morley (2003, 2004) and scholars like Ashwin (2020) and Dahler-Larsen (2019) point to changes in the complex relationship between the individual and the collective. The individual academic is now being held responsible for the collective via accountability procedures and scores. Data and governance work together in the 'fabrication' (one way of making it) of quality in higher education. A classic contradiction is thereby created between quality as reified and objectified, and quality as being experienced (Ozga et al., 2011, p. 2).

Overall, we see that quality is being understood and studied as objectified and value-neutral, but that it is also assessed as situation-specific and related to different values, experiences, and perspectives. Issues like the negative effects of quality assurance instruments on academic cultures have therefore become critically assessed and related to societal changes like increasing competitiveness, audit cultures, and a lack of trust in institutions and academic actors (Amaral, 2014; Amaral & Rosa, 2014; Brankovic et al., 2023; Enders & Westerheijden, 2014; Ozga et al., 2011).

Research aims and main research question

Despite the attention on quality practices, there is still a lack of empirical knowledge on how the challenging quality notion is constituted by people within and across specific different contexts. Looking back at the uptake of Harvey and Green's (1993) 'Defining quality', Harvey and Newton (2007) note that the different quality categorisations and rationales have provided little guidance for analysing its abstract characteristics in practice. They critique the quality notion itself as elusive, lacking conceptual gravitas, and in need of reconstitution, without, however, relating its abstract characteristics to possibilities in practice.

We do not have a socio-theoretical perspective to consider and understand the empirics concerning the relationship between quality's situated understandings and their environments. Schaffer (2016) notes, for example, that Foucault (1977) writes brilliantly about the place of concepts in social life, but provides little guidance for analysing power dynamics in practice and the space that different actors can deploy to act upon these quality processes and their structured environment.

Studies that build upon Foucault draw attention to – and maybe strengthen – a divide between those evaluating and those being evaluated, but overlook the dynamics and ambivalences of academics in different and often multiple roles and positions. Senior academics such as full professors and associate professors, for example, often have a teaching assignment and realise higher education quality in educational practices such as curriculum design, but also maintain managerial responsibilities whereby they evaluate the performances of their colleagues.

Higher education quality has the potential to bind different perspectives and act upon processes within and across universities, but we do not know what space different actors possess to create change and direct processes in a specific way. Following Giddens' (1984) well-known work on structuration, Newton (2000, p. 162) argues that 'quality' acts as a 'modality' through which actors can un-

derstand 'structure'. We can take Giddens' argument a step further and analyse whether and how quality enables situated actors to change the rules of the game and alter academic relationships and configurations in a certain direction. This dissertation combines Wittgenstein's (1953) notion of language games with framing analysis and Elias' notion of human figurations as an analytical perspective to understand how people play out the notion in situated enactments and understandings, and to assess how this relates to larger social processes across different contexts.

The research aims of the dissertation are threefold:
- To understand how the abstract higher education quality concept is understood and enacted by people in different positions and situations in Dutch higher education in interdependence with their evolving contexts (how is it made);
- To understand what these constituent processes mean for practices and power-ridden social processes of the people involved and their larger environment;
- To develop and critically assess the value of the combined analytical perspective with which to understand these evolvements.

The following research question is posed: How is higher education quality played out by people in varying situated practices, how do these understandings and enactments relate to larger social processes within and across different contexts, and how can we understand these evolvements by using Wittgenstein, framing analysis, and Elias as a complexity perspective?

Analytical perspective and research design

To understand how quality is made in engagement with its contexts, I have applied an interpretive approach. Interpretive approaches are based on the presumption that we live in a world characterised by the possibility of multiple interpretations (Yanow, 2000). An interpretive approach to social science concepts such as higher education elucidates how people such as students, lecturers, managers, and policymakers create meaning and shape these concepts in engagement with their environments, including other people (Schaffer, 2016).

The research design is exploratory and iterative to grasp how quality as an abstract notion is understood and enacted by different groups of people in interdependence with their environment. The four empirical studies that I conducted in

the Netherlands build upon one another and further develop the combination of language games – framing analysis – human figurations as an analytical perspective to study quality's evolvement within and across different contexts.

Elucidating quality and its contexts with Wittgenstein's language games

> The greatest difficulty in these investigations is to find a way of representing vagueness. ... One can speak of the function of a word in a sentence, in a language-game, and in language. But in each of these cases 'function' means *technique*. Thus it refers to a *general* way of explaining and of training (Wittgenstein, 1982, § 347-348).

Wittgenstein's (1953) notion of language games is used throughout the dissertation as a constructivist, open perspective to study how higher education quality as an abstract notion is played out by people in situated practices in interdependence with different contexts, without capturing or narrowing down its different meanings. Rather than starting with a definition to study quality, I have focused on how people come to definitions or other ways to concretise and realise it in practice (Schaffer, 2016). Constructivist approaches acknowledge that the reality we know is not only interpreted, but also constructed, enacted, and maintained through language. In a constructivist discourse, language itself is a construction, and different language games will give multiple constructions, understandings, and assessments of higher education quality in interrelation with its contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Wittgenstein, 1953). Such a constructivist perspective remains partial and values other epistemic perspectives that are less focused on practices and context-specific uses. It allows us to understand when and how the quality concept is approached in different forms of analyses and practices, for example in negotiations about standards or in using student evaluations.

Central to the idea of language games is that we lay down rules and techniques for a game that develop as abridgements of practices. To show that words gain their meaning through rules, Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of the chess game. You cannot play chess by pointing to its separate pieces, but need to have knowledge of the rules or have mastered similar games to be able to play chess (Wittgenstein, 1953, § 31). We have to learn in order to participate in the game. As Stern (2004) notes, attention is thereby drawn to the context in which our use of language takes place; 'I shall call the whole, consisting of language and actions into which it is woven, a language-game' (Wittgenstein 1953, § 7d).

The number of possible language games is unlimited. Wittgenstein notes that there are countless different kinds of use of what we call symbols, words, and sentences. This multiplicity is not fixed. New types of language and language games come into play, whereas others become obsolete and forgotten, and how this evolves and the rules that people thereby develop is what we want to understand.

Its specific uses and phrases help us to elucidate how people understand a concept, and for example what they find important and whether they contest it or use it fashionably. Different notions of quality can thus be part of the quality family, without having to share the same properties. Giving quality definitions, providing indicators, but also denotations like 'that's not quality' are all part of the same quality family. We can pattern how they evolve over time and what specific actors select and bring to the fore in engagement with their environment.

The first study in the dissertation concerns specifically how policymakers play out higher education quality in policy texts in engagement with different contexts over time, and it discusses extensively the analytical value of the notion of language games (Weenink et al., 2018). The study on quality policies elucidates, for example, how the formal national policy understandings became more internationally oriented and competitive around the turn of the century.

Whereas the study on evolving quality policies looks at how the notion is played out in a formal way, the other three studies in the dissertation dive further into the evolvement of quality in processes of meaning making in situated practices 'on the ground'. Wittgenstein's language games enable us to *indicate* when it is used vaguely, ambivalently, and ambiguously in specific situations and contexts, or more articulately framed. Following Wittgenstein, we do not need sharp boundaries or clear expressions to do something with a concept:

> Is it senseless to say: 'Stand roughly there'? Suppose that I were standing with someone in a city square and said that. As I say it I do not draw any kind of boundary, but perhaps point with my hand – as if I were indicating a particular spot. And this is just how one might explain to someone what a game is. One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way (Wittgenstein, 1953, § 34e).

Adding framing analysis to understand sensemaking practices

Framing analysis provides both a theoretical lens and a method to assess how people deal with issues in complex environments (Dewulf et al., 2009). To interpret interviews in the article with programme directors (Weenink et al., 2022), framing analysis is added as a language-centred approach to further assess how quality is played out and when it is used vaguely or more concretely in interactional sensemaking practices in everyday life. As further explained in the articles on meaning making in the universities included in Chapters 3 to 5 of this thesis, framing analysis serves as an analytical perspective and method to assess what is going on while making sense of situations and issues.

Framing creates meanings in interaction while relating previous experiences and cognitions to dynamic, situational contexts. Frames are implicit theories of a situation, and framing is a language-driven ordering process through which people select and label the relevant features of the situation, structure these into an understandable whole, and behave accordingly (Goffman, 1974; van Herzele & Aarts, 2013). Framing analysis exposes quality's interrelations with webs of power, as people actively construct frames that fit their interests, feelings, convictions, and backgrounds to achieve specific goals. Entman foregrounds in this respect that framing involves *selection* and *salience*.

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

What gets framed are usually the issues at stake, actors' identities and relationships, and the process itself (Aarts & Van Woerkum, 2006; Dewulf et al., 2009). What people select, name, and categorise as relevant from their complex environment is key to a dynamic, processual understanding of framing as it develops in sensemaking processes (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). The exclamation 'That's not quality!', for example, selects and names a specific 'thing', but also categorises its features as undesirable and pushes actions in another direction.

Framing analysis enables us to understand how the abstract quality notion is played out in practices and whether people's perspectives are bound and aligned with one another in a specific direction, used against one another, or otherwise played out. As scholars like Loyal and Quilley (2013) and Mol et al. (2010) note,

framing analysis and other language-centred analyses still, however, run the risk of losing the specificities of care and goodness as grounded in practices such as the situated educational process. Writing about practices makes them public and brings those aspects to the fore that can be expressed through language – with the possibility to abstract, categorise, and alter unruly educational practices. The problem concerns the (un)translatable aspects of quality and associated notions across different contexts (Dahler-Larsen et al., 2017; Seidl, 2007). Dahler-Larsen (2019) gives the example of standards as quality categorisations 'travelling' to other situations and practices where they may be less apt.

These analytical issues remain, but the language-games approach makes it possible to see language as a practice embedded in other forms of life. It allows us to compare, for people in different situations and contexts, *how* the notion is played out and thus indicate for each specific context *when* the notion is used tacitly and indicatively, when for example standards and classifications are applied, or when notions are framed more articulately. This dissertation therefore looks at different contexts such as the policy context and different sites within universities and, for these sites, compares how the notion is understood and played out by people in practices as interdependent with their specific environment at that specific moment.

Elias' relational sociology

A situated approach, however, leaves under-addressed the dynamics and engagements of people that relate to, and depend upon, one another *across* multiple and changing contexts in different social processes. Elias' human-figurations perspective is introduced to better understand how the quality notion is played out in larger, complex, and power-ridden (con)figurations that involve actors across different sites and positions. Elias notes that the dominant way to organise social groupings is as if everything external were a thing, a static object:

> Concepts like 'family' or 'school' plainly refer to groupings of interdependent human beings, to specific figurations that people form with each other. But our traditional manner of forming these concepts makes it appear as if groupings formed by interdependent human beings were pieces of matter – objects of the same kind as rocks, trees or houses (Elias, 1970/1978, p. 13).

This common way of thinking conceptualises the individual as surrounded by social structures, yet cut off from society through some invisible barrier. Elias shares

the critique concerning this dialectic between individuals and society with prag-matist thinkers like Dewey and Mead (see Biesta, 1998, for intersubjectivity and education), with symbolic interactionists like Goffman, and with Wittgenstein, who argues that it is not possible to have a private language (Wittgenstein, 1953, § 259).

To rethink static concepts like individual, university, state, and society, Elias brings in the image of people who are related to one another in the most diverse ways. A figuration is a constellation of mutually oriented and dependent people, with shift-ing asymmetrical power balances: a nexus of human interdependencies (Elias, 1939/1968/1994). Power develops within the relationships as people are mutually dependent; the lecturer and the student have control over each other as they are both needed to realise good teaching. For lecturers and students, their mutual power develops in education-related processes, as power balances are everyday occurrences that exist as long as people attach value to them. Lecturers usually have more control over students, as well as on how the educational process is shaped, but they also depend on students to make teaching work. Interdependen-cies are at least bipolar, but often multipolar, and for example also include higher management or policymakers. Figurations are in this sense interdependency net-works (Elias, 1970/1978). They allow us to study how situated processes are relat-ed to changes in power balances between different groups and to developments such as changing steering conceptions.

Evolving games, rules, and habitus

To further strengthen this processual way of thinking and capture the dynamics of human action, Elias (1970/1978, pp. 71-103) uses the image of people playing a game as forming societies together. The most simplified game model is that of the Primal Contest: a competitive relationship governed without shared rules of behaviour, whereby two groups struggle over resources. As with a game of chess (which was originally a war game), each move of one group determines each move of the other group and vice versa, and the moves cannot be predicted. The internal arrangements in each group are determined to a greater or lesser extent by thoughts about what the other might do next (Elias, 1970/1978, p. 79). Power balances can thus change, and we can analyse these basic ordering processes, even when they are played without norms and rules. Elias notes that the analogy of a game such as chess or football being played out according to rules is less apt for the Primal Contest state than for his more sophisticated game models, as it represents a real and deadly contest between groups. It also reminds us of the actual possibility of disorder.

Both Wittgenstein (1953) and Elias (1970/1978) argue that the rules of games are not present from the outset and that games do not always transpire as expected. Elias reasons that the more the game comes to resemble a social process, the less it can be individually planned. The difficulty in determining the course of the game increases when the number of people or groups involved increases and the chains of different people's and groups' interdependence upon one another become longer. The game will then become opaquer for individual players, and even those in a relatively strong position will be less able to control it.

As the number of players in a game grows, the chances of disintegration and pressure to reorganise also increase. The group of players can fall apart or develop into distinct groups, but there is also a chance that the group will remain integrated and turn into a complex, multilevel figuration. In the latter case, all players remain interdependent, but they are no longer directly in play with one another. People such as 'representatives, delegates, leaders, governments, royal courts, and monopolistic elites' then form a second, coordinating group related to the mass of players (Elias, 1970/1978, p. 86). Power balances become complex in such games and concern the balances of the group with the upper level, but also between and within groups at the lower level. Players can thus both cooperate and compete within groups, and with other groups, to get things done.

Elias related changes in the organisation of power-ridden human figurations to concomitant but not always simultaneous shifts in *habitus*, the way in which people behave and engage with one another psychologically and socially. In *The court society* (1969/1983), Elias described how, during the reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715), warriors became tamed and transformed into courtiers without independent power – and the game changed. The courtiers were grouped between the nobility and the king and became rivals, striving for status and rank instead of economic gains and income. Through processes of self-observation, reflexivity, and self-control, the courtiers adjusted their behaviour to improve their position.

Mennell (1997) notes that Elias identified civilising processes at individual level (a process of socialisation) and the more controversial long-term processes of shaping standards of behaviour. In a complex society, people constantly attune their behaviour to that of others and further develop rules and regularities. 'To attune their conduct to that of others, the web of actions must be organized more and more strictly and accurately, if each individual action is to fulfil its social function' (Elias, 1939/1994, p. 367).

Analysing contradictory processes

In *The civilizing process* (1939/1994), Elias argues that interdependencies produce social stability, but also account for elasticity and sometimes fragility, as social relations are simultaneously predictable and unpredictable. As (Mowles, 2015) notes, the constraining and enabling features of human relations draw attention to contradictory processes in human life. Elias' processual approach make us sensitive to how dualities such as stability and change, and individual and group, evolve over time. He recasts such dualities as paradoxical – stressing the diverse and often dilemmatic ways in how the two poles are related to each other.

This way of thinking alters the analysis of how people in higher education relate to one another and their environment. Elias' processual and relational approach circumvents discussions concerning structure and agency. Social figurations are to a certain degree independent of the specific individuals forming them at any particular time, but they are not independent of individuals *as such* (Dunning & Hughes, 2013; Van Krieken, 1998). Elias' processual sociology enables us to interpret the space that people can deploy to realise higher education quality in interdependence with one another in processes that span different contexts. It emphasises the interplay of coordination of processes, multilinear chains of interdependencies, and emergent processes of change instead of looking at how individuals such as teachers, students, and managers have agency and are embedded in structures. Rules play an important part in producing and reproducing this patterned character of social life, but they are not exhaustive as determinants of social structure (Dunning & Hughes, 2013, p. 177).[1]

Combining Wittgenstein, Elias, and framing analysis to study quality and complex environments

Wittgenstein and Elias both touched upon many topics, changed their minds, and have frequently been misunderstood (Heinich, 2013; Stern, 2004; Van Krieken, 1998). Both scholars nevertheless provide us an analytical toolbox to 'think with', and Wittgenstein's language games have been used in a wide range of disciplines. The same goes for Elias' empirically based central theory, which is less well-known, yet broad enough to be applied to various topics (Dunning & Hughes, 2013; Newton, 2001). Lybeck (2019), for example, demonstrates that understanding educational processes *as processes* sheds a different light on questions concerning social inequalities of education and globalisation.

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1   To my knowledge, Elias differed from Giddens (1984) in that he did not explicitly rely on Wittgenstein's language games as constituent.

It is, however, the combination of language games, framing analysis, and processual sociology that enables us to analyse how the abstract notion is played out by people in engagement with their environment in all its facets, from the shortest utterance and process of meaning making to the complex power dynamics in extended, slowly evolving figurations. Anthropologist Anton Blok (1976) found the combination of Wittgenstein and Elias fruitful for analysing how concepts gain meaning in varying practices and processes, and Mowles (2015) positions Elias alongside Wittgenstein in the canon of process-oriented scholars who explore flux and change in organisation studies.

Research questions

The research question how higher education quality is played out by people in situated practices, how these understandings and enactments relate to larger social processes and how we can understand this from the combined analytical perspective can be further concretised in the following questions:

1. How do people in different positions play out higher education as an abstract concept within and across specific, changing, contexts?
2. Which issues do they thereby experience, how do they deal with them, and how do these processes relate to changes in their environment?
3. What is the contribution of the combined analytical perspective, and how can we understand the evolvements in how higher education quality is played out from a language-centred and interdependency perspective on complexity and social developments?

Case studies and methods

The dissertation applies an interpretive methodology to elucidate how the abstract quality notion has been played out by actors at different sites and positions in Dutch higher education since 1985 (Schaffer, 2016; Yanow, 2000). I have conducted four studies that have been published and together explore how the quality notion is played out within and across academic figurations in the Netherlands. Formal governmental policy texts, guidelines, and documentation were interpreted, and interviews and focus groups were conducted with people in various positions.

The first study, on governmental policies, concerns the Dutch government's relationship with the entire field of publicly funded higher education institutions. The other three studies were conducted in research universities and specifically concerned education in various social sciences as realised within their faculties. This

context was chosen because the publicly funded research universities in the Netherlands provide insight into the long-term development of academic figurations. Publicly funded higher education institutions in the Netherlands are divided into research universities and universities of applied sciences. Both types of university provide education as well as research, but the universities of applied sciences focus on providing professional higher education and have their roots in vocational education. The 14 research universities have a stronger focus on research and a more longstanding tradition of combining research and education. They have been publicly funded and under governmental control for a longer period of time (Griffioen, 2013). The changing steering relationships since the 1980s are in this respect for them comparable with academic developments in other countries in continental Europe (Leišytė & Dee, 2012).

The social sciences were chosen in order to have a particular focus. The focus group discussions were conducted with academics across 11 of the 14 research universities in the Netherlands, and the interviews varied by university location, size, and profile. With the exception of Delft University of Technology and Eindhoven University of Technology, all the universities provide a substantial number of educational programmes in the social sciences (including behavioural sciences). The Open University was excluded from the dissertation because it focuses on part-time education. I made sure to cover in each study the variety in disciplines within the social sciences. Because the social sciences were chosen, the academic figurations are not covered in their entirety. Habits, education valuations, and relationships can be different in, for example, the medical sciences or sciences faculties. The study on student evaluations did address university-wide discussions in two universities though.

The three research questions guided the selection of the case studies and methods. I made sure that the exploratory and iterative research design captured the main relationships that make up the figuration (1), provided a deeper understanding of the quality-related issues and processes at stake (2), and further explored the value of the combined theoretical perspective (3).

1. Capturing the higher education quality figuration
To understand the complexities and interdependencies within and across the extended figuration, I addressed how the abstract quality notion is played out in formal governmental policies over time in the first study, to then specifically study the understandings and strategies of people within research universities in the other three studies. The three studies conducted in the universities included com-

parisons of people in different positions. These studies specifically included those dealing with multiple commitments, such as programme managers and academics who combine education, research, and other university tasks. People who use and shape student evaluations were interviewed, ranging from lecturers and students to educational directors and project leaders at central institutional level.

To capture the wide range of interdependencies relevant to the realisation of higher education, language games and framing analysis were used as a contextualising perspective from the inside out. We therefore concentrated specifically on the environments, policies, people, perspectives, and so forth that were selected and emerged as salient in the policy texts, interviews, and focus group discussions. Quality is grounded in everyday situated educational processes, and this approach allows us to understand how these processes relate to their larger environment. Organisations like the Dutch parliament, the European Commission, the Accreditation Organisation of Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), and the Inspectorate all have a say in the realisation of quality in practices, but one cannot foresee their relevance and the full range of the evolving figuration. The contextualising perspective provides an indication of the relevance of different actors in the figuration, but does not bring all their (people's) perspectives to the fore.

2. Issues and strategies

The exploratory design enables a deeper understanding of the issues and interdependencies at stake, as phenomena that need further understanding thereby come to the fore (Silverman, 2021; Yanow, 2000). The dissertation's second study (included in Chapter 3) assessed how programme directors realise higher education quality in interdependence with their environment. It reveals that the position of directors in the academic hierarchy matters for the room for manoeuvre that they can deploy to play out their educational quality views. Full professors can, for example, create more leeway than assistant professors. In the third study (included in Chapter 4), I therefore further assessed how teaching and research relate to each other in the hierarchical academic figuration, and how academics perform in both domains. This study then led to the insight that early career academics in particular experienced personal difficulties with student evaluations. The last publication in the dissertation (included in Chapter 5) studied how academic actors navigate tensions and purposes concerning student evaluations, and how they use, shape, and deliberate them in practice and policy processes.

3. Bringing the combined analytical perspective into practice

This thesis started not with a fully developed theoretical perspective, but with an

inductive, open-grounded theory approach whereby Wittgenstein's notion of language games was combined with sensitising concepts to elucidate how the quality notion as an abstract notion is played out by policymakers in national policies in engagement with their environment over time (Blumer, 1954; Charmaz, 2014; Schaffer, 2016). Framing analysis and Elias' processual sociology were added to the language games perspective in the other three studies, included in Chapters 3 to 5, to further understand how the notion is played out in social, power-ridden processes. These three studies applied a more interactional approach, whereby attention was paid to the dynamics and meaning making of different people in relation to one another and their environment. Whereas the article in Chapter 2 combined language games with sensitising concepts to understand how the notion is played out, the latest article, on student evaluations in Chapter 5, used more explicitly the combination of Elias' social theory and framing analysis as a (deductive) sociological perspective to understand the constitutive processes and complex relationships at stake.

Structure of the dissertation

Chapters 2 to 5 form the body of the dissertation. These chapters include the four studies as published in different scientific journals and explore how the quality notion is played out within and across academic figurations in the Netherlands. The publications have been reproduced in their entirety, but we have now consistently applied the APA 7th edition citation style and assembled the references in one list. References in the text to the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (the name changed over the years) have been shortened. The publication in Chapter 2 was originally written in American English, but British spelling is used throughout this dissertation.

Chapter 2 discusses the value of Wittgenstein's language games for the study of higher education quality as an abstract concept. It explores how the quality notion is played out in governmental policy texts over time and identifies several changes in its relationship with its environment, especially with the higher education institutions. It indicates that quality is not contested but identifies several governmental dilemmas.

Chapter 3 assesses how higher education quality is understood and (strategically) handled by a specific group of key university actors: directors of educational programmes. Framing analysis and Elias' figurational perspective are introduced to assess how bachelor-programme directors in Dutch social science departments understand and enact quality, while maintaining multiple commitments. The anal-

ysis shows how directors apply different strategies to uphold their programme and smoothen tensions.

The study in Chapter 4 analyses how academics play out the teaching-research nexus in interdependence with their environment and thereby deal with tensions involved. Homogeneous focus group discussions were conducted with academics in different positions to better understand their room for manoeuvre and strategies within the academic figuration.

The study in Chapter 5 uses framing analysis and Elias' processual approach to understand how academic actors navigate tensions and purposes concerning student evaluations and how they use, shape, and deliberate them in practices and policy processes. Interviews were conducted in two universities with people who are actively involved in these processes, ranging from lecturers and students to programme committees, management, and project leaders. This perspective provides more insight into how relationships, interdependencies, and behaviours take shape within universities.

Chapter 6 forms the synthesis of the dissertation. It brings the insights of the different studies together, provides answers to the research questions, and formulates a conclusion. This chapter also further assesses the value of the combined analytical perspective to study abstract and positive notions such as higher education quality.

Playing language games

Higher education quality dynamics in Dutch national policies since 1985

Abstract

Higher education quality is a vague, ambiguous, multiple, and essentially contested concept. Quality's contested character involves endless disputes about its proper use which makes it problematic to handle in governmental policies. Wittgenstein's notion of language games is used to understand how, through time, higher education quality is enacted in Dutch governmental policy texts, and how its uses are related to each other. The analysis depicts various quality games interacting with different policy contexts, which show multiple enactments of quality as a unified concept alongside more differentiated uses. In the policy games, quality is not the focal notion. The games centre around the steering relationship with the institutions, which are placed 'at distance'. Through time, the games respond to increasing societal complexity and competition, and foster further flexibilisation of institutional policies regarding quality and accessibility. In this management discourse with the institutions, quality is not used contrastively. It is concluded that quality's vague and contradictory enactments and valuations are not problematic in the institutional steering relationship. Recent policy texts however relate quality's 'proper use' to activities that enhance the student's learning process. This draws attention to paradoxes for a distancing government in its role as a universal actor with societal responsibilities.

Introduction

'What the hell is quality?' researcher and policy advisor Christopher Ball asked in 1985 in a much-cited essay (C. Ball, 1985). When Ball raised his question, front-runners like the Netherlands and the United Kingdom developed a quality framework for higher education. Thirty years of policies and analysis have not provided a univocal answer to Ball's question. In the 1990s, research showed that formal quality conceptions did not match situated meanings held by educational professionals. Quality became conceived as elusive, vague, ambiguous, multifaceted, and without an essential core. It is what Gallie (1956) calls 'an essentially contested concept', which involves endless disputes about its proper use by its different users (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Newton, 2007; Harvey & Williams, 2010a; Lips, 1996; J. Newton, 2010; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011).

While academics extensively debated the higher education quality concept in the 1990s, the question 'what quality is' is currently understudied (Stensaker, 2007; Westerheijden et al., 2007; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011). Quality's multiplicity, multidimensionality, and subjectivity are broadly accepted (Brockerhoff et al., 2015; Harvey & Green, 1993) as well as the conception that it can be classified by the way it is used following different rationales. The question 'what quality is' however remains apt as it is still also used as a unified concept (Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011). There is now a variety of discourses which use and define quality, and it is questioned whether all enactments can be seen as quality. Following Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances', multiple and contradictory quality definitions and enactments can all be seen as quality. These are part of the same quality family, and family members do not need to resemble each other in their features in order to be part of this family (Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011; Wittgenstein, 1953).

The contested character of quality is still present in daily practices, as it is interrelated with numerous enactments and valuations by varying family members operating at different social levels. This renders higher education quality a complex and ill-defined social problem which cannot be easily addressed using traditional problem-solving methods, especially at the macro-societal level (Krause, 2012; Westerheijden et al., 2007). Moreover, the discussion about its proper use remains, and Harvey and Newton currently argue that classifications such as 'quality as fitness for purpose' are empty categorisations without conceptual gravitas. Instead, a Marxist reconstitution of the quality concept is proposed that evolves around its essential goodness (Harvey & Newton, 2007). Such a reconstitution however will not work, as the problem with contested concepts is that this essen-

tial character remains disputed, and differences cannot be finally settled. Even when one quality perspective becomes morally and socially dominant, there are always other perspectives, and we do not have pre-given standards to value which quality is the true one. To use an essentially contested concept is 'to use it against other uses and to recognise that one's own use has to be maintained against these other uses' (Gallie, 1956, p. 172). To understand how the quality concept relates to wider social and political contexts, we need to study how it operates and functions as a prominent concept in decision processes, especially the macro-oriented policy process.

Wittgenstein's notion of language games is used to understand how higher education quality is enacted and used in governmental policies, while interacting with different actors and policy contexts. The notion of 'language games' connects 'family resemblances' with social constructions of reality and assumes that language is woven into action. Constructivist approaches acknowledge that the reality we know is interpreted, constructed, enacted, and maintained through language. In a constructivist discourse, language itself is a construction, and different language games will give multiple constructions, understandings, and assessments of higher education quality in interaction with its contexts. Language games enable us to study quality is in all its vague, ambiguous, and contradictory uses (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Wittgenstein, 1953). To understand its uses, we pattern how higher education quality is 'played' in Dutch national policy plans published since 1985. The following research question directs the study: How and where are quality differences and unity created in governmental politics in interaction with changing actors and social contexts, and what does this mean for the policy process relating to higher education?

The patterning of language games however not automatically involves an understanding of quality's uses. The theory section 'Language games as theoretical and practical perspective' therefore addresses the possibilities and limitations of the language games perspective, and introduces Hall's work on 'articulation' to understand how and when quality is enacted as a contested concept in social formations. We then describe the case study on quality in Dutch policy texts through time. The results section analyses governmental policy documents on higher education quality and steering relations published between 1985 and 2015. This section ends with a wrap-up of differences and unity in the quality games and is followed by a discussion on what its different uses mean for the policy process and further research directions.

Language games as theoretical and practical perspective

Quality's contested, vague, ambiguous, and elusive character invites research approaches that do not aim to define, categorise, or substitute its meanings. The full political consequence of a contested identity is that it is a 'constructed identity' which cannot be grounded in any category, and therefore has no guarantees in nature (Gallie, 1956; Hall, 1996; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011; Yanow, 2003). The paradox is, however, that such approaches hinder its operationalisation. Current quality studies therefore address its vagueness but do not operationalise it (Giroux, 2006).

This section introduces and discusses Wittgenstein's notion of language games to elucidate how quality differences and unity are enacted in interrelation with different contexts, without catching or narrowing down quality's meanings. Categorisations and typologies can thereby provide a useful starting point to study quality enactments, if they are used as sensitising concepts. This section ends with a description of how sensitising concepts can provide directions about where to look, without using them as definitive categories (Blumer, 1954).

Introducing language games

Wittgenstein introduced language games in his lectures published as the *Blue Book* and further developed the concept in his *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1953, 1958). Central to the idea of language games is that we lay down rules and techniques for a game. These games develop as abridgements of practices. When we follow these rules, things do not turn out as we assumed however (Mouffe, 2000; Stern, 2004). Wittgenstein notes that we are entangled in our own rules, and this entanglement is what we want to understand (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 50e).

According to Stern (2004), it is essential to this method that attention is drawn to the context in which our use of language takes place, highlighting the state of affairs before contradictions are resolved. The term language game is applied to almost any action in which language is involved in some way, any interweaving of human life and language; 'I shall call the whole, consisting of language and actions into which it is woven, a language-game' (Wittgenstein, 1953, § 7d). This makes the number of possible language games countless. Wittgenstein notes that there are countless different kinds of use of what we call 'symbols', 'words', and 'sentences'. This multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all. New types of language and new language games, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten (Wittgenstein, 1953, § 23).

Language itself is multiple, and this enables the interpretation of plural and poly-semous concepts like higher education quality in different uses and contexts. The notion of language games does not make the difficulties in interpreting vague concepts disappear. Whereas context can select one of the ambiguous meanings, their relation with their contexts is more complicated for vague concepts. Vague expressions can be context-dependent, but context does not provide clear conceptual boundaries (Giroux, 2006; Keefe, 2000; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011).

Language games do, however, allow sensemaking to understand vague concepts in practice. We do not need sharp boundaries to do something with a concept.

> Is it senseless to say: 'Stand roughly there'? Suppose that I were standing with someone in a city square and said that. As I say it I do not draw any kind of boundary, but perhaps point with my hand – as if I were indicating a particular spot. And this is just how one might explain to someone what a game is. One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way (Wittgenstein 1953, 34e).

Giving examples is not an indirect way of explaining or defining, but an expression of the game. This is how games are played, and understanding is conveyed in language games. Patterning higher education quality games will not provide clarity or definition, but will help to elucidate how quality is enacted and interrelates with its changing contexts (Mauws & Phillips, 1995).

Possibilities and limitations of language games

Although the notion of language games has been used to study organisational practices and strategising (Mantere, 2010), it has not yet been applied to the study of quality in higher education. There is, however, a wide range of textual and discourse analytic approaches to higher education quality. Several studies depict discursive struggles over meaning, whereby Foucauldian and Critical Discourse Analytic perspectives tend to dominate (Morley, 2003; Saarinen, 2008a; Vidovich, 2001). Vidovich (2001), for instance, argues in a longitudinal analysis of Australian policies that quality is chameleonlike and tends to meld into its contexts. This enables the government to launch institutional reforms. Others are more critical toward the 'captive powers of discourse', and note that academics apply different repertoires to negotiate their own position in institutions (S. J. Ball, 1993; Trowler, 2001). These agency-oriented analyses however do not specifically problematise the quality concept.

Several studies analyse how quality is translated as a management concept (Blanco Ramírez, 2015; Giroux, 2006; Stensaker, 2007). To enable broad dissemination, it has to lend itself to various interpretations, and each party has to recognise itself in its own version of the concept. This equivocality allows different courses of action while maintaining a semblance of unity (Giroux, 2006). Such studies however focus on traceable translations and do not operationalise its vague enactments in the open social domain. With respect to different translation and discourse analyses, the language games perspective is more open to the unlimited range of vague and contradictory higher education quality enactments. It asks for an interpretive policy approach which focuses on situation-specific meanings, and enables the study of the interplay between language uses with a variety of contexts. Being rooted in practices, language games allow us to understand how and where quality unity and differences are enacted, situated, and strategised in governmental policies (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Mantere, 2010; Yanow, 2007).

The language games perspective however runs the risk of losing analytical power since its toolbox comes without preset rules or limitations to conduct the social analysis. Its openness can lead to Lyotard's conception of society as consisting in a plurality of incommensurable language games. Anything then seems to go, which makes moral and political rearticulations impossible. Furthermore, if the practice perspective is not taken seriously, it reduces reality to a spectacle of what is immediately there on the surface (Grossberg & Hall, 1996; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

In line with Hall, we therefore study the practices of 'articulation' to understand how the different contested quality uses are maintained and played in relation to each other. Articulation literally means to utter, 'to speak forth'. It is however also a temporal linkage, whereby two different elements like 'quality as essence' and 'quality as differentiated' are connected. Processes of articulation involve social formations, whereby things are related through their similarities as well as their differences. As Hall notes, the practices itself do not necessary lead to political articulations. There will always be language games which do not connect or confront different quality uses (Grossberg & Hall, 1996; Slack, 1996).

Hall's notion of articulation is used to further clarify how the games are played, and when quality is articulated as a contested concept. Wittgenstein was wary of what we would now call cognitivist interpretations of mental worlds, which originate meaning making in private, inaccessible minds (Potter, 2001). As a critical Marxist, Hall differs from this perspective. To put it overly simple, Hall

integrates identifications in the processes of sensemaking, which he understands as processes of struggle while interrelating with underlying structuring schemes. Contrary to earlier Marxist theorist, Hall, however, does not fall in the pitfalls of essentialism (Grossberg & Hall, 1996). Hall thereby uses the games analogy as brought forward by the linguist Saussure. While both Saussure and Wittgenstein farewell the perspective that a word stands for its meaning, Saussure understands linguistic signs and language itself as biplanar (Harris, 1988, p. 14).

In practice, Wittgenstein's language games focus on directions and sensemaking in the (inter-)act, whereas Hall's games relate with underlying structures and identifications the actors bring forward in interaction. It enables a better understanding of its contestation as it also addresses underlying identifications. To gain a full understanding of how quality is enacted in governmental policies, we first interpret the policy texts following Wittgenstein's language games perspective. The conclusion then specifically addresses different articulations and contrastive uses.

Interpreting the policy texts

The aim of the study is to elucidate where and how differences and unity in higher education quality are enacted in governmental politics, and to understand what its contested, vague and ambiguous character means for the policy process. Wittgenstein's notion of language games is used to interpret 12 Dutch national higher education policy texts since 1985, and pattern how these games are played and change through time. The interpretation concerns the 1985 governmental white paper Higher Education Autonomy and Quality (Hoger Onderwijs Autonomie en Kwaliteit, or HOAK) and subsequent strategic planning documents.

Since 1988, 11 generic planning documents have been published. They all address higher education and research, but the 2015 Strategic Agenda focuses on education.2 The formal author is the Dutch national government, represented by the Ministry of Education and Science. The documents were first named Higher Education Research Plan (Hoger Onderwijs Onderzoeks Plan, or HOOP) and in 2007 renamed Strategic Agenda (Strategische Agenda Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek).

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2   The Netherlands has a binary higher education system with universities (universiteiten) and more practice-oriented universities of applied sciences (hogescholen).

We analysed the final drafts of the documents, which have been sent to the Parliament. The documents are the result of governmental interactions and deliberations with various and changing actors, and aim to provoke planned change. The collectively written policy texts are carefully constructed. While they provide directions to the planning process, they remain vague and open to future deliberations (Czarniawska, 1997). The content and form of the plans change through time, and they range from 200 to over 600 pages. Some plans are published with addenda containing indicators and statistics. As these indicators and statistics are expressions of language games, no selections have been made in the texts. Both the core documents and their addenda are interpreted.

The constant comparison of language games forms the methodological basis of the interpretation. Language games can take the form of new strategies relating to solving policy problems, giving new orders, using statistical data, and countless other acts. They range from simple, well-defined acts, such as the use of predefined quality indicators in argumentation, to abstract meta-levels, such as providing vague indications. The texts are therefore constantly compared on different, interrelating units of analysis, ranging from single utterances to the whole body of texts. Quality classifications function as labels to code the texts and provide a starting point in the identification of quality games. Interpreting language games implies identifying where in the policy texts quality is situated, who is concerned, and which courses of actions are proposed to solve the indeterminacy. The analysis was computer-assisted using the Atlas-TI program.

Quality classifications as sensitising concepts

Quality studies identify and contribute to the categorising and modelling of the higher education quality concept from different traditions, spanning management, and educational perspectives (Brockerhoff et al., 2015; Giroux, 2006a; Stensaker, 2007). We use Harvey & Green (1993) as sensitising concepts. Though these categories have later been identified as empty, they provide a starting point to identify different rationales and practices in the games. Harvey and Green have raised awareness for quality as a relative concept, in the sense that it is subjective and has to be compared or valued against standards (Brockerhoff et al., 2015; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Williams, 2010a);

- *Quality as fitness for purpose* relates to the purpose of a product or service and is judged from this perspective. Any product is good if it serves its purpose. Students' education, for instance, should match the requirements of work-life. This perspective is dynamic because purposes can change.

- *Quality as value for money* is difficult to discern from fitness for purpose. It is explicitly linked to economic motivations and the measurement of quality in terms of profit and effectiveness.
- *Quality as excellence* encompasses two different notions:
- *Quality as exception* is quite remote from quality as fitness for purpose, as it is distinctive and elitist, and by definition exclusive. It requires constant modification of elitist standards to keep the distinction.
- *Quality as perfection* or consistency focuses on specifications for how quality is to be striven for in every part of a process. The result depends on the quality culture. The focus is on the process, and it is characterised by checklists and procedures.
- *Quality as transformation* relates to the transformative process that students go through and is often addressed as *Bildung*. The transformative process can be of higher or lower quality.

Results

The HOAK paper: fostering autonomy and quality

In the 1985 HOAK paper, higher education quality is primarily played in two inter-related ways: as a central notion in the design of changing steering relations and as a new system of quality assurance. The gist of the HOAK paper is that current steering relations are no longer effective in adequately advancing the quality of higher education in a complex and changing society. 'The dynamics and unpredictability of social and scientific change call for the reduction of uniforming and centralised procedures to the absolute minimum' (MinEd, 1985, p. 9). The proposed solution is increased institutional autonomy. This enables systems dynamisation, which fosters flexibility and quality.

In this reasoning, the quality concept is paired with the concept of institutional autonomy. 'The paired concept of 'autonomy and quality' fullfils a central role in this paper: it indicates policy directions' (MinEd, 1985, p. 10). The Educational Council of the Netherlands remarks on the draft HOAK paper that there is no logical and evident relationship between those two concepts and that it cannot be simply assumed that increased autonomy will automatically lead to quality improvement. The government responds in the final paper that quality increase is not a reality that automatically comes with growing institutional space for policymaking, but that it forms a necessary precondition thereto. The realisation of quality therefore becomes the primary responsibility of the institutions. They have

to use the increased room for policy manoeuvre (MinEd, 1985). The central position of the paired concept was not further questioned, and the paper was accepted without much political discussion. The government, the institutions, and their umbrella bodies were convinced that a new relationship between government and institutions was needed. No further argument was necessary, for who could be against more autonomy (Lips, 1996; Mertens, 2011)?

Although quality and autonomy fulfil a central role in the HOAK paper, the elaboration focuses on the how of changing steering relations between the national government and institutions. The planning system is to change from detailed governmental prescriptions to institutional accountability. The government thereby strives for a situation of distanced and global steering, whereby the institutions themselves are responsible for their policies and interact with different societal subsystems. It is noted that this increases the space for institutional profiling and differentiation. The intent is to put more effort into communication and interaction in the steering relationship with the institutions.

The HOAK paper introduces two new planning documents to support the interaction between the government and the publicly funded institutions. In their Development Plans, the institutions should formulate how they plan to interact with societal changes and respond to the governmental Higher Education Plan. In turn, this Higher Education Plan (which would become the HOOP) should interact with the development plans and contain the governmental vision on the higher education system.

The introduction of a good system of quality assurance is found essential to the functioning of the changing steering conceptions. The institutions and their umbrella bodies are to organise a system of quality assurance, and the inspectorate will have an additional, evaluative role.

To summarise, together with (institutional) autonomy, quality provides directions to new policies laid down in the HOAK paper. It supports new steering policies, whereby the distancing of institutions improves their flexibility in interacting with a complex and changing society. Higher education quality is thereby treated as an abstract though unified object, realised when the institutions use the improved space for policy maneuver.

1988-1992: coming into play
In the first draft HOOP, educational quality is not a central notion. Its introduc-

tion focuses on the role of the government and the HOOPs as communicative documents in the process of realising new steering relations and related planning systems. The HOOPs should bring cohesion in governmental communication with the institutions and other parties.

> What is written in the HOOP should be substantiated and moti-vated, and therefore legitimate, but not compelling [...]. [...] an ex-change of insights and arguments is needed, of meanings and atti-tudes, of intentions and foresights. We call this exchange dialogue (MinEd, 1987, pp. 9-10).

Dialogue is a central concept in the first three HOOPs. It is considered necessary to enable responsible decision-making by both government and institutions. The proposed dialogue is formal and procedural, and conducted by exchange of writ-ten documents as well as through deliberations with the institutions, their repre-sentative bodies, and other parties.

Like in the HOAK paper, quality is supposed to be the result of actions performed primarily by the institutions, guided by governmental perspectives on develop-ments in different societal subsystems. With the absence of quality as a central notion, this reasoning is, however, less explicit than in the HOAK paper. When quality is addressed in the strategic sections, it is treated as a relative though unified concept, which can be compared with other countries' performances. The Dutch quality highlands are valued positively in comparison to more strongly proliferated institutional differences in the United States. Policies that foster ex-cellence and quality peaks should not endanger this high quality standard (MinEd, 1987).

In the strategic section of the first HOOP, the notion of excellence interrelates with the more prominent notion of quality as fitness for purpose. This labour-oriented perspective on higher education quality is also highlighted in the plan-ning sections. Macro-societal developments interrelate with the functioning of the current educational system and scenarios for the supply of, and demand for, higher-educated people on the national labour market. Statistics for example ad-dress scenarios for supply and demand in specific sectors. In the dialogue, the government focuses on the planning of educational subsystems, not on individual institutional interactions.

Although we can identify sensitising quality concepts like fitness for purpose and excellence, quality is not explicitly named or suggested in the texts. National labour market statistics and higher education statistics, for example, are not understood as quality indicators. The sensitising concepts relate to higher education in general, not specifically to quality.

'Quality assurance implies an explicit opinion on what is understood to be the quality of education or research'. In the second HOOP, it is noted that there are various perspectives on the scientific, social, and individual features of graduates, as well as on the meaningfulness and efficiency of the educational process. Several parties with varying interests and values mingle in the debate and are entitled to do so. Hence, a varied set of instruments is needed to gather and value the ordeals of students, educational professionals, graduates, and customers. The discussion on what is understood as quality is advanced further when the concepts used are specified. Operationalising these concepts clarifies where value orientations diverge and can have the effect of the conversation becoming more pragmatic (MinEd, 1989, p. 319).

The intent is to formulate valuable performance indicators with the institutions, and come to a shared language. This can have a disciplining effect on interactions with the institutions, if those involved agree on which indicators are valuable and acceptable (MinEd, 1989, pp. 319-320). A quality dialogue that makes the different value orientations explicit is found necessary to come to these performance indicators and serves the interaction with the institutions. This quality dialogue, however, is not played out in the HOOPs.

The first HOOPs exemplify a quest for how the planning and steering game is practiced in interaction with the institutions. In doing so, quality is played in at least three ways. The strategic policy game treats quality as a unified though relative object, which can be valued against other countries' performances. In the planning game, quality is not specifically addressed. We can however recognise several sensitising concepts, whereby fitness for purpose predominates. Finally, the quality assurance game treats quality as a differentiated concept, whereby different value orientations and quality conceptions should be addressed in a government-led dialogue and shared language.

1994-1998: playing differentiation and selectivity

> The strength of nations in social, economic, and cultural domains is increasingly determined by the capital that well-educated people represent. To build and maintain this human capital, higher education is of crucial importance. Higher education is the place where talent is fully developed, where young people are challenged to make the best of themselves, where researchers achieve better results by being challenged by their students. Excellent institutions are essential for the prosperity and welfare of our country (MinEd, 1995, p.3).

These first sentences of the 1996 draft HOOP exemplify how higher education and higher education quality are played in the introductory parts of the HOOPs. The current society and its relevant developments are sketched and related to desired future educational developments. We can recognise the idea of quality as fitness for purpose. Higher education creates human capital, which increasingly determines the social, economic, and cultural development of the nation. This quality-as-fitness-for-purpose frame interrelates with quality as excellence, because excellent institutions are crucial to Dutch prosperity and welfare. It is even possible to identify connotations relating to *Bildung* and individual talent development. Just as in the first HOOPs, quality is not explicitly named or suggested here. The sensitising concepts are again related to higher education in general, not specifically to quality.

This game in the 1996 HOOP is vague and conceptual. The introductory sections are airier and more evocative than the labour-oriented notions in the first HOOPs and no longer contain labour market forecasts. The quality conceptualisations relate to generic social effects for higher education and research at an abstract level. As the earlier quotation illustrates, the level of conceptualisation is so generic that the different notions of quality such as fitness for purpose, excellence, and *Bildung* do not clash with one another. The 1996 HOOP thereby practices what the HOAK memo preaches and leaves the concrete dealing with complexity issues to the institutions.

These HOOPs draw extensively on the frame that institutional differentiation is needed to deal with the balancing of different goals in a complex society.

> This draft HOOP sketches how the accessibility, quality, and afford-
> ability of higher education will be balanced in this decade. With the
> observation that [...] first and foremost increased differentiation
> and selectivity are needed, this draft HOOP continues the path of
> the 1994 HOOP. (MinEd, 1995, p. 10).

The situated meanings of differentiation, selectivity, as well as quality, accessibil-
ity, and affordability, are expressed in relation to one another. Quality, and espe-
cially the quality assurance system, is valued positively in comparison with other
countries. A perceived downside is that the system is not sufficiently differentiat-
ed to meet the diverse needs of the increasing number of students. There has to
be more focus on student selection, and smaller universities should provide room
for tailor-made education. The institutions should be more flexible in the types of
studies they offer.

The 1994 HOOP is the latest document to address dialogue specifically. This then
disappears, together with the idea that specification of the concept advances qual-
ity discussions. The 1996 HOOP builds on the governmental coalition agreement,
and the quality system is successfully implemented without further reference
to shared quality indicators or situated meanings of the quality concept. These
changes are accompanied by a changing relationship with the institutions. Fol-
lowing successful implementation of the quality system, the focus shifts toward
monitoring the outcomes of visitations (MinEd, 1993, p. 1099).

The second half of the 1990s can therefore be characterised as a period in which
evocative and strategic language games become more prominent. In these stra-
tegic policy games, quality is contrasted with efficiency and accessibility, a ten-
sion that should be solved by the institutions balancing different needs. There is,
however, less emphasis on the rules of the games and on how quality should be
played in dialogue. With the successful implementation of the quality system, this
systems game becomes more procedural.

2000-2004: changing contexts, practices, and systems
In the first years of this century, there is a prolonged tendency for policy texts to
become more strategic and evocative. The HOOPs and Strategic Agendas display
an incremental development from detailed planning documents to strategic docu-
ments with an increased emphasis on social effects. It is difficult, however, to con-
nect social effects with policy measures, and to decide what exactly contributes to
these changing policy practices (MinFin, 2004).

The 2004 HOOP identifies three social trends of (1) transition to a knowledge society, (2) growing importance of Europe and internationalisation, and (3) increasing societal complexity. There is a shared ambition to belong to the top international knowledge economies in 2010, and the reasoning is that institutions have to change to improve and foster the transition toward a knowledge society. Increasing societal complexity means that education should be oriented toward societal demands and enable students to function in this society. More higher-educated people are needed to prepare for a future complexity. Policy solutions are maximal participation, increased efficiency, and challenging education (MinEd, 2004). These notions can again be related back to accessibility, efficiency, and quality, and have to be provided by strong and flexible institutions.

In these conceptual and airy language games, the notion of excellence becomes more prominent, although not predominant. Institutions are given more space to offer more than basic quality, for example through individually customised education, international experience, or special programs for the talented.

The context changes from national in the early HOOPs to EU-regional in the mid-1990s and international around the turn of the century. With the start of the Bologna process in 2000, the policy texts relate to European processes on harmonisation and the position of Dutch education in comparison with other countries. In the 2004 HOOP, the knowledge society is the main context. The policy texts again express the idea that institutions have to provide flexible solutions in response to the increasing complexity of the knowledge society. They should cooperate in networks, retain maximum autonomy, and be more distinctive and profiled. The changing societal context is, however, also used to legitimise shifting quality assurance conceptions. In the 2004 HOOP, the steering relationship with the institutions is again a central notion. The rules of the steering game are changed, and the government delineates its own role in relation to the institutions. The institutions are denoted as 'organisations with a societal task', with not only a vertical but also a horizontal accountability relationship with their direct environment.

'Performance agreements' are introduced in 2004 as a key concept in the development of steering relations. To bring the worlds of politics and practices closer to each other, shared ambitions are to be formulated, and institutions are asked to deliver a contribution based on their own profile. The formulating is tacit and indirect here, and performance agreements are not being used to measure individual institutional quality. It is stressed that formulating is an incremental

process that is to be conducted with care and in close consultation with the institutions and their umbrella bodies.

The institutions are meant to use collective indicators and ambitions to formulate their own policy goals in relation to the government and their environment. Quantitative benchmarks are part of the governmental publication *Mapping Knowledge*, which also contains indicators relating to governmental goals. The quality indicators are student/staff ratio and the distribution of scores at visitations. Other indicators relate to accessibility and efficiency.

In the first years of this century, the quality assurance system changes into an internationally comparable accreditation system. This systems change does not receive much attention however. The 2000 HOOP notes that the quality system is good, but that it can be further improved. The 2004 HOOP sees accreditation as an instrument to improve the European comparability of the Dutch higher educational system and mentions an accreditation agreement with Flanders (MinEd, 2003, 2000).

The first years of this century show a growing importance of the international context. This context remains at a distance however, and national changes in steering conceptions are foregrounded. The international context and complexity tend to be used as abstract entities that legitimise changes in steering relations with the institutions.

2007-2011: average is not good enough

In the 2011 Strategic Agenda, the bar is raised to prepare students for a more demanding future.

> In 2025, the study culture at colleges and universities is characterised by challenges, achievement, and making the most of one's own abilities. The bar is raised, and the student who cannot jump over it will have to adjust his ambitions. (MinEd, 2011, p. 8)

Whereas the first HOOPs value the quality plateau of the Dutch highlands, the last decade shows a tendency toward excellence, further differentiation, and quality peaks. Excellence is primarily used to make distinctions between institutions and further differentiate students. The government aspires to a leading position amongst knowledge economies, and 'Entrepreneurs, researchers, educational professionals, and students should be more challenged to excel' (MinEd, 2011,

p. 4). This distinctive notion of quality as excellence is explicitly voiced in the 2007 Strategic Agenda *The Highest Good* and the 2011 Strategic Agenda *Quality in Diversity*. The recurrent argument that an increasingly complex society needs differentiation and flexibility now explicitly relates to quality as distinctive. 'Average is not good enough' (MinEd, 2007, p. 5). The distinctive notion of excellence becomes proliferated in response to globalisation and societal complexity.

In 2011, quality is positioned as a central notion, and the funding should be less based on student numbers and more on quality. Sharper profiling by institutions is needed to increase quality and to be recognisable to students and employers. Profiling leads to choices and topics at which one is good, and this also improves basic quality. Profiling furthermore increases differentiation, reduces fragmentation, and is needed to react to societal challenges. To realise the desired increase in quality, several agreements are made at the central, sectoral, and institutional level. Institutions have to enter into individual performance agreements and make their own choices in profiling. Quality is not further defined. These individual agreements on performance indicators and institutional profiling differ strongly from the communal attempts to formulate performance indicators in the first HOOPs.

A different instrument, aimed at safeguarding basic educational quality, is applied for the universities of applied sciences, which enter into agreements to develop standard knowledge bases and central testing for core subjects. The policies to increase and safeguard quality are based on recommendations by the *Commission Future-Proof Higher Education System*. The advice to focus on profiling to increase educational quality holds a central position in their report *Triple Differentiation* (Veerman et al., 2010). The 2011 Strategic Agenda is primarily based on this report and on the governmental strategy to secure a leading position for the Netherlands at the top of knowledge economies. There is no explicit reference to the role of the institutions in this policy process, although the top is meant to be reached together.

In sum, the 2007 and 2011 Strategic Agendas put more emphasis on higher education quality improvement and focus on excellence in a globalised competitive context. The reasoning is that further differentiation raises the generic national quality level. Individual institutional arrangements replace the earlier dialogue, and less attention is given to institutional quality practices and valuations.

2015: situating quality

In the 2015 Strategic Agenda, *The Value(s) of Knowing*, 'a sharper view on the same horizon is taken than in 2011, with a greater awareness of the changing context of higher education' (MinEd, 2015, p. 9). The local context is situated alongside a globalised context, and educational professionals and students are positioned as cocreators of an unpredictable future.

> Dutch students and educational professionals widely share the belief that the future is not an abstract quantity that happens to us. The future is the result of today's and tomorrow's choices that we make together. Starting with a notion of the society we want to be. And which education is needed. (MinEd, 2015, p. 1).

Quality is related to the purpose of education, and higher education should allow every student to get the best out of him/herself (MinEd, 2015, p. 22). The focus, therefore, should be not only on qualification for the labour market but also on socialisation and personality building. The demands on students remain high however.

> We demand more from students. More personal development, more of their academic or professional attitude, their autonomy, their ability to work together, their expertise, their effort and partic- ipation, their creativity and imagination. Educational professionals are the drivers of this learning process. I understand educational quality as all those (learning) activities that maximally contribute to this. (MinEd, 2015, p. 22).

This stipulative definition explicitly relates higher education quality to learning ac- tivities as well as to the goals of social development, socialisation, and personality development. This perspective differs from the first HOOPs, in which sensitising concepts like *Bildung* are not directly related to quality. Since the second half of the 1990s, excellence is named and linked to quality and so is *Bildung*. Although the quality concept remains vague, what it relates to becomes more profiled.

The tension in balancing the three goals of providing quality, access, and efficien- cy is addressed again. These three goals are repeatedly identified as competing, and in 2015 this tension is explicitly identified as a trilemma. 'More educational differentiation is also an answer to the trilemma, which means that we at the same time want to maintain accessibility to higher education, realise high educa-

tional quality, and spend [governmental] budgets efficiently' (MinEd, 2015, p. 22). The reasoning remains that is not possible to achieve all three goals concurrently. Increased accessibility will lead either to higher costs or to a decrease in quality (Bronneman-Helmers, 2011). The goals are treated as unified concepts; there has to be a trade-off somewhere, or the institutions will have to provide flexible solutions. The analysis of the policy documents shows that the preferred governmental solution is more flexibilization and differentiation.

In their situated uses, these three goals are not stable however. Different versions of quality, accessibility, and efficiency are played and juxtaposed in 2015, for example by contrasting meaningful learning communities with quantity and increasing student numbers. These notions differ from the meanings presented in the 1990s, whereby freedom of choice was valued over institutional excellence. Those situated meanings can all be related back to tensions between quality, accessibility, and efficiency, but they refer to quite different things. The situated meanings slide.

The 2015 Strategic Agenda differs from the 2011 Strategic Agenda in both its analysis and its positioning in the policy process. It is based on a higher education tour through the institutions, whereby educational professionals, students, managers, and others concerned are consulted. The agenda also reflects, however, the limitations resulting from previous practices and rules. The much-criticised performance agreements for example cannot be eliminated, as they have become a formalised part of the policy process. Previous quality practices recur.

1985 - 2015: wrapping up quality games

The HOAK paper starts with a meta-conceptual understanding of higher education quality. It follows the reasoning that the current steering relations are no longer effective in adequately advancing higher education quality in a changing and complex society. Systems dynamisation and institutional autonomy are needed to enable flexibility, which in turn is a necessary precondition for the realisation of higher education quality. Over time, this line of reasoning develops into a persistent and intensified flexibilisation narrative, which understands quality as the result of changing steering conceptions, systems dynamisation, and institutional profiling and differentiation. This understanding of quality is unified and rather abstract, as it is primarily related to the steering relationship with the institutions and their broader societal context. It changes however along this context, which becomes more globalised and competitive. This game can be directly related to new public management or businesslike steering conceptions, as they develop in a neoliberal society.

In the strategic policy sections, notions of quality as fitness for purpose, excellence, and *Bildung* are intertwined and vaguely played. They are not, however, undirected in their vagueness and change along dynamics in societal contexts that are considered relevant. The patterning through time displays a positioning that starts with quality as fitness for purpose in the Dutch labour market and develops toward quality as excellence in a competitive global context. The latest Strategic Agenda explicitly positions *Bildung* alongside this global context. The 2007 and 2011 Strategic Agendas explicitly name quality as excellence, and the latest document provides a stipulated definition of higher education quality. In these strategic games, sensitising concepts like fitness for purpose and excellence relate to both quality and higher education in general. While several scholars originally related these notions to different quality rationales and practices, they are not prominent as organising categories in the policy documents. Only the notion of 'quality as excellence' is explicitly foregrounded as a policy goal.

In the policy games, the strategy to respond with increasing flexibility, decentralisation, and differentiation to growing societal complexity recurs. It is reflected in the policy solution to balance the trilemma between the conflicting policy goals of educational accessibility, quality, and efficiency at the institutions. These goals are treated as unified concepts, and the trilemma between these goals is explicitly solved by institutional differentiation, treating quality as well as accessibility and efficiency as abstract concepts. What these concepts mean in relation to each other however remains vague, and changes through time. As Stone notes, goals like quality, efficiency, and accessibility are treated as motherhood issues. Everyone is for them when they are stated abstractly, but the trouble begins when people are asked what they mean by them (Stone, 2012, p. 14). From a governmental perspective, it makes sense to leave these trade-offs to the institutions.

Besides these prominent strategic games which are abstract and primarily treat quality as unified, the policy documents play numbers and indicators games. The first HOOPs contain labour market forecasts and sporadic international comparisons. There are attempts to set quality indicators that facilitate a meaningful policy dialogue between government and the institutions. This dialogue fades out in the 1990s however, without having reached shared indicators or meanings. In 2004, the addendum *Mapping Knowledge* is introduced, with different sets of indicators. The intent is to achieve shared sectoral goals and cautiously develop performance agreements with individual institutions. The 2011 Strategic Agenda, however, emphasises individual performance agreements, without explicating their relationship with educational quality.

Another game played is the accountability and quality assurance game. The early HOOPs display intentions to relate the development of the quality assurance system to the formulating of policy goals. In the way that quality assurance is operationalised in the texts however, it is not related to the strategic games that give quality improvement pride of place. The policy documents devote small sections to the development of the quality system and address accountability-related notions only when the quality system changes or when there are problems with quality assurance. The government's delegation of responsibility for quality assurance to its monitoring bodies is a likely contributor to this.

Quality is thus simultaneously played by the government as both a unified and differentiated concept. These different enactments show divergent governmental practices interacting with changing social contexts. At times, the games are interrelated. For example, the current emphasis on excellence is reflected in the focus on institutional performance agreements. The concurrent unified and differentiated games however do not add up to a unisound governmental understanding of what quality is or should be.

Conclusion and discussion

Conclusion
In order to gain a better understanding what quality's contested and equivocal character means for complex, political and multi-actor governmental decision processes, we have patterned how quality is constructed and enacted in Dutch governmental policy texts since 1985. The language games perspective enabled the identification of various quality enactments in governmental interactions with changing contexts. These patterns showed persistent uses of quality as a unified concept, as well as more differentiated enactments. These interactions changed toward a focus on institutional profiling and differentiation in a society which is understood as competitive. Its dual concurrence as a unified and differentiated concept however did not change, and did not add up.

How quality is enacted is rational from a governmental perspective. The different quality games probably all make sense according to the social rules developed in play and found appropriate for their institutionalised settings and contexts (March & Olsen, 2006; Wittgenstein, 1953). It is striking that the steering relationship with the institutions forms the pivotal notion in the governmental policies, and how quality is played and enacted relates to this steering relationship.

Whether it concerns the abstract new public management game, the trade-offs of the evocative policy goals, or even the numbers and accountability games, they all somehow relate to this interplay with the institutions. Higher education quality is not the focal notion in these games.

With regard to the functioning of quality as a contested concept, we come to several interrelated conclusions. First of all, identity issues related with quality's use as a unified concept have become a shared responsibility with the institutions. In order to deliver quality to society, they literally have to develop their own identity in competition with each other, and solve the tensions between quality, efficiency, and accessibility in institutional practice. We also see that the interaction process with the institutions develops from an explicit and deliberative dialogue which aims to develop general indicators, toward individually negotiated performance agreements and concurrent development of standards to value these performances. Third, the government does not explicitly use quality against corporate institutional uses in its formal policies.

These conclusions are consonant with Lips' findings for the HOAK period and the first half of the nineties, that the relevant actors in the government, the institutions and their representative bodies did not come to shared underlying understandings of 'what quality is' (Lips, 1996). They are however also in line with studies which show that both the government and institutional management easily recognise themselves in quality as a management concept (Giroux, 2006; Stensaker, 2007). In spite of the different enactments, this management discourse does not center around discussions on quality's true character, and the government and institutions do not tend to hold competing uses.

The interpretation of the policy texts however also shows that the relationship with institutional actors as academics and students changes through time. While the first documents barely address them as actors, the latest Strategic Agenda presents them as drivers of higher education quality, which is stipulatively defined as the student's learning process. This definition is in line with Harvey and Newton's initial plea to reconstitute quality's true character in educational practices, and to rule out distrusting bureaucratic requirements (Harvey & Newton, 2007). The government seems to respond to this essentialist perspective. The overall perspective brought forward in the policy documents is however that the government distances itself from policies in the institutions.

Discussion

For the policy process with the institutions, the conclusions imply that it is not necessary to organise an initial dialogue to come to a shared language, underlying meanings, or quality standards before concrete policy negotiations are conducted. The policy process changes into practices, whereby the standards to value quality develop concurrently with its constructions, as they are individually negotiated. Discussions with the institutions about quality and performance agreements are just part of this management discourse, as it is played out in a competitive neoliberal society.

Democracy is however not confined to negotiations with the institutions on how the cake is cut (Mouffe, 2000; Stone, 2012). For a government who is responsible for assuring higher education quality, accessibility, and efficiency to society as a whole, this not only means assuring that deviant perspectives and other actors are represented but also that they are actively heard and attended to in the management discourse and situated institutional discourses. The analysed policy texts do provide some insight whether this is the case. They are however vague, and do not explicitly articulate concrete emancipatory issues and their translation in concrete policy measures. The feasibility of study programs by different groups of students has for example gained a prominent position in the performance agreements, though this issue is only vaguely mentioned in the policy texts.

Strategy concepts are enacted as different concepts across discourses (Seidl, 2007), and the relatively closed discourse with institutional management indicates that this is the case for higher education quality. Further research is needed to understand whether and how quality is articulated in the institutions, and whether governmental policy measures are seen as contributive or hindering the student's learning processes.

The point is that we do not have external or pre-given guarantees to value whether the different and contradictory perspectives are actively heard and attended, and neither does the government as a universal actor. A universality living in an unresolvable tension between universality and particularity makes it contaminated, and this is problematic for a government which is understood to act on everybody's behalf (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. xi). A full understanding of the articulations at stake in the boundless educational domain may be an interesting academic project, but it is not feasible for the government as a universal actor. As such the current development toward a multiplicity of quality practices paradoxically runs the risk of fostering further bureaucratic distrust, since these multiple policies

are paired with formal accountability demands. Its vague and elusive character thereby remains. The good news is however that the Dutch government and the institutions are currently reworking the quality assurance system and its practices, in order to reduce these multiple accountability demands.

The growing domain of valuation studies focuses on the concurrence of evaluative practices with constituent practices like the educational process, in relation to decision making (Heuts & Mol, 2013; Lamont, 2009). Though quality's vagueness is not specifically attended, this brings in new possibilities to further inquire language games as an open and flexible perspective and toolbox to study how quality is played in multiple interactions and constellations. How academic middle managers value and realise quality, and what they thereby identify with in their decision processes is for example an interesting question which contributes to the understanding of the games at stake. Let's play.

'We're stubborn enough to create our own world'

How programme directors frame higher education quality in interdependence

Abstract

Little is known about how the complex notion of higher education quality is understood and (strategically) handled by a specific group of key university actors: directors of educational programmes. A framing analysis of in-depth interviews was conducted to explore how bachelor-programme directors in Dutch social science departments understand and enact quality, while maintaining multiple commitments. The analysis revealed that directors share a non-problematic, understanding of quality as realising a good educational programme. They enact different quality frames while upholding their programme and position but face issues in practice. Balancing different goals and interests is a recurrent strategy. The directors' room for manoeuvre to enact their quality views, however, is position-dependent. Whereas some directors can play it out in any direction, others experience responsibility without power. Quality's plasticity provides the flexibility to maintain the idea of improvement, even in limiting circumstances, while preventing structural changes at a more fundamental level.

Introduction

The concept of higher education quality is both airy and concretised in practice (Giroux, 2006). The notion played an evocative role in change processes during the European 'quality revolution' in the 1980s and 1990s, as it was easily accepted as a fashionable management concept. Policymakers and institutional managers recognised themselves in its different manifestations and its vague appeal enabled the rearrangement of steering relations between the Dutch government and institutions (Giroux, 2006; Stensaker, 2007; Weenink et al., 2018).

A vague notion can, however, become problematic when articulated in practice. Quality's translation into practice was resisted by academics from below, who opposed its formal meanings, and understandings such as 'improvement' and 'transforming the learner' were countered by articulations such as 'lack of trust', 'burden' and a culture of 'getting by'. These articulations were not stable or uniform and varied in resistance to, and adoption and adaptation of, formal quality frameworks (J. Newton, 2002; Overberg, 2019). Moreover, the same person could deploy different understandings and enactments depending on whether that person was teaching, researching or managing, or in other interrelations and contexts (Harvey & Green, 1993; Seidl, 2007).

Discursive studies have patterned quality discourses and note that quality is cloaked, tends to melt into its context and lacks conceptual power (Harvey & Williams, 2010a; Vidovich, 2001). Following a dialectic perspective, Morley (2004) argued that quality is not easily opposed communicatively, as it has become a metanarrative that discursively carries with it the threat and trace of 'the other'. To oppose quality is to become the opposite of its goodness, demanding espousal of its negative sides. It is in this sense a modular and plastic word, a word without meaning (Poerksen, 1995; Van Der Laan, 2001).

Practice scholars, however, note that notions such as quality, care and goodness are layered and strikingly complex. People draw upon multiple meaning structures like quality assurance schemes and teaching experiences to assess and improve them in practice (Mol, 2010; Vettori, 2018). Opposing quality perspectives against one another is just one of many ways to constitute it communicatively. Although it may be difficult to reconcile competitive quality notions with the tacit teaching process, it can be apposite to engage academics in marketing practices to increase student numbers. The quality perspective adopted depends on the specific situation and context.

Such constituent practices are inherently dynamic and processual and concern not only how quality is understood but also how it is performed (Mol, 2010). As Wittgenstein (1953) noted, the flexibility and multiplicity of language not only sustain existing views and latent meaning structures but also enable people to use them as a toolbox and commodify their meaning in specific, situated contexts. This also applies if people can only vaguely indicate what they mean, for example when saying 'stand roughly there', while indicating a certain spot. Playing language games creates new meanings and directions.

Contextual shifts in professionalisation, research, education and teaching régimes are constantly reconfigured and mediated with fellow academics (Leišytė & Dee, 2012). People apply several communicative strategies in dealing with dynamic and often contradictory institutional logics and environmental complexity. These include, for example, bridging towards other perspectives and bonding with like-minded people (Smets et al., 2015). It is not known, however, what such complexities mean for how quality is performed. Things do not always transpire as expected and people find themselves entangled in their own rules and practices while playing language games. People often utter several ambivalent and contrasting perspectives in one sentence. It is this entanglement of different rules and perspectives that this study aims to elucidate and understand (Wittgenstein, 1953).

Presuming that quality is difficult to contest as well as constituted and improved communicatively, it is key to assess how the notion is enacted by academics in engagement with varying actors and contexts. How quality understandings and enactments vary in engagement with contextual dynamics and the room that academics have to optimise it are, however, understudied. Context-oriented studies such as Westerheijden and Kohoutek (2014), Blanco Ramírez (2015) and Overberg (2019) focus on how quality is implemented or 'translated' and how external quality assurance régimes, policies and institutionalised environments shape actor perceptions and actions, rather than starting with what academics themselves find salient and select as relevant quality notions for their specific situations and contexts (Cardoso et al., 2017; Elken & Stensaker, 2018). Even studies, as for example Elken and Stensaker (2018) and Vettori (2018), which focus on sensemaking processes, situated perspectives and barriers to improvement, barely address how various repertoires of meaning structures and conceptualisations are performed in different practices.

This article elucidates how quality is understood and enacted by academics in interrelation with various dynamic and open-ended formations and complexities, and what this means for its optimisation. Twenty-four directors of bachelor programmes in social science departments of six Dutch research universities were interviewed about achieving quality. Academic middle managers often combine their managerial role with a position as lecturer and researcher. They navigate different commitments and their work has been framed on the boundaries between managerialism and collegiality (Clegg & McAuley, 2005). As they adapt and adopt policies and other inputs in the situated context, studying their quality enactments and understandings enables an assessment of how the notion is communicatively constituted in complex, dynamic interdependencies. The research question is: how do directors of bachelor programmes in Dutch research universities understand and enact higher education quality, while interacting with dynamic actors and contexts?

This study presumes that whether it is considered problematic and articulated as such depends on the specific contexts and processes. The following sub-questions address these processes: how do the directors understand and enact quality? What tensions do they identify and what actors and contexts are involved and considered relevant? How do they deal with these tension fields as they unfold?

Combining framing analysis and figurational analysis

Framing analysis and human-figuration analysis are combined from a language-centred practice perspective to examine how quality is performed and what directors find salient in complex situations and processes. Framing analysis serves as an analytical perspective and method to assess what is going while making sense of situations and issues. Figurational analysis draws attention to people's space to enact specific quality perspectives in interdependence with other people.

Framing creates meanings in interaction while relating previous experiences and cognitions to dynamic, situational contexts. Frames are implicit theories of a situation and framing is a language-driven ordering process through which people select and label the relevant features of the situation, structure these into an understandable whole and behave accordingly (Goffman, 1974; Van Herzele & Aarts, 2013). Framing analysis exposes quality's interrelations with webs of power, as people actively construct frames that fit their interests, feelings, convictions and

backgrounds to achieve specific goals. What gets framed are usually the issues at stake, actors' identities and relationships and the process itself. Intersubjective processes of meaning creation draw on previous experiences and understandings. Whether these are activated as people negotiate the meaning(s) of their actions depends on the situated context and the inter-relational dynamics (Aarts & Van Woerkum, 2006; Goffman, 1974).

Framing analysis provides both a theoretical lens and a method to assess how people deal with issues in complex environments (Dewulf et al., 2009). Rein and Schön (1993) have applied it methodologically to assess problem setting in intractable policy controversies (Schön & Rein, 1994). Van Hulst and Yanow (2016) built upon their and Goffman's (1974) work by looking at what people find meaningful and how they frame a way forward in the event of tensions. What people select, name and categorise as relevant from their complex environment is key to a dynamic, processual understanding of framing as it develops in sensemaking processes. The exclamation 'that's not quality!' for example selects and names a specific situation but also categorises its features as undesirable and pushes actions in another direction. It is crucial to identify what directors select, name and categorise as salient, to understand when and how quality understandings differ and change.

The figurational approach developed by sociologist Nobert Elias is used to further assess quality in interdependence with its contexts, as it prioritises selections and connections in relational processes. A figuration is a constellation of mutually oriented and dependent people, with shifting asymmetrical power balances: a nexus of human interdependencies (Elias, 1939/1994; Iterson, 2009; Van Krieken, 2001). These figurations create meaning in practice and shape society, as they restrict and enable what directors can do. Power therefore develops within the relationships as people are mutually dependent; both the lecturer and the student have control over each other as they are both needed to realise good teaching. Such interdependencies are at least bipolar, but usually multi-polar (Elias, 1970/1978). Figurations are in this sense interdependency networks (Iterson, 2009). For example, the way in which governmental quality policies are translated into institutional practices influences directors' room to enact specific quality frames. What programme directors want to achieve, however, can be more relevant to how their figuration develops, as also how they relate to colleagues or how the programme is positioned within its research domains.

The boundaries of these figurations are not pre-given as they may change according to changing contexts and also form larger figurations, nesting within one another. The interdependency chains have become so long, interwoven and complex that it becomes impossible for people to second-guess the actions of others. It is likely, for example, that directors do not take the views of members of parliament into account, although these parliamentarians might engage with departmental deans. Directors and parliamentarians are then indirectly related. The consequences of this interweaving of interests and actions of different groups are that none of these groups can pursue entirely their own interests. The social order is the unintended, slowly emerging result of people's actions (Elias, 1970/1978, 1969/1983; Iterson, 2009; Kuipers, 2018).

Methodology

Figurational analysis and framing analysis were used to explore the patterns of quality performance in specific settings.

Sampling strategy

A two-step (purposeful) maximum variation sampling strategy was applied to select the interviewees (Patton, 2002); first, at institution level: six of the 14 publicly funded research universities, varying in geographical location, size and profile

Table 1 | The interviewed directors' distribution across positions, including sex ratio.

Position	Total*	Male	Female
Full professor	5	4	1
Associate professor	11	9	2
Assistant professor or senior lecturer	4	1	3
Administrative support staff (middle management)	4	1	3
Total	24	15	9

The programme director role in Dutch social science departments is often fulfilled by associate professors, as reflected in the section. The sex ratio reflects the the distribution of men and women in academic positions in the Netherlands.

(generic as well as technical universities) were selected. Then, all 37 directors of bachelor-level social science programmes in these six universities were approached, of whom 24 participated. The programme director role in Dutch social science departments is often fulfilled by associate professors, as reflected in the selection. The sex ratio reflects the distribution of men and women in academic positions in the Netherlands.

Table 1 shows the directors' distribution across positions, including sex ratio. The aim was to vary maximally on the programme size and field dimensions but also on academic position and sex distribution. Between three and six directors from each selected university were interviewed. The formal positions and responsibilities of the interviewees varied: some directors coordinated a single bachelor programme, whereas others managed employees and programmes from undergraduate to PhD level.

Interview procedure

The interviews (average duration 1.5 hours) were open and minimally structured to allow the directors to share their perceptions, experiences and strategies, after first introducing themselves and describing their work as a director, their responsibilities and their position within the organisation. To answer the research questions, several key topics intentionally recurred in each interview: their concept of quality, situations that involved quality, how they assessed quality, the issues and dilemmas that they experienced in realising quality and how they dealt with these. Finally, they were asked about policy measures that would greatly improve their programme's quality. Throughout the interviews, the interviewees were asked to whom they related regarding quality and which documents and policies they considered relevant in specific situations.

Analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using Atlas-TI. An interpretivist grounded-theory approach was taken to elucidate the quality framings and theorise upon the dynamics in human figurations. Charmaz (2014) interactional and constructivist grounded theory approach was followed, as it combines well with the interpretive framing methodology and changing figurations (Gioia et al., 2013; Schaffer, 2016).

Analytical rigour was achieved by constant comparison in the initial coding phase as well as in the focused coding phase of how the notion was framed in human interdependence (Charmaz, 2014; Gioia et al., 2013; Schaffer, 2016). The inter-

views were treated as sites of director-interviewer interaction. Following Van Hulst and Yanow (2016), the issues, notions, identities and relationships in their environment that the interviewed directors selected, named and categorised as salient were systematically identified. Differences and similarities between the interviewees were, therefore, constantly compared. For instance, the initial coding phase elucidated that the directors consistently demarcated higher education quality as the realisation of a coherent programme. It also indicated that they situated the main interdependencies and issues within the institutions and that academic hierarchies mattered for how the notion was understood and enacted.

In the focused phase, the strategies that they deployed to deal with the various intra-organisational issues and what they considered as hindering or enabling the realisation of educational quality were further compared across the figurations. Specific attention was paid to similarities and differences across academic positions and what they said they could do in interrelation with their colleagues and other academic actors was further compared. Furthermore, how these findings related to other aspects, such as educational models and policies or academic fields, was assessed, as also whether such aspects were considered specifically enabling or restrictive.

Findings

This section follows the line of reasoning laid out in the sub-questions, addressing first how the higher education quality notion was framed and understood by bachelor-programme directors by looking at how quality was selected, named and categorised in the interviews. Second the tension fields are identified, and third it is addressed how these were handled across dvergent figurations.

Quality understandings

A good educational programme
The interviews revealed that the directors (D) shared an understanding of higher education quality as a close synonym of good education. It was recurrently articulated as different from other qualities and the directors specifically selected and named educational practice as important and distinctive. In response to the interviewer's (I) focus on quality:

> D: Because now it seems like you're investing a lot in 'what is

quality', and so. The quality of cheese is something different than the quality of water, and the quality of education. The word 'quality' itself seems to me totally uninteresting to study, because you want to know something about education. And of course, put it in the right context: what is it in the Netherlands... what are those people's practices? And that while we are now working with a totally developed system of quality standards on which we assess one another. And that is just there. And I find that the liveliest that there is, and what the discussion is about. (1)

It was difficult to discern whether the directors were talking about good education or education quality. Comparison of the sparse word use across interviews, however, revealed that education quality was interwoven with quality assurance. Directors operationalised it and had 'the liveliest discussions' on how to assess one another with the quality standards system.

The directors considered it their prime responsibility to achieve a qualitatively good educational programme and considered this a concrete, non-problematic goal.

D: You're saying; 'quality is elusive'. Well, I can tell you about that. I don't think it is elusive at all!
I: No, how can it be caught?
D: Well, if I now—I haven't done that systematically, I haven't read it, so maybe, then I should come up with a different story—but if you just ask me as a programme director: 'what do you consider educational quality?' Well, that's actually really simple. What do I want people to learn in four years?... So, this has elements related to practice. You can analyse it and report about it. And after four years, for me you're an academic.
I: Yes.
D: I mean, tell me if I'm mistaken, but I don't find that complicated at all. (7)

Quality was understood as setting and meeting objectives for an academic programme and relating these to student attainment. The directors listed elements to realise this, such as the quality of lecturers and courses, coherence in tracks and the curriculum, effective learning strategies and labour-market preparation. Some interviews consisted mainly of elaborations of such elements. This goal frame of realising a good educational programme situated educational quality within the

institutions and connected the essential lecturer-student interactions with other programme elements.

Aligning programme elements

The continuous alignment with one another of the programme's goals, means and assessment was considered key.

> D: These three things must really be connected... And if you can intertwine these well, then you have a somewhat greater assurance that the quality of education is at least guaranteed to the students. (9)

Guaranteeing quality education through continuous alignment was essential for all directors and several mentioned 'constructive alignment' as the underpinning educational perspective. The alignment process concerned discussions and choices at course level with colleagues such as lecturers and course coordinators.

> D: We were having a discussion about 'what do we want to achieve with the defence of the master thesis?' Because if the students get feedback, they will certainly learn from it. But that is a different skill than having to defend something yourself. (15)

Whereas discussions with lecturers concerned courses, the directors named the programme level as their main locus for quality. Realising coherent learning paths was key and they wanted to ensure that all students were able to learn what they should and that all elements were taught.

> D: That is what I want! And how do you assess that? Do you indeed know the theory, do you have the theoretical luggage? That is testable.
> I: Yes.
> D: Do you have the methodological luggage? ... then you're actually close to those Dublin-like things, [European competence descriptors] which I do consider relevant. So, taken together, I think that if that is level ... And, of course, you can say, what is 'level', what is 'the level'. Well, I have my thoughts about that. If you can do it well, then you are an academic. Then you really distinguish yourself from what a university of applied sciences does and delivers. (7)

Aspects such as theoretical knowledge and analytical and writing skills related to the assessment of students' attainment; the knowledge, insight and skills that they should attain in a coherent programme that prepared them for the labour market and society. Many directors were proud of their coherent programme with solid learning tracks. This fragment also exemplifies how the quality of the programme was named and categorised as different from the programme quality at universities of applied sciences, yet comparable to other academic programmes.

In summary, the interviews elicited a widely shared quality frame that understands educational quality as a close synonym of good education and directors confined it to the consistent alignment of a coherent programme in relationship with various stakeholders. This way of thinking is 'in their veins' and most directors do not consider this alignment process very problematic. However, the interviews revealed also that directors face issues when they want to achieve quality improvement in practice and that these issues are very much related to the development and maintenance of constructive relationships within their institutions.

Quality and its tensions

> D: Yes, well, I think that we pretty much agree with each other on 'what quality actually is', to put it like that. When we think we have delivered a good student. But given our resources, how can we achieve that in the best way? Well, I find that a quest. My feeling is also that the frameworks are still getting more and more narrow. (8)

This fragment reveals that tensions related to how a good programme could be achieved and improved given limited resources, in the context of perceived narrowing quality frameworks. Various issues were associated with realising programme quality, ranging from the language taught to a lack of teacher professionalisation. Although they involved societal questions and the adaptation of external quality demands, these issues were situated and dealt with within the organisation.

There were two interwoven domains where tensions were recurrently perceived and situated. First, there were other goals and qualities within the university. These tensions concerned the complex distribution of budgets, as well as interdependence with other programmes and research. Second, there were specific tensions regarding the situated teaching process.

Balancing budgets and programmes

> D: We had thought it all out well in years of budget cuts, and re-
> duced it. How can we solve it? With for example online things, or
> ... And, then, then they're saying: 'the contact hours have to be
> raised'. Hoppa! In two years, you have to raise all those contact
> hours.
> I: Yes
> D: Without additional funding. Then you'll get empty hours. You
> get that. Not everywhere, and ...
> I: Yes
> D: Because it has to be done fast, you do not get the smartest
> things, there.
> I: Yes
> D: And those kinds of things do not improve quality, that's what I
> think. (6)

The directors found it difficult to change policies, as they had to make arrange-
ments and renegotiate with a multitude of actors, while already finding the current
budgets too limited. Governmental budgetary restrictions were heavily criticised
and 'more money!' was on the tip of their tongues when they were asked what
would really improve educational quality. Money is time and more hours enable
intensive classes and contacts, which apparently contribute to higher quality. The
directors did not engage with the national government though and dealt with bud-
getary issues within their institution. Several considered it their task to handle the
budget as efficiently as possible.

> D: It is of course very easy to say, 'we'll throw in more lecturers,
> and more time'. That will surely improve the quality. But we have
> only a limited amount of money, so I have to balance the two. (4)

The quality of different courses and elements were weighed against one another.
'If you want to supervise this individual thesis, that goes at the expense of... it's a
real optimisation problem!' (8). Another director noted, 'we are not distributing
money, we are distributing losses' (22).

These optimisation processes transcended their direct influence and the directors
depended on other institutional actors' budget allocations, rules and practices. A
small university, for example, centralised the distribution of educational resourc-

es and programmes 'bought' courses from, and 'offered' courses to, other programmes and student groups. This enabled an extensive programme, even when it drew a limited number of students. It also, however, threatened analytical depth, as courses served students from different programmes. 'Quality for whom?' (17).

Balancing research and education

All directors believed that a good programme could not come without academic research skills and knowledge. Lecturers were often researchers and the tension field was framed as 'just time' (6). Intensifying education was, however, found to be achieved at the expense of research time and often valued less. 'You are of course talking about 'educational burden' and 'research time'. That makes a big difference!' (14). Education and research were often articulated hierarchically in relation to each other and the interviewees stated that lecturers' careers still depended on research performance, whereas teaching was believed to be more essential.

Tensions between research and education were reflected in the directors' powers within figurations. Several were engaged in hiring new staff.

> D: If I leave this to the professor who is responsible for the research programme, there will be all research-hotshots hired, who mainly want to do research. And if I look at the quality of my programme, I want someone who is intrinsically motivated, preferably for education. Who also has the skills. So, we have to ask for attention on that, and that is the kind of game being played. (9)

Foregrounding educational quality is a game with limited possibilities, 'you cannot do this all the time' (1). Several directors noted that there had to be a good balance in the team. The interdependence between research and education was articulated hierarchically, yet was complementary and evolving slowly. Various directors noted that the research-education balance had changed but that an academic career built on teaching remained an exception.

Issues concerning the situated educational process

Directors depended on their relationship with lecturers, who had to deliver good courses. Most believed that decisions should be made in conjunction with those who have to deal with them in practice and that lecturers and course coordinators should be trusted in their professional autonomy. However, the interviews also revealed tensions and contrasting frames. 'One cynical lecturer can ruin a whole

course' (22). The directors were held responsible for educational quality but had a limited view on what happened in practice and lecturers maintained their own views and multiple commitments.

Tensions with budgets, other programmes and research concerned the situated educational process but were played out in hierarchical relationships, as the directors depended on managers' decisions about resources and on professors about learning assignments. Whereas directors at professor and associate professor level were 'playing the game' in both the managerial and the situated context, others noted that 'we are very much in the position that we have responsibility without power' (14).

Dealing with tensions

Tensions concerning budgets, research, other goals and situated practices occurred across all figurations. The interviews show that the directors deployed similar strategies to deal with these, for example, bracketing their work into smaller pieces and balancing different interests. Such strategies were similar to generic strategies to deal with competing but complementary goals within complex organisations (Smets et al., 2015). The directors also shared their work and responsibilities with actors, such as programme and course coordinators, support staff or education and examination committees. These academic interdependencies were, however, often articulated hierarchically and the directors' room for manoeuvre to enact specific quality understandings depended on their figurational position. They switched between protective and change- oriented strategies regarding situated educational practices.

Protective and change-oriented strategies

Directors were protective when external demands, such as policy changes, seemed to hinder the programme's situated processes. They were selective in what they adapted from policies and identified with their academic staff while maintaining their quality views.

> D: Well, you can dig in your heels, and say, 'We will not do it'. Then you'll have a problem, also with the University Board. So, you can better say; 'Oh, this is what they are demanding from us. Let us see what we find valuable and necessary, and that is how we arrange it.'
> I: Yes.
> D: And then we're stubborn enough to create our own world. And

that's what you do, and then suddenly you're the university's best practice, if you do it like that. (19)

The directors created their own world with their colleagues involved in the programme and maintained their quality frames, while selecting what they considered valuable and necessary. Conflict was thereby avoided, as they did not contravene the interests and quality views of higher management and policymakers. Nonetheless, quality practices did change. This protective strategy was also deployed when directors felt that quality policies went against their own views and tacit situated practices but did not want to offend higher management by defying their policies.

D: What speaks for this programme is when I explain it: 'Guys, it is not my idea'. That makes it totally different. And, 'Don't shoot the messenger!' So, let's use this to do it in the best possible way, but stick with our inner drive. (7)

This professor bonded with the staff and positioned himself as protecting core educational practices. These practices were, however, affected by the criticised policies. 'It can all be done. The point is that I don't think that a rubric makes education much better' (7). The compromising paradoxically strengthened the detested bureaucratisation and rationalisation of educational practices.

The protection of educational practices concerned the situated teaching process and the lecturers' academic autonomy to shape their lessons in interaction with students, as well as their own practices. These interests were not always the same, however, and the directors also aimed to change teaching practices to improve the programme.

Curriculum changes were widely considered useful to keep the programme up to date with changing societal and organisational demands and there were constant incremental changes. Experienced directors noted, furthermore, that there was always at least one major change process going on. These processes were initiated by different actors but the directors tried to be selective in what they did and when they did it. Opening a new campus, for example, was a good opportunity for further expansion and differentiation. In other instances, changes were considered necessary to survive.

Such change-oriented strategies had different quality frames than those of protective strategies. One professor commented that the programme was 'going down the drain' and had to be repositioned to make it more attractive for students. He compared and valued the programme against other Dutch programmes in the research domain. 'I know the landscape very well!' Improvements were made to be more distinctive, 'We are now educating for the future' (22). This quality perspective is competitive and can be identified as both entrepreneurial and consumer-protective, as it serves students as consumers (Vettori, 2018). It was considered appropriate in the context of attracting more students and supported by institutional management. It also strengthened the coherence of the programme in practice. Not all directors enacted an outward, competitive view, however, and the analysis suggests that it was enacted mainly by professors and associate professors.

Different spaces for quality

Directors' academic position was not the sole element determining their figurational space to enact quality understandings. Various aspects such as programme size and allocation rules and practices mattered: large programmes, such as psychology, could operate relatively independently of other programmes and higher management. Moreover, directors in all positions had little leeway when institutional relationships were seriously troubled. In one institute, the director and the institutional management felt that they could not act upon the programme as they wanted to, as renowned research groups were protecting their education and specialisations against change. He argued, however, that he did achieve quality improvement. 'Well, I caught up the things where I could make a difference' (21). The situation changed only after it entered the public domain.

The constant comparison of different aspects across different figurations suggests that the directors' hierarchical academic position was important for their quality repertoire and how they played it in all directions. It seemed to matter for how they dealt with interrelated issues concerning budgets, other educational and research qualities and teaching practices.

A salient distinction between the directors' positions was whether and how they engaged with other actors and contexts within the university. Full professors, for example, were in close contact with other professors and higher departmental and institutional management, whereas administrative directors engaged with other directors and students. The differences also concerned the shape of these relationships and their effects on relationships on which all directors relied to bring

quality into practice, especially among the educational staff. These differences recurred across the different domains and it did not seem to matter much what the specific topic of education and research was.

Full professors
Directors with the position of full professor switched between protective and change-oriented strategies and considered which perspective was apposite. Policies that they considered harmful in practice were discussed with the management team and departmental management. They also ensured that they had managerial support to change the programme. As one director noted, 'I have the authority to put things under pressure. That is accepted'. Several professors had a say in the distribution of the budget and staff reviews. They also garnered staff support and another professor noted: 'You *can* be authoritative, but it sets rancour. In the end it works against you' (7).

One communicative strategy to connect their management strategy with educational practices and to create engagement was to identify and act from their researcher or lecturer role. 'I find it important to still have the teaching experience. To keep understanding what is happening there, what the primary process is' (7). They proffered their own experience in interaction with lecturers and engaged them in changing teaching practices towards what they considered best.

The strategy of speaking from the situated perspective was also deployed to protect the programme against hindering demands from other actors. The professors noted a strengthening of the administrative position within academia and felt held accountable by administrators who used instruments such as the National Student Evaluation. '*They* are doing all those things therewith. But *I* really don't need that! *I* just need a panel session, a good team' (24). Such inquiries were framed as conflicting with their situated practices, including their interpretation of student evaluations to improve the teaching process.

Associate professors
The associate professors' strategies showed similarities with those of full professors. Some noted that they had the authority to take the final decision and that it would not differ if they were professors. Most, however, identified more strongly as managers of the specific educational domain and they were less involved in decisions regarding budgets and academic staff.

Associate professors temporarily devoted much time to programme management and several had taken the same educational leadership course on complex educational issues and programme organisation. They focused on improving different elements and conducted research or initiated projects on, for example, teacher professionalisation or the effects of distance learning on student attainment. They used these experiential and analytical skills strategically to create engagement. 'Many people saw that we made a good analysis of the situation and how you can shape it in the future' (1).

Associate professors' perceived powers to enact their views varied, however. Several directors could garner ample support amongst managers and lecturers by combining their analytical framings with the strategy of making issues manageable. They sought, for example, the right time to start a project or discuss issues at management level. Other directors, though, perceived more limitations and the interviews in one department were divergent. Whereas some easily convinced departmental management of their strategy to empower lecturers, others felt that their proposals were not heard and that they could not connect the situated practices with managerial views.

Assistant professors
The few assistant-professor-level directors usually worked together with an educational director who had more managerial responsibilities. Their role was mostly coordination; they looked after quality evaluations and ensured that staff members were heard. One director described herself as the '*primus inter pares*' amongst the educational staff. They were less involved in the management game, though, and their interactions and quality enactments concerned primarily the situated perspective.

Administrative directors. Directors with an administrative position framed themselves as 'lubricant oil', stressing that they aligned different perspectives, for example by consulting different research groups ('blood groups') and students in preparing curriculum decisions. Their approach was processual and they bridged different quality perspectives but did not always feel themselves heard. Those without a teaching background were especially limited in their quality repertoire and connective work. One administrative director felt framed by academics as 'part of the bureaucracy'. The administrative directors depended on procedures and investments in personal relationships to have impact. They were reluctant to speak out and another one recounted that professors did not even realise that they had different concerns. Some female directors with the position of assistant

professor or administrative director noted that the power differences were gendered.

Student evaluations

Student evaluations played a particular role in how quality was enacted, especially concerning tensions with educational practices. All directors used them as part of the instrumental repertoire to monitor the quality of courses and teaching. They were 'sailing on the evaluation figures' (6) and one director remarked that 'it is in my interest to know what is going on' (1). When discussing student evaluations, directors noted that such evaluations were biased, did not necessarily measure quality as student attainment, or provided a limited view on practices. They found them limited but a valuable addition to what was heard and seen.

Evaluations were used to monitor and discuss the quality of teaching, courses and lecturers but also their own programme, with actors such as the educational committee. Several directors noted that a tremendous value was put on them and were critical about abstract, internal uses to improve and assess their programme.

> D: Well, what is measured now, study success, dropout-rates, average duration, that is a bit what is available at national level. You will have to do it with that ... You *could* approach it differently and for example include student ordeals. For example, the NSE [National Student Evaluation], or the Elsevier-survey, or rankings, but I would be careful with that .. Because if you use them to steer, you will also be held accountable for that. And *that* was just not the intent. (9)

Conclusion and discussion

To understand how higher education quality is performed in interdependence with environmental complexity, this study elucidates how directors of Dutch social science bachelor programmes enacted and understood it, while maintaining different commitments.

Framing analysis and figurational analysis were combined to analyse in- depth interviews and to explore the interrelationships and quality perspectives that programme directors considered relevant in their specific situations and contexts. It can be concluded that the directors shared a non-problematic understanding of quality as realising a good educational programme. We found also that quality was

enacted in such a way that the directors could deal with tensions emanating from changing societal and organisational demands. These tensions were experienced and acted upon within the organisation and concerned quality's interdependence with limited budgets and other intra-organisational qualities and goals, including the situated teaching process. Directors' strategies such as bracketing quality into manageable elements and compromising and balancing different interests showed similarities with generic strategies that Smets *et al.* (2015) identified to deal with complexities as expressed within organisations.

The results also suggest that the directors' room for manoeuvre to enact their quality frames depended on their specific, power-ridden figurations within academia and differed per position. Interdependencies with research and other educational qualities were often articulated hierarchically: whereas some directors could deploy their quality frames in any direction, others felt that they had responsibility without power. It is striking that the directors' relationship with lecturers and their influence on the teaching process were affected by their relationship with (other) full professors, even though professors experienced a strengthening of academic bureaucracy. All in all, the enactment of educational quality in complex interdependencies pushed directors to develop strategies in interaction with their near academic environment, whereby traditional hierarchies constrained their room for manoeuvre.

Quality is a broad notion. To uphold their programme as well as their own position, directors put their efforts into those aspects that they could change if they could not improve what they wanted to. Quality's multiplicity and plasticity provided the flexibility to maintain the notion of quality improvement, even though it changed what they considered quality.

The study supports Vettori's (2018) analysis that people seemingly share a view of educational quality, while drawing upon different underlying meaning structures. It also shows, however, that what might be individually seen as a quality view was inherently interrelated with what was considered apposite for the directors' specific position in their hierarchically ordered academic figuration. Quality's plasticity therefore suited their interactional, situated process for dealing with tensions and contradictory demands. As the directors resolved their issues within situated figurations, there were no countervailing powers against external quality demands and decreasing budgets. Even protective strategies could not stop situated educational practices from changing in unwanted directions.

The study draws attention to how quality is played out in academic hierarchical figurations. Although directors' room for manoeuvre is related to their formal rank, it is worthwhile to further investigate how it relates to how the academic order is being shaped. Gender differences, but also the tendency to value research over education, do seem to play a role here and also to affect the directors' room for manoeuvre in relation to other figurational actors, specifically their near colleagues. Such aspects are, however, also dynamic, multiple and multifaceted; and it would be interesting to study how the valuation of higher education quality relates to other valuation processes in academia.

The present study is restricted to Dutch research universities, with a differently organised hierarchy than universities of applied sciences. Further comparative research would provide both a broader and a deeper perspective on quality enactments and understandings in divergent higher education systems. Finally, it should be noted that the interviews were conducted before the COVID-19 crisis. Current research is needed to assess how changing teaching practices and communications may affect the enactment of quality understandings.

'I need a grant but spend time on teaching'

How academics in different positions play out the teaching-research nexus in interdependence with their contexts

Abstract

The teaching-research nexus is omnipresent in academic professional life. How it is articulated depends on specific situations, contexts, and academic hierarchies. Initiatives to change the nexus in Dutch research universities are now informing European policy processes, but how academics in different positions play it out and deal with various contextual aspects is understudied. In this study, Wittgenstein's notion of language games is combined with Elias' notion of human figurations to assess articulations and interdependencies in the nexus. We analysed tensions and strategies in ten homogeneous focus group discussions with assistant, associate, and full professors across social sciences in the Netherlands. All academics identified tensions regarding the balancing of research and teaching and a systemic undervaluation of teaching, yet their games differed. Assistant professors experienced personal insecurities, whereas associate professors faced further differentiation of tasks, and full professors dealt with responsibilities concerning group performance and market-driven demands in both domains. In some figurations, research and teaching were balanced at team level. Paradoxically, all academics' strategies tended to reproduce and strengthen patterns that exist at collective level, including tensions.

Introduction

Higher education quality is concretised in situated practices where academics draw flexibly upon multiple educational logics and rationales. How education quality is performed depends on the situation, context, and issues at stake. It materialises within the educational realm with its own rules and valuation systems whereby lecturers and students create meaningful teaching processes in interdependence with educational regimes (Trowler, 2020; Weenink et al., 2022).

Research is also part of the academic context, and lecturers are often also researchers. Research and education are the core tasks of research universities, and academics have to engage with research at multiple sites within the university. A study amongst directors of educational programmes indicates that their space to realise quality education depends on how the teaching-research nexus is configurated in interdependence with specific academic contexts. Directors who are full professors, for example, experience fewer constraints on realising their educational views and acting upon the nexus than assistant or associate professors. Education is consequently often, though not always, valued less than research (Weenink et al., 2022).

Similarly, realising 'good science' (a close synonym of research quality) depends on its multifaceted relation with teaching within the university (Jerak-Zuiderent et al., 2021; Koens et al., 2022). A survey found that the main motivation of most academics in the Netherlands is to conduct good research with inspiring colleagues. Because of educational and other tasks however, 57% of respondents spend less time on research than agreed upon, with assistant professors reporting the strongest increase in demands (Koens et al., 2022).

The teaching-research nexus concerns the relation between teaching and research as separate concepts, but also as synergetic or even interwoven knowledge-centred processes (Visser-Wijnveen et al., 2009, 2010). Visser-Wijnveen et al. (2010) identify several academic ideals concerning the relationship, ranging from teaching-research results to providing research experience to students. Brew (2010) identifies growing evidence that students gain valuable skills through participating in research scholarship programs, and that involving students enhances research. To realise research-enhanced education, it is critical that academics see the possibilities and that there is support from high-level management.

Although the connection has positive connotations, the relationship is also seen as problematic and difficult to establish (Coate et al., 2001; Elken & Wollscheid, 2016; Hattie & Marsh, 1996). Tight (2016, p. 304) even asked provocatively whether it was worth persisting with the study of the teaching-research nexus, as

> [it] is used in such varied ways, is differently approached in policy and practice, and in different systems, cannot be definitively and clearly shown to exist (or not to exist), and is often poorly articulated or understood.

The lack of understanding concerns specifically its articulation in interdependence with changing contexts and demands within and beyond the organisation. Wareham and Trowler (2007) identified different logics and practices in the connection, ranging from research positively influencing teaching to research strengthening the university's knowledge transfer to society. Contextual aspects such as discipline, the programme's focus, and the student population are furthermore relevant to how the link is established (Coate et al., 2001; Elken & Wollscheid, 2016).

Hughes and Tight (1995) noted that it matters how the relationship is mediated, for example through the academic's scholarship, discipline, or department. Academics have to engage with multiple and sometimes conflicting organisational and societal demands that affect their professional identity and performance (Brew, 2010; Brew & Boud, 1996). Scarcity of time, for example, negatively impacts the commitment to perform in both domains and leads to strategies like increasing educational efficiency (Hattie & Marsh, 1996). There is a personal connection for academics who combine teaching and research, but this relation is not necessarily positive.

We do not know, however, which interdependencies are relevant in specific contexts, and how they relate to more structural change processes. Wareham and Trowler (2007) argued that the nexus needs a more rigorous analytical approach that transcends the individual perspective and addresses complex social interactions and social structures. These structures are not stable, and studies in the first decade of this century (Coate et al., 2001; Leišytė et al., 2009) identified a pattern of teaching and research dividing into two distinct activities because of changing policies, governance arrangements, and institutional priorities that created efficiency-, effectivity-, and outputs-oriented cultures, despite academic ideals to keep them together or even further integrate them.

McKinley et al. (2021) took up the call to relate situated articulations to change processes, arguing that teaching and research can be pulled in different directions by institutional ideals and priorities. They identified dilemmas and varying situated practices, but they also argued that higher education ideologies shape how teaching and research are brought into practice. This, however, overlooks the various moderating processes that act upon the nexus, as well as the framings deployed by academics in different positions to translate their ideals into action and shape it. A macro-level divergence pattern can look very different in practice, and the relevance of specific developments for the articulation of the nexus in academic configurations is not obvious.

A recent report on good science practices within Dutch research universities indicates that working conditions and external demands still negatively impact research and learning as interwoven knowledge-centred processes (Jerak-Zuiderent et al., 2021). Research universities in the Netherlands are currently conducting the change programme 'Recognition and Rewards', which aims to change this output-oriented culture in scientific practices. Revaluing teaching and other 'qualities' are part of the change programme, but so also is the development of more differentiated career paths. We thus need a research approach that connects academics' frames and actions concerning the nexus with their contexts and change processes.

This study uses Wittgenstein's language games as an analytical perspective to understand how the teaching-research connection is played out by academics in different positions and how this interrelates with their contexts and change processes. The language games perspective emphasises that language's multiplicity allows people to shape notions in endless different ways (Wittgenstein, 1953). Patterning language games elucidates what is considered apt and valuable, and how such rules and understandings develop in interdependence with specific contexts (Schaffer, 2016). This approach is combined with Elias' figurational perspective to further assess how people deal with interdependencies and tensions concerning these contexts, as it presupposes that human relations and interdependencies constitute their (con-)figurations and restrict and enable what people can do (Elias, 1970/1978, 1939/1994).

The research question is: how do academics in different positions play out the teaching-research nexus in interdependence with different contexts, and what strategies do they thereby bring forward in dealing with tensions? Ten homogeneous focus group discussions were conducted with assistant, associate, or full

professors across social sciences in the Netherlands. Before addressing the specific study design, this paper first addresses the combination of language games and figurational analysis to assess the relevance of specific contextual dynamics.

Combining language games and figurational analysis

Central to the idea of language games is that humans establish rules and techniques for playing a game. The term language game is applied to almost any action in which language is involved: 'I shall call the whole, consisting of language and actions into which it is woven, a language-game' (Wittgenstein 1953, § 7d). This makes the number of possible language games countless. Innumerable tacit and explicit uses of symbols and words gain their meaning through their uses in specific situations and contexts.

Language games develop as abridgements of practices, and, in following rules, outcomes can be different than expected. Referring to Luhmann (1977), Seidl (2007) argues that concepts can be differently articulated in different fields with their specific rules and logics. The nexus can be played out according to educational practices such as knowledge integration in teaching, but scientific rationales and valuations like foregrounding excellence may be considered more apt. Aspects like academic hierarchies, habits, and organisational demands can change the games more strategically. The rules that are considered apt are never pre-given. The game can change within one sentence, for example when articulating dilemmas.

Elias' human lens on the games analogy enables further analysis of the restricting and enabling aspects in social figurations. The analysis of the nexus in interrelation with its environment can be a rather abstract endeavour, whereby human perceptions and actions are related to 'society' and 'structures' made up of 'things' like departments, universities, states, and policies operating at meso- and macro-level. Elias' (1970/1978, 13-14) notion of human figurations replaces this tendency to experience everything external to the individual as pieces of matter with the idea that people make figurations with one another.

A figuration is a constellation of mutually oriented and dependent people, with shifting asymmetrical power balances: a nexus of human interdependencies (Elias, 1939/1994). Power develops within the relationships as people are mutually dependent; the lecturer and the student have control over each other as they are

both needed to realise good teaching. Interdependencies are at least bipolar, but often multipolar, and for example also engage higher management or policymakers. Figurations are in this sense interdependency networks (Elias, 1970/1978).

Elias and Wittgenstein share the idea that norms and values that govern games are not universally present from the outset and that rules develop in practices. Elias' figurational perspective enables the analysis of how games develop in multi-governed academia. The chains of interdependence can become so long and opaque that people feel detached from rules that originally seemed apt, like the efficiency policies that provoked the divergence of teaching and research (Elias, 1970/1978). It is therefore even more important to look at how these games relate to academics' views and develop in complex interdependencies.

Framing analysis is used to explore the working of the games. Frames are implicit theories of a situation, and framing is a language-driven ordering process through which people select, emphasise, and label the relevant features of the situation, structure these into an understandable whole, and behave accordingly. Framing analysis elicits how and when people articulate the nexus and what they value and select as relevant for their contexts. It exposes interrelations with webs of power, as people actively construct frames in interaction that fit their interests, feelings, convictions, and backgrounds to achieve specific goals, thereby providing directions to deal with tensions and issues (Aarts & Van Woerkum, 2006). Framing analysis provides insight in what the problem is supposed to be and provides directions for action in interaction with the specific contexts (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016).

Assessing situated dynamics and contexts

The combined analytical perspective has been used in higher education analyses before (Weenink et al., 2022), but has not yet been applied to the contextual analysis of the teaching-research nexus. Our contextual perspective amplifies the analysis of frames as applied in Visser-Wijnveen et al.'s (2010) analysis of academics' ideal research-teaching nexus. Visser-Wijnveen et al. identified ideal relations concerning the work of academics in practice, such as teaching research results or showing what it means to be a researcher, but their categorisations do not address relevant interactions.

Our contextual approach acts upon the lack of focus on connections between individual practices and the environment identified by Wareham and Trowler (2007). Studies that do concern the complexities of academic experience (e.g. Robertson,

2007) address embeddedness in wider cultural and disciplinary frameworks, but do not assess the room for manoeuvre that academics utilise to act upon restraining interdependencies. Combining language games with human figurations, studied through frame analysis, enables the assessment of specific articulations in interdependence with their larger contexts and further theorisation upon the inherent social dynamics.

Framing analysis enables us to assess what respondents take into account in engagement with their multifaceted contexts, and what they select as salient. While the relationship is usually understood in the literature as the teaching-research nexus with a focus on teaching as an individual endeavour, the study also looks at academics' engagements with education as a collective responsibility, like realising a good educational programme.

Study design

Ten focus groups explored how academics in different positions develop language games and interdependencies in practice. Focus groups were used because they provide insight into how participants describe and evaluate things and can serve as a deliberative space where academics share their experiences and develop a position (Macnaghten, 2017).

Focus group design
Fifty-one academics participated in the ten focus groups, with four to eight academics per group (Table 2).

Table 2 | Focus group design (singular, double layer).

Position and contract	Focus groups	Number of participants per focus group
Full professor (permanent)	2	4-5
Associate professor (permanent)	4	4-5
Assistant professor (permanent)	3	4-8
Assistant professor (temporary)	1	6

Participants were from 11 research universities3 in the Netherlands and various social sciences; we accessed their websites to identify and approach them. Each group consisted of academics from different institutions and social sciences. Separate groups were created for assistant, associate, and full professors as they have to combine research and education, but differ in hierarchical position. To add to the variation, assistant professors were differentiated by whether they held a permanent or a temporary contract (with or without tenure). Teaching-only academics were not included in the study, but the precarious position of lecturers was discussed as problematic in most focus groups.

One group of five full professors consisted only of men, and seven of eight participants in an assistant professor group were women – reflecting to some extent the gender distribution across positions in the Netherlands.

Focus group set-up and topic guide

The focus group discussions (average duration 1.5 h) were held in the second half of 2021 and recorded via Zoom because of Covid restrictions. Two groups were conducted in Dutch, and eight groups were in English when at least one participant was not fluent enough in Dutch. The Dutch groups differed from the English groups in that the term 'education' (onderwijs) was also used there to denote the situated teaching process.

The topic list first addressed how the academics experienced and perceived the relationship, with questions like: When are education and research connected in your work? Are they mutually beneficial? How do you value the relationship? Do you experience tensions or issues? To study where they situate the nexus and whether their focus is more on (individual) teaching practices or education as a collective process, we started with the term 'education-research relationship' in the questions asked, to then see whether it is framed down in the discussion to the teaching-research nexus. The next topic specifically addressed how they performed the relationship and dealt with tensions, but also whether, and what, things should change. It was thereby specifically discussed in which situations and contexts they experienced tensions and issues, whose views they take into account and what constrains or enables them. All topics were covered for each academic position, but not all focus groups addressed all topics.

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3   The version of this article as published in *European Journal of Higher Education* incorrectly mentions that participants were from 12 research universities. We have decided not to have this corrected, as it does not affect the analysis.

Analysis

The focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using At-las-TI. The coding process was interpretive and contained an initial, explorative phase and a more focused phase (Charmaz, 2014).

We first labelled the fragments and assembled the salient labels in code groups concerning the nexus, tensions, and strategies. The labels were then assigned to newly created category codes to better understand the patterns. The strategies code group, for example, contained the category code 'acceptance', with labels like 'It is ok because I don't need to go up'. The analysis was conducted separately for assistant, associate, and full professors. Afterwards, the variation in the three groups' issues and strategies were compared. To understand the games better, we returned to the underlying text fragments and further explored the framings of the tensions and strategising in order to ascertain what, whom, and the strategies that participants named as salient in specific situations and contexts. We identified what each participant perceived as enabling and restricting interdependencies and compared these in memos (Charmaz 2014; Schaffer 2016).

Findings

This section addresses the framings concerning the nexus and describes per position the perceived relationship, issues, and strategies. First however, we start with the important observation that academics in all positions shared the frame that teaching and research should go together and that there is moral value in combining them. They liked their work and appreciated the combination but also found the relation challenging, and they recurrently questioned how it should be shaped in practice. As a full professor put it:

> HGL6(m): I think they are inextricably linked, that you cannot see them separately. How you set that up, how you give shape to that link, that is of course another question. It doesn't have to be. The question I ask myself now, or we ask ourselves in the department; 'should it be the case that the researcher, who is therefore very good at research, is automatically the teacher who actually translates all that knowledge and transfers it to the student?' Not necessarily, we think.

The idea that the combination is worth striving for but difficult to establish in practice started discussions in focus groups for all positions.

Assistant professors

> UD21(f): I hope that we are moving towards that you can much more unite our teaching practice with your research practice.... You have to be able to teach all different courses, to be a kind of all-round teacher. And I understand – especially as I have the ambition to become an educational director – that I have to know the educational programme well enough. But I also supervise many theses that do not address topics that I know something about, or do not interest me at all. I am much less motivated then. And my research also slows down because of that.

The ideal that synergy is good for education quality (less for research) runs through the assistant professors' narratives. These positive articulations were instantly accompanied by ambiguities, tensions, and different preferences, and establishing the connection was not always favoured personally.

> UD6(f): But if it was up to me, to be honest, I would not be doing any teaching. I would just focus on research and engage with societal stakeholders for valorisation, which is much more preferred by me personally, than the other. And I also feel that teaching should not be left to people who just have a teaching role. Because it would not be good for the quality of the teaching. We have a responsibility there.

Assistant professors saw the responsibility concerning the combination but also valued the two domains as separate professions that both deserved full attention.

Assistant professors' tensions
The tensions experienced by assistant professors in performing in both domains concerned different forms of time-related trade-offs, a systematic undervaluation of education, dependencies on student evaluations, and issues concerning their identity and position. These tensions were perceived as persistent and interwoven. Tensions regarding the teaching-research nexus concerned primarily a lack of time to conduct both in practice. Realising good teaching and good research were both considered time-consuming, and many found it difficult to find a balance,

let alone excel in both. Several assistant professors found this lack of time caused by education too time-consuming, especially in their first years. They had to teach too much and did not have enough time for other tasks.

Time-related tensions were recurrently framed as a trade-off between official research time and the quality of teaching. Formal teaching models were seen as unrealistic with too many demands from outside the department.

> UD12(m): But I always feel that these hours are not sufficient to cover the task. So that you are always feeling as if, yes, it's 60/40. But if you want to do Solver [time registration system] properly, it will quickly become 80, 90. And then the research becomes part of your spare time. And you are then forced to cut the things that you really like. I mean, I really like research, but that's the part you have to start cutting. Or you have to deliver somewhat of less quality.

Assistant professors recurrently noted that they had to 'fight' and negotiate to protect their research time. Several said that they needed a grant, but spent time teaching. UD17(f): 'You are losing so much time on teaching, which is not valued as much as the obligations and the grants.'

Lack of time was considered persistent, and efficiency gains like increasing student autonomy were found difficult to bring into practice. Several academics felt that they were underserving their colleagues and students. The view was that teaching remained time-consuming and that strategies like making students responsible for their learning process did not necessarily result in more time.

The balancing of research and teaching is not a value-neutral process. Teaching was often reported to be systematically undervalued, leading to a lack of attention on the education process.

> UD9(f): The people that have the most relaxed work balance are the people that do have a less percentage of education, because they get rolled out. Ja, I agree with that. That relates to the fact that these teaching things are just generally underrated....I've been grading master theses a lot. That is just one thing that is structurally underrated with regard to the number of hours that it takes.

The view that there were still few incentives to teach was widely shared, and several received the message that it would ruin their career, even if they really liked it. UD10(f): I've been taught that you are wasting your time on teaching.' Starting assistant professors especially worried about the normative message concerning education and found it strange that they were first educated as researchers to then perform as teachers.

There was much criticism of a lack of teamwork and professionalism in education. Experiences differed, and assistant professors in smaller research groups reported ample educational support and collegial collaboration. These, however, also identified cues to focus on research and were still judged primarily on research performance. The undervaluation of teaching was seen as systemic, despite change processes and willingness in the departments. It was framed as persistent and ingrained because senior academics with strong research positions did not experience incentives for change.

Assistant professors in all groups noted that teaching impacted their identity negatively. This reflected the higher valuation of research, and several assistant professors did not feel seen as lecturers. One assistant professor with a teaching profile felt like 'a total failure', and it was recurrently noted that one was seen as a lecturer rather than an academic if one excelled at teaching. Early career academics also experienced difficulties with teaching and noted that they felt bad if their teaching was bad. The focus group with assistant professors on a temporary contract extensively discussed negative effects of student evaluations and found that students had power over them, thereby raising their insecurity. Part of the tenure evaluation is teaching, and people depend on it.

> UD14(f): It sometimes really feels that if I fail, I get like homeless. It is a lot of tension to put on someone. And part of the tenure evaluation is your teaching. My professor for instance, with the whole COVID, she was like 'ah, just record some shit, and put it online, and you're done with it'. And I was like 'Noho!' Because if I do, they will not like it, and I will not get tenure.

Career issues related to an environment that maintained a competitive research rationale, but also demanded teaching performance. It was stated that those who quit did not like teaching anymore, and that those who stayed had a research profile. Several women noted that these patterns were gendered.

> UD22(f): The people of my generation who quit are actually all women....Even if you decide to focus on education, it turned out too heavy for some. It is also a combination of personalities, I want to acknowledge that. But of some, I think, that has been a real loss. And the types that do survive – yes, I am still there, but I hope that I am not talking about myself. But those are not the best in the position.

Assistant professors' strategies

Strategies were oriented primarily towards keeping and improving one's personal balance. 'Coping' and 'surviving' were seen as 'the right words' to describe the first years of combining research and teaching in academia. This early career stage was identified as an individual process of balance seeking, trying out which strategies work. Periodising research and teaching during the year, as well as increasing the efficiency and effectivity of the teaching process were recurrently mentioned. Increasing efficiency, for example, meant varying between individual student attention and making time calculations in one's head. From the beginning of their career, some assistant professors were able to maintain their balance, using strategies like protecting their time:

> UD11(f): I think I make some decisions that are good for me, and that not always do the students really, well. They don't really dislike it, but sometimes I make very good time management choices, I think. So for instance, I am coordinating a course with approximately 300 students. So I tell them: if you want to talk to me, don't email me. I am in the office every Tuesday at four o'clock after the lecture. And if you have any question about the course, or about individual things, or about anything like that, you can come to me and ask any questions.... So, I use those kinds of things to make work easier. And it works.

When others expressed guilt about not spending enough time on students and colleagues, this associate professor stressed that efficiency came with care and that she also tried to do a good job. UD11(f): 'But I also think it's just experience, right.'

The assistant professors aimed for synergies like seeing students as knowledge partners or teaching in line with their capabilities or research specialisation. Synergy was, however, difficult to achieve, and they identified a persistent trade-off.

Experienced assistant professors noted that their teaching had changed and that their balance and capabilities improved over time. Strategies to improve their position like negotiating which courses to teach were widely applied, and they also experienced more leeway to develop a stronger research or educational profile. They chose to perform more strongly in one rather than both domains.

A research focus was favoured to improve the balance, and grants were considered helpful for reducing the teaching load and improving one's position. Choosing the educational path was seen as deliberately choosing a more difficult and insecure trajectory than the standard research-centred path, and several academics found that they had to do it differently if they preferred teaching. Ambitions were thereby lowered:

> UD3(m): I am not actively striving to go higher up. It's not, I don't do this work because my intention is to become a professor. I am doing this work because I like the work. And that might end up becoming a professor, probably not as fast as someone in a tenure track, definitely not as fast. But I think that it is also a perspective on the job.

The discussions displayed intrinsic motivations to embrace the teaching profession that came with acceptance of the situation. Experienced academics with an educational profile noted that it was not an ideal world but that they were amenable to spending more time on teaching. The relative autonomy and rewarding and inspirational aspects of the teaching profession were appreciated.

The acceptance strategy implied that the academic hierarchy was functional. Although it was critiqued, hierarchy was also considered a 'tricky topic' and not further acted upon – keeping things stable. Some noted that one could oneself be part of change in lessening hierarchy and competition. UD13(f): 'so, it's, well, support each other. And at least, try to work as a team, even though the system does not really foster it.'

All assistant professor groups identified positive changes away from coping. They mentioned processes like teaching support and institutional rules to prioritise teaching or reduce the workload. People were hired only on a permanent contract, or there were clear rules to manage the hours. Rules and practices differed, however, within and between institutions – creating different room for manoeuvre for assistant professors. Whereas some institutions balanced research and education

at team level and developed collective strategies to improve the balance, other assistant professors felt that nothing had changed and that management did not support them. The space to improve their position and contribute to change was found limited, even for those in supportive environments. Academics higher in the hierarchy were considered responsible for structural changes, even though their views were also considered ingrained.

Associate professors

The associate professors' experiences overlapped with those of assistant professors, but associate professors engaged in a broader range of activities and responsibilities within and beyond education and research. The issues and effects of the dually driven funding scheme were also more prolific.

Associate professors' tensions

Associate professors, similar to assistant professors, identified time-related trade-offs and a systemic undervaluation of education that affected their careers. One noted that she was the university teacher of the year a few years previously, but only recently got promoted to associate professor. UHD3(f): 'If I was the best researcher, I would be professor by now.'

Associate professors, however, also experienced demands beyond the core activities of research and education, and noted that everything was becoming important. UHD10(f):

> 'I feel like it is 89 things. It is not two things! I could definitely manage doing research and giving my own lectures. It's, it's everything around it as well.'

They performed roles and tasks like department chair, educational director, and project leader. This variety in responsibilities affected how they approached the nexus. A clinical psychologist with an internship coordinator role found it crucial to integrate research-based and practice-based knowledge, so that future practitioners would know what evidence-based knowledge means in practice. She found it difficult to realise however, as combining clinical practice with research and education was not always encouraged and valued. A clinical psychologist in another group felt that students should first acquire scientific knowledge and critiqued student demands for a practice-oriented curriculum.

The relevance and necessity of such processes differed per field, and the discussions addressed how tasks like administration and management should be valued. Several academics found themselves still 'busy with the quality of everything' [UHD10]. Policies to strengthen different career paths for education and research were thus positioned against international competition and practices to 'look for the sheep with the five legs'.

> UHD8(f): Ja, there is change, definitely. But the international angle makes it pretty hard. Like, when you are evaluating teaching. Like the NWO position paper, I think two years ago, one year ago, it's like; 'maybe you can excel, or develop in two domains, and then leave the other one'. On paper, it all sounds really nice. But in practice, probably, the ones that will get through the system and get the promotions, are the ones that eh are most equipped in most domains. Because, then they are versatile, and you can just, I don't know, use this professor in multiple aspects of the organisation. So, I think it might even increase pressure, rather than just saying like 'we should just embrace all individual differences'.

The difficulties in balancing research and teaching and the higher valuation of research were still prevalent amongst associate professors. UHD2(m): 'It's the folly of rewarding A, while hoping for B.' These discussions concerned grants and the paradoxical effects of the funding scheme, which became more prolific.

In the Netherlands, academics compete for a limited number of personal or collaborative grants, oftentimes provided by the 'Dutch Research Council' (NWO). Obtaining a grant is relatively important to get promoted or obtain a permanent position. These grants come with research obligations, and academics can use them to negotiate about their work within the university. Obtaining a grant was seen in the focus groups as a way to improve one's own position and reduce the teaching load, but also created issues such as the need to apply. Some experienced a higher workload because research obligations were increased, but they could not go below a minimum of teaching. Obtaining a grant was seen as a reason to negotiate, which was framed either negatively (buying oneself out) or positively (making one's workload doable). A grant was also seen as difficult in relations with colleagues, evoking the feeling that one should not complain so much.

Having a grant was seen as a way to create more flexibility and for example hire student-assistants. Some grant holders noted that they had more quality time to

spend on teaching and that they would be hurting students if they had no grant. Academics without a grant, however, objected that they did not need one to provide quality education and that they performed well in both domains because they arranged their work efficiently.

The discussions on career paths also concerned how education and research should be valued and evaluated in relation to each other. It was noted that scientific peer review of scientific publications offered a public scale for comparison, which is lacking in education. It was, however, found difficult to change evaluation practices, and some noted that peer review of teaching interfered with lecturers' autonomy. An American scholar noted that the criteria for evaluation were not clear and that, for a long time, she was insecure about whether she could stay.

Associate professors' strategies

Associate professors aimed to keep their balance and deployed coping strategies to perform in several domains, but also specialised in specific tasks. They displayed more leeway than assistant professors to make their own choices and develop their identity. For some, the more senior position created peace of mind and room to dedicate their time to teaching. Relationships were 'played', and some noted that tensions with students were not necessarily negative, but could also be an opportunity to discuss and reflect upon their courses; this differed from the student ordeals to which assistant professors felt subjected.

Associate professors actively sought for space regarding rules and regulations in engagement with colleagues, students, and higher management. One associate professor noted regarding policies that did not convince her, 'I refuse, but mostly comply' (UHD10). Some protected junior colleagues against unreasonable demands, but norms and values were also maintained.

> UHD2(m): It's this temporary shield that you need to be. But that's, how I try to see myself. And when I talked to the dean, I once said that I felt like being that. He was obviously offended about it. But, yah, to me it's my main reason for being there. I don't need to structure anything, I don't need to motivate anybody, because they are all heavily motivated. So, then let me at least try to think of being the one to make it possible for them to do the most decent job as possible.
> Interviewer: Yes.
> UHD5(m): At the same time, I also sometimes think that some

people just need to get a little push, because sometimes I still
need to remind them about the programme's learning outcomes.

Educational directors felt responsible for setting standards to assess and maintain education quality. Several associate professors actively developed strategies to deal differently with student evaluations, for example by making them richer. Changing the formal perspective was found difficult however, and an examination committee member noted that he kept his views on student evaluations to himself.

Associate professors also developed initiatives concerning time registration issues, resulting in their colleagues realising that they were structurally doing overtime – and that this was not caused by their own lack of efficiency. Associate professors used such experiences to exemplify a discrepancy between their own experiences with higher management and the system, which they felt they could not act upon. They displayed a lack of agency concerning structural change processes:

> UHD15(f): These are faculty-level decisions. And they say it is university level, and the university says it's ministry. And the ministry says it's the government. That's how it works.

They could engage with their colleagues though, and several academics urged one another to work more efficiently or be more socially involved. Changes were, however, considered difficult to accomplish.

> UHD8(f). We are full of good ideas. The whole scientific community is. But then implementing it in practice, and then making sure that it becomes part of your organisation, I think it often stops there.

Full professors

Several associate and full professors noted that their relationships with students had changed, and that their knowledge claims were less easily accepted. The eyes of the full professors were however more on group performance and combinations of staff than on their own positions. They felt that the teaching-research nexus was under pressure and were oriented towards establishing the relationship at group level.

Full professors' tensions

A lack of time for research and education, the systemic undervaluation of teaching, and the discrepancy between formal and actual teaching hours were recurrent themes. Full professors also framed the educational staff's precarity as problematic, although they did not identify issues with student evaluations. The main difference was that most professors expressed at least as much concern with their group's performance in both domains as with their own balance. The issues concerned making sure that education and research were good enough, while also keeping an eye on the staff.

These tensions accompanied the idea that it had become frustrating and painful to see what it took to keep things running, and full professors noted that there were unreasonable demands in both domains. A lack of synergy was seen as problematic, but they were more concerned with performances in research and education as separate domains. Negative accreditations 'kept on pounding' and there was not enough time for research.

The full professors identified a high pressure on education, as social sciences depend on student numbers and student satisfaction. Like assistant and associate professors, full professors experienced issues concerning the educational process. They framed these differently though, and expressed concerns with not having enough students. They noted that specific courses had to be taught even when the teaching load was already high. One group discussed how a changing student population affected programme quality and teaching – their views and experiences differed – indicating that increasing student numbers changed the group's research-teaching balance.

Full professors' strategies

The professors' strategies were oriented towards keeping up with external demands in research and education and concerned practices within the department. Their powers to change the systemic undervaluation of teaching were considered limited, and several professors noted that they did not see how they could change the imbalance. They identified some space to act upon the relations in their research group.

> HGL8(f): Because, look. The ideology trickles down in the organisation. And the fact we were just discussing, the prestige that is locked. And people that cannot go anywhere because of the educational pressure that they have. And others that do have time on

their side and do other nice things in their eyes. Well, that creates skewed relationships, and you have to work against that all the time.

In tackling these issues, the professors experienced different dilemmas. They discussed their own role towards junior colleagues:

> HGL8(f): On the one hand you have to say: 'it is not just research'. I mean 'you also have to enjoy teaching and try to develop yourself in that'. But on the other hand, there is the market, where indeed, those publications count. So I try to mediate between that....
> HGL7(m): I would like to react to that last remark, because I think it is a very important one. Because, what message do you give the new generation? The new generation lecturers, researchers about what is important? Indeed, you want to give them a good starting position. 'So yes, do work on those publications because it gives you more chances.' But that, yes, that also gives them a certain message. And yes, if you want to bend that, where do you start? So, I think that that is an important one.
> HGL9(f): Well, I find that a complicated one. Because, though I, [HGL8], I completely follow you! And at the same time there is something nagging, that I think; 'yes, but that keeps the system intact'.

In changing the game, full professors experienced the same interdependencies and dilemmas concerning international competition as associate professors.

> HGL9(f): If we maintain, this, then, then we are the ones that keep initiating the work pressure, with this focus on publications....We can, or you can as department or one university think like 'I do not play with these rules of the game, we do it differently, we value it differently.' But that only works if you have your own bubble without incoming and outgoing traffic. That's of course not how it works in practice. So, eh, difficult.

These dilemmas concerned the invisibility of academic labour, and female professors brought them up when discussing the specific difficulties that women experienced.

The strategies related at least as much to their responsibilities to realise good research and education, as to the systemic undervaluation of teaching. The strategy to further differentiate between research-oriented and education-oriented staff and to make the combination at group level was widely discussed and preferred by several professors to meet these demands. Several professors noted that not everyone had to be top in everything. Others argued that the combination could be in the curriculum so that one did not depend on one specialist researcher. Several participants saw increasing differentiation and found that the curriculum also determined who was hired. It was furthermore noted that there was room to listen to individual preferences:

> HGL8(f): What you can do is of course listen to the people in your department. What are their aspirations? What do they actually want? If someone is happy in education and occasionally wants to write a nice article, you have to facilitate that. But others, then you know, that is someone who would like to have research time or something alike. And you should not hide the differences! I think it is fine that they are there. And then, you have to guide someone in that direction. We just have those different flavours in a department or research group.

The idea of hiring academics who spend 80% of their time teaching and 20% researching was suggested as a compromise to deal with the high demand for education and maintain synergy between research and education. It was seen as an alternative for junior lecturers on a temporary teaching assignment, as they had a PhD and were part of the team. The professors identified differences between institutions in enabling these different careers, and some planned to discuss this with faculty management. It was, however, also noted that education needed engaged professors and questioned whether 20% research time was enough for quality teaching.

The professors were also oriented towards team-level actions. Both focus groups found that there should be more teamwork and community building in research and education, and that instruments like looking at one another's classes, peer review in education, and administration hours were important. The full professors' strategies were therefore oriented towards the people with whom they had to satisfy the different demands emanating from their research/education responsibilities. The professors concluded that they faced similar issues but had different outcomes and that the room for manoeuvre differed per institution.

Discussion and conclusion

This study combined Wittgenstein's notion of language games with Elias' notion of human figurations to assess how academics in different hierarchical positions frame and play out the teaching-research relationship in interdependence with their contexts.

Framing analysis provides insight in what the problem is supposed to be, including directions for action. The analysis elucidated that the academic's problems concerning teaching and research hung together with issues concerning other aspects, such as the lack of time to find a balance, to developing a career, or to teaching performance and its assessment. The relationship between teaching and research was thereby mostly seen as concerning two tasks which are both valued and seen as important, while striving for mutual fertilisation. The problem frames concerned aspects like 'skewed relationships' and personal and social effects of choices in teaching and research, less the content of courses or the value of research for teaching and learning and vice versa. A lack of synergy, changing the imbalance between research and teaching or systemic undervaluation of teaching as such were not necessarily framed as the first priorities to change.

Regarding contextual aspects, the human figurational analysis shows that tensions concerned the interdependencies between personal and organisational interests and demands at the collective level. While all groups deployed strategies like balancing, mediating and compromising, the language games differed in this respect as the full professors focused on balancing and relating education and research at the collective (team) level, whereas assistant professors deployed individual strategies concerning teaching and research to stay afloat.

The contribution of the combined perspective lies in elucidating how figurational interdependencies shape and restrict how the relationship between research and teaching is played out. Values, policies, and actions of higher management and policymakers concerning the nexus affected situated practices, but these processes at the meso- and structural level were less straightforward and provided more agency 'on the ground 'than McKinley et al. (2021) indicated. Associate professors buffered against efficiency demands from above, but also complied and passed on effectivity and efficiency values in interactions with their colleagues. The full professors were more dilemmatic in dealing with multiple responsibilities and values.

The study confirms patterns of further specialisation and divergence of teaching and research at the macro-level (Coate et al., 2001; Leišytė et al., 2009), but also finds that demands to be versatile and perform in both (and more) domains are still current. Paradoxically, dealing with tensions and dilemmas did not prevent reproducing existing situations (Luhmann, 1986) and the power balances that make up the academic figurations mostly remained stable and reproduced these patterns. For all positions, some academics however reported changes in the power-dynamics with students, whereby assistant professors experienced uncertainties concerning student evaluations.

Knorr-Cetina noted already in 1988 that we cannot presume that we know all mechanisms that control actions at the micro-level, once power relations at the structural level have been identified (Knorr-Cetina, 1988). Our combined analytical perspective provides insight in the various processes and multilevel power-dynamics at stake, but also has its limitations. McIntosh et al. (2022) point for example to the gender dimension in the invisibility of academic labour in collective work, but our analysis does not fully address how this relates with how the nexus is played out. Neither does the study provide (critical) directions for change or straightforward theorising. It first of all helps us to understand that concerted action is difficult to accomplish, given a lack of clear problem frames and the multiplicity of goals, issues and interdependencies interwoven with the nexus.

Several focus groups were positive, though, about slowly evolving changes and balances at the collective level. After a lobby 'from below', the Dutch Government announced furthermore on its website university pilots to organise the academic year more smartly, to reduce the teaching load and to foster a better balance. It is however yet unclear what this means for the nexus or the quality of teaching and research – again illustrating the interwoven character of the issues at stake.

Purposes and tensions in organising knowledge

Trajectories of student evaluations in two research universities

Abstract

Student evaluations of courses and teaching (SETs) are used for various purposes, are omnipresent in academic teaching, and cause tensions within universities. Their analytical power is contested, and specific uses are problematised for negative effects on lecturers and academic relationships. This interpretive interview study addresses how academic actors navigate tensions and purposes, and how they use, shape and deliberate on student evaluations in practice and policy processes. It reconstructs the trajectories of student evaluations in two Dutch research universities. Twenty-one interviews were conducted with actively involved students, support staff and academics in various positions including management. Elias' processual approach to human figurations was combined with framing analysis to understand how interviewees deal with tensions and create space to change evaluation processes. The two universities differed in their articulation of problems and policy trajectories. In both universities, programme committees and management smoothed tensions by guiding lecturers and students in adjusting behaviours towards each other. Issues persisted, and multifaceted questions like performance evaluations of lecturers were addressed only indirectly. Student evaluations operated as boundary objects, bounding specific perspectives and problems while leaving others untouched. The study invites more articulate deliberation and concerted action, especially concerning persistent negative structural effects.

Introduction

Formally or informally, university students have always evaluated their teachers and courses. Marsh (1984, 707) identified several purposes of student evaluations of courses and teaching (SETs) still in use today. SETs provide teachers with diagnostic feedback about their teaching, are used as a measure of teaching effectiveness in tenure/promotion decisions, give students information about courses and instructors and deliver outcomes or process descriptions for research and teaching. They provide information on quality-related aspects like student learning, satisfaction and programme quality and also serve quality assurance and accountability intentions (Alhija, 2017; Borch, 2020). Spooren et al. (2013) identified a dual use of SETs as a formative instrument to improve teaching and for summative purposes such as staff appraisals, mapping teaching competence for administrative decision making and accountability.

The broad uptake SETs in the 1990s fuelled an ongoing critical debate about negative aspects concerning their uses (Heffernan, 2022; Hornstein, 2017; Spooren et al., 2013). Spooren et al. (2013) pointed to ambivalences, as teachers may be convinced of SETs' value as a feedback instrument for their teaching, but wary of their administrative and evaluative purposes. Such ambivalences prompted critical analyses. Borch (2020) noted in the Swedish context that the main use shifted from quality improvement to quality assurance, and Barrow and Grant (2016) found that, in New Zealand, it has become a disciplinary device to shape academic conduct. Lakeman et al. (2022, 2023) noted for Australian universities that features like anonymity impacted teaching and learning experiences. Lecturers felt that it created a culture of incivility that erodes academic standards and invites game-playing.

Critiques regarding uses are multiple and interrelated, concerning for example their effectiveness in improving teaching and learning as elements of educational quality (Borch et al., 2020; Kember et al., 2002). Hornstein (2017) concluded that there is little to suggest that SETs say anything about teaching competence, although they do reflect the level of student satisfaction with courses and service. The digitisation of the process has reduced response rates and its usefulness for improvement and measurement purposes (Young et al., 2019).

The issues concerning validity and reliability, and related issues, such as (gender) bias and low response problematised in the 1990s, have subsequently appeared in the literature (Hornstein, 2017; Spooren et al., 2013). In response to critiques,

proponents of their various uses found ample evidence that SETs are a valid and reliable source with relatively little bias, but that they should be conducted with an appropriate design and under the right conditions to use them effectively. Marsh and Roche (1997, 1187) noted that teaching is a complex and multidimensional activity that involves interactions with students and organisation and found that formative diagnostic evaluations should reflect this multidimensionality. SETs can be a valid instrument for measuring teaching effectiveness when validity requirements like providing enough tasks are met. Young et al. (2019) pointed in this respect to faculty procedures that increase response rates. Others have argued that SETs can be used effectively in combination with other methodologies in a balanced evaluation system. Lecturers can then work on developing teaching methods and skills, rather than focusing on their performance rankings (Arthur, 2009; Benton & Young, 2018). Stein et al. (2021) identified the potential of SETs to enable the student voice and create meaningful engagement.

In practice, however, issues concerning bias and other negative aspects of lecturer evaluations persist. Recent studies pointed to abusive comments aimed especially at women and marginalised academics, and to unfairness and systemic discriminatory effects in their uses for hiring, promotion and award decisions (Esarey & Valdes, 2020; Heffernan, 2022, 2023; Lakeman et al., 2022, 2023). Student evaluations are a source of occupational stress (Lee et al., 2022), especially for younger and untenured academics (Hutchinson et al., 2023). Educational scholars in the Netherlands responded by arguing that SETs should not be axed, but properly applied by using valid instruments, combining them with other sources and fostering open dialogue among actors. They should not be used for hiring and promotion decisions (Dolmans et al., 2022).

Either critically or more positively, the majority of studies focus on their universal uses and effects (Pineda & Steinhardt, 2023), advising what *should* be done (or not), without much elaboration on the situated discourse, practical dilemmas and interdependencies in applying this knowledge within institutions. The deliberations and strategies concerning uses, problems and effects may in practice be confined by other priorities, procedures, habits and values of actors engaging with one another in academia. Heffernan and Harpur (2023) found in their analysis of university policies in Australian universities that these persistently leave academics exposed to discrimination. It is unlikely that the use of SETs for summative purposes will easily disappear, as it may be critiqued by lecturers but valued by students, administrators and management (Heffernan & Harpur, 2023; Hornstein, 2017).

Assessment SETs are shaped by their environments, but they also shape these in turn. As Lloyd and Wright-Brough (2022, 2) noted:

> SET is a complex web of regulation, accountabilities, interactions and expectations. It involves more than academics and students and its impact is felt beyond the walls of the classroom. Much of the existing research into SET, however, does not address its complexity and reach.

The aim of this study is to understand how different actors within universities handle tensions concerning SETs and how complex interdependencies contribute to processes of using and shaping them. This study therefore reconstructed the trajectories of student evaluations in evaluation practices and policy processes in two research universities in the Netherlands. We conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with employees and students who actively use, shape and deliberate on them in practice, such as student and staff members of programme committees, course and education directors and programme leaders. The research question is: *What trajectories do SETs follow in two Dutch research universities, how do actors deal with tensions involved, and how can we understand these processes from an interdependency perspective on their complexities and reach?*

Analytical perspective

The human figurations perspective developed by Elias (1970/1978) was combined with framing analysis (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016) to provide a processual understanding of the trajectories and interdependencies involved. This combination connects situated practices and issue framings with (decision) processes that involve larger webs of powers. It adds to two other perspectives in the relatively small body of studies on the uses of SETs in practice: a situated perspective and a discourse-analytic perspective that starts with patterns in policies and academic discourse.

Several studies have addressed lecturers' and students' situated uses and interactions (Arthur, 2009; Borch et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2023; Yao & Grady, 2005), and have also identified strategies for process improvement (Chapman & Joines, 2017). Arthur (2009) noted that lecturers deploy responses to student feedback that can be linked to notions of performativity and the development of teacher professionalism. Yao and Grady (2005) found that lecturers discretely use feedback to improve their teaching but also experience anxiety. These studies do not, however, relate to the larger configurations and power dynamics in decision processes.

Discourse analysis applies a broader perspective and addresses socio-historical developments and neo-institutional logics and translations. Heffernan and Harpur (2023) noted that university policies concerning SETs persistently leave academics exposed to discrimination. Borch (2020) found that academic leaders' translations of formal quality regulations follow logics of appropriateness and are driven by previous experiences and local uses. Pineda and Steinhardt (2023) identified patterns of convergence across different cultures, but also differences, such as a focus on management purposes in the US whereas German academics reflect on improving teaching. These discourse-analytic studies in turn, however, underassess actors' space for manoeuvre to mediate and negotiate uses in complex interdependencies.

Elias' human figurations

Human actions are interwoven with one another, and they make up human figurations and their social *habitus* or conduct (Elias, 1970/1978, 1939/1994; Van Krieken, 1990). A human figuration is a constellation of mutually oriented and dependent people, with shifting asymmetrical power balances: a nexus of human interdependencies. Power develops within relationships as people are mutually dependent. Lecturers and students have control over each other as both are needed to realise and improve good education, and value and evaluate each other in these processes. Interdependencies are often multipolar and can, for example, engage higher management or even policymakers beyond the institution. Figurations are in this sense interdependency networks (Elias, 1970/1978). They restrict and enable what people can do with SETs, given their relative position in the network. A programme director may have more room than a lecturer to discuss and adjust uses and scope. The figurational perspective relates teacher-student interdependencies with larger webs of power, including how actors' relative power is configured and can change over time. It thus enables our comparison of the practices and relational dynamics in universities as part of larger academic figurations in the Netherlands.

As others (Michael, 2017; Van Krieken, 1990) note, Elias' social theory is akin to actor-network theory (ANT) and Foucault's work. Elias and ANT share a focus on interdependencies and agents that are dynamically networked and engage with a plurality of decision makers. The reconstruction of the trajectories of student evaluations has to some extent similarities with the tracing of 'translations' (Callon, 1986) across networks in ANT. Elias emphasises the social asymmetries in networks and the conditions that govern organisational relationships and behaviour. Such attention to processes of changing *habitus* adds to the Foucault (1991)

perspective on student evaluations as applied by Barrow and Grant (2016), who found for New Zealand that their use as an assessment instrument changed into more formal and disciplining forms of control.

Framing analysis

Framing analysis can be used to understand dynamic processes and explore how people's perspectives and values relate with SETs, what people find problematic and how they act upon these issues. Frames are implicit theories of a situation, and framing is a language-driven ordering process through which people select, emphasise and label the relevant features of the situation, structure these into an understandable whole and behave accordingly. It concerns making sense of, and interpreting, what is happening and framing processes involve people's values, norms, objectives, interests and knowledge at a particular juncture (Aarts & Van Woerkum, 2006). What gets framed are issues, identities, relationships and processes (Dewulf et al., 2009). Often, framings concern all these together, for example when they involve consequences of specific measures for the student-teacher relationship. Framing analysis provides insight into what the problem is supposed to be and directions for action in engagement with different situations and contexts (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). It enables the analysis of processes concerning SETs and elucidates how these framings and strategies relate with changing figurations. The following sub-questions guided the study: (1) How are trajectories concerning SETs organised and made up in practice as part of complex human figurations? (2) How do the different actors' framings of the tensions, strategies, processes, identities and relationships relate with their space to act upon the development of these processes and interdependencies in human figurations?

Materials and methods

The study combined an interpretive grounded theory approach, whereby the trajectories of student evaluations were reconstructed (Charmaz, 2014), with Elias' social theory and framing analysis as a (deductive) perspective to understand the evolvement of the trajectories and complexities at stake. For the reconstruction, the involved actors and how they use, shape and deliberate on the trajectories in evaluation and policy processes were identified. Framing analysis was used to understand the practices and processes of SETs and actors' concomitant engagements in power-ridden human figurations within and across two universities (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016).

Sampling strategy and interview procedure

A two-step sampling procedure was followed (Patton, 1999), whereby we first selected the universities. Both universities are generic (covering multiple scientific fields) and middle-sized, like most publicly funded universities in the Netherlands. The universities were chosen because they are similarly governed by Dutch and European law and display similarities in their student population, but seem to differ in organisational processes and strategies. Uni-A emphasises improving education and student participation in its institutional strategy somewhat more strongly than Uni-B does, and we expected that such aspects and the leeway to organise student evaluations would lead to different trajectories.

Participant sampling was purposeful (Patton, 1999). The first consideration was which participants would be actively involved in using and shaping SETs, and the snowball method was used to identify, approach and select them (Noy, 2008). For practical reasons, we focused on social sciences, and interviews were held in social science faculties, but trajectories were also followed to the central university level. The sample covered smaller and larger programmes.

Nine and 12 interviews were conducted in Uni-A and Uni-B, respectively. In both universities, snowball sampling started with educational directors, as they oversaw evaluation processes and interacted with several types of involved actors. These directors suggested and contacted potential interviewees, who were guaranteed confidentiality and whose participation was voluntary. The interviews included: student representatives (2 + 3), lecturing academics in various roles including management (4 + 6) and support staff (3 + 3). Support staff included institutional project leaders and faculty policy advisors/administrators. Student representatives and academics were actively engaged in evaluation and decision processes in different roles. Student representatives participated in programme committees, faculty boards and the student council. Academics were active in programme committees (representing lecturers) or in programme or faculty management; thus, all were experienced teachers. Several academics spoke from experiences in multiple (past) roles like programme committee-member and programme manager. European guidelines assign a joint responsibility to student representatives for internal quality assurance, which can be arranged at different levels. In countries like Sweden and the Netherlands, programme quality is monitored in programme committees as participative bodies at programme level; in the Netherlands, at least half of programme committees consist of students, and student evaluations can be discussed (Beerkens & Groeneweg, 2022).

The Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Science of Radboud University approved the project, and the participating universities and interviewees provided written (informed) consent.

The average duration of interviews was one hour. Some were conducted on site, but most were digitally conducted and recorded *via* Microsoft Teams. The semi-structured interviews addressed: 1) the interviewee's activities and responsibilities; 2) how, why and for what purposes SETs are used; 3) how the evaluation processes develop in practice and who is involved; 4) what they value and critique in these processes; 5) what they can measure and how they relate with higher education quality; 6) what is and could be done to improve them; 7) alternatives; 8) whether they are debated and how deliberation processes develop. The interviews did not address each topic in the same depth, but saturation was achieved for all topics.

Analysis

The interviews were combined with other sources to reconstruct the trajectories (Flick, 2004). Interviewees were asked to share relevant documents, such as discussion articles and regulations. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and all transcripts were analysed using Atlas-TI.

The interpretive coding process contained an initial open phase and a focused phase (Charmaz, 2014). Fragments were labelled in the open phase (Saldaña, 2021), whereby we looked at how the trajectories develop, how the interviewees relate with SETs, the goals for which they use them, what they find problematic and act upon. A much-used label concerning problems was, for example, 'the response is decreasing'.

In the open phase, it was noted that SET processing was situated and programme related and that groups of actors like programme committee members or education managers had specific responsibilities in these processes. We therefore first reconstructed this situated process and human figurations to proceed with further framing analysis of strategies and issues in larger figurations in the focused phase. Labels were assembled in codes concerning issue framings and codes concerning strategies. A problem code is for example 'comments in open questions' with the label 'you cannot take wrong feedback seriously'. A related strategy code is for example 'educate students'.

Atlas-TI queries made it possible to compare different actors or groups of actors – proposing specific frames and strategies. We made memos to analyse which actors, identities, relationships and processes were addressed and how the figurations developed.

Results

This section follows the reconstructions of the student evaluation trajectories. It first addresses, for both universities, how the evaluation processes are organised in practice, then how issues are articulated and dealt with in policy processes, and ends with how persistent issues are dealt with in evaluation practices.

Organising evaluations

Actors within the faculties depicted a situated process that is cyclical, digitised, part of the formal internal quality system, and in its essence similar for courses and teaching in university programmes in the Netherlands. Halfway through the course, administrators ask the course coordinator whether specific questions should be added to a standardised questionnaire sent to students through the evaluation system at the end of each course. After administration of the evaluations, the course coordinator writes a reaction with proposed changes in the form of a teacher report, and both documents are sent to the programme committee and the programme coordinator and/or director. Both documents are then first discussed in the programme committee, which writes a short response to the course coordinator. The programme committee discusses issues with the programme coordinator or director, who in turn discusses them with the course coordinator if necessary. Changes to the courses are then reported to students *via* the programme committee and the digital learning environment.

A small group of actors was involved in the processing of SETs relating to the assessment and improvement of courses and programmes. Programme committees and educational management organised and adjusted the process. These adjustments led to differences in trajectories between programmes within faculties. As an administrator in Uni-B noted:

> And we do a lot more steps than they do as well... She couldn't believe actually what we did. I don't know. Maybe we just made that decision. 'Okay, let's do this, this, this, and this.' And it's been an ongoing procedure for the... Actually, actually, it's still ongoing...

> Because even last week, it was brought up in the programme com-
> mittee. Actually, one of the teachers made a complaint that they
> did not think it was a good idea for the teacher reports to be avail-
> able to students and to everybody.

Adjustments were made in the process to protect vulnerable lecturers but also
provide actors such as students with relevant knowledge about changes in cours-
es. Tensions were smoothed by adjusting the procedure. Such regulatory practices
affected students' and lecturers' knowledge exchange, conversation and be-
haviour in engagement with each other. Actors like programme committee mem-
bers and educational management acted upon the student-lecturer dynamics in
evaluation processes.

Programmes varied in how the student evaluation processes were arranged, and
actors such as the programme committee and course coordinators in the social
sciences department of Uni-A had more space than their counterparts in Uni-B to
act upon education evaluation practices. In Uni-A, the digital evaluation system
and regulations enabled, for example, flexibility regarding the timing of evalua-
tions, questionnaire design, communications by course leaders and combining
them with multiple forms of assessment such as peer assessment or student-led
focus groups. In Uni-B, the situated space for manoeuvre was more limited and
the questionnaires were more standardised:

> We have been instructed by the faculty to distribute the SETs
> through the system... and that is being done through a standard
> questionnaire compiled by the faculty at the time. And there is
> some room for course coordinators to add questions, but it is very
> minimal.

Flexibility in Uni-A was reflected in variations in situated processes and trajecto-
ries. Several directors noted that the evaluation processes were becoming more
divergent and moving further away from a one-size-fits-all approach. Some years
ago, the university chose a more flexible evaluation system. For a small depart-
ment, this meant that colleagues with expertise in quality assurance took the lead
in the development of a new plan and vision on how to organise the evaluation
cycle. In practice, this small department relied less on quantitative evaluations.
Dialogue between students and lecturers on improving courses was emphasised
by management and the programme committee by, for example, students or-
ganising additional focus groups and informal contacts. Management in a large

department also focused on improving courses and professionalism through dialogue, but relied more heavily on the quantitative assessment process developed over the years. To support professional teacher development and start the conversation, evaluations of junior lecturers were conducted systematically in addition to course evaluations. This strengthened 'professionalism instead of performativity', but interviewees also drew attention to ambivalences experienced regarding teacher assessment and the habit of 'evaluating everything all the time' in Uni-A.

Policy processes and problems

Both universities initiated a university-wide project group concerning SETs with support staff such as policy advisors at faculty and central level and academic staff, such as programme directors. The processes differed however. Both universities experienced interrelated issues regarding low response rates, student-teacher communication, such as negative and gross feedback in open comments, and a lack of validity and reliability in relation to what they were used for. Issues were more articulated and problematised in Uni-B.

Change processes in Uni-A

After previously choosing an evaluation system that enabled flexible organising and questionnaire design at programme and course level, the project group in Uni-A focused on further choices in design and uses. This question was also addressed in the university-wide network of education directors that informed the project group. The project leader stated:

> And a choice was made very quickly that we do not want a standardised questionnaire. Most don't want that. But a signal has been received from various faculties that they would like some more guidance and grip.

The project group planned future actions to support faculties in their choices, for example by organising expertise, identifying best practices and providing suggestions for questions that were valid and could be useful for different purposes. Responsibilities for choosing different or multiple purposes were assigned low in the organisation, close to the educational process. Further steps considered included a dashboard to combine quantitative and qualitative evaluation sources. The project group was finalising its report at the time of the interviews and also indirectly looked at the use of SETs for the valuation and performance measurement of teaching academics, which was not considered desirable. Discussions on them were, however, ongoing, and interviewed academics associated these with

processes like recognition and rewards that see the (e)valuation of teaching from a human resources management perspective.

The interviewees in the social sciences faculty appreciated the continued strategy to support flexibility, combine multiple assessment methods and assign responsibilities low in the organisation. Academics were mostly confident with the situated capacity to organise SETs as part of larger educational knowledge processes. They were sometimes themselves methodologists or education researchers, and deliberately chose educational purposes. To facilitate the teaching process, a small department chose, for example, less standardisation in the questionnaires. This suited the accreditation process, which became more formative. Other programmes, however, maintained comparability and assessed courses on the same criteria over time.

Issues remained about aspects like how to value the student voice for different purposes, increase low response rates and support teacher-student dialogue effectively. Academics noted that SETs are limited regarding educational quality and what they can measure. These issues were, however, less articulated and problematised in university-wide discussions than in Uni-B.

Change processes in Uni-B
Academics – fewer students – experienced similar issues in both universities, but practices were more widely questioned and problematised in Uni-B. Problems inventoried by several faculties include a lack of validity and reliability, unsuitability for measuring educational quality, and feelings of exertion of control instead of improving education. Employees noted that there was now momentum and that problems were recognised at sites, such as the education directors' network. The university-wide project had not, however, started yet, and the process was in a problem-setting phase, whereby problems and strategies were not collated in coherent problem frames with clear solutions and directions for action. As a director of education noted:

> The difficult thing about the whole discussion is that, with the current system, the problem is, to me at least, very clear. But it's not that easy to find a solution... because then you end up in panel discussions. Well, that has already been experimented with. No student comes to that either.

Problems in Uni-B resonated with strategies applied in Uni-A, such as the quest to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach or combine multiple forms of evaluation. Several directors framed as the main problem that SETs could not be tailored enough to specific courses and purposes in practice. In this problem-setting phase, problems were also approached differently though, suggesting fundamental choices and strategies. As a programme committee member (lecturer) argued:

> What is this evaluation for? Is it a control tool to assess whether your teacher is good and to be able to say to the assessment committee: 'oh, we are doing this very well and neatly controlled'. Or is it an instrument to simply improve your education? Yes, sorry, but for me the second is much more important than the first.

Several academics in programme committees and management pointed to difficulties in using SETs for hiring and promotion decisions, with some pointing to lecturers' vulnerabilities and gender bias. That the project group was, however, framed as a working group on course evaluations (not student evaluations) may divert these teacher-related aspects to the institution-wide project on recognition and rewards in this university too.

Strategies and student-teacher dynamics in practice

Several actors noted that change initiatives were paused in Uni-B awaiting the outcomes of the institutional project group. As analysis of the situated evaluation processes elucidated, tensions were in practice, however, balanced and smoothed in both universities, for example by adjusting evaluation procedures.

The misalignment between what can be measured with SETs and what they are used for was recurrently framed as the main problem. The coding of strategies in practice elucidated, however, that different situated actors handled this by acting upon students' and lecturers' behaviours and interrelationships. Strategies were aimed at creating more effective knowledge for educational assessment and improvement, while organising this process in a socially responsible way, mindful of lecturers' and students' mutual vulnerabilities. The strategies to increase effectiveness were therefore often interwoven with strategies to improve the process. They concerned, for example, changing students' feedback behaviour to make the evaluations more useful or strengthening lecturers' professionalism in using the feedback for educational improvement. Changes were thus considered necessary in the articulation of the student voice.

Interviews in both universities revealed four interrelated types of problems with student voice in the evaluation process. First, nearly all interviewees (including students) noted that response rates were too low for SETs to be usable. Second, most actors mentioned problems with abusive student comments, which were also considered as rendering them useless. Third, academics considered students limited in their capacity to evaluate the quality of education, including teaching. Finally, student engagement and conversations between lecturers and students were considered intrinsically valuable but under threat, especially after COVID-19.

Strategies to deal with issues concerning student voice were directed at increasing response rates in both universities, for example by organising the evaluations during the course rather than after the examination, reminding students in different ways, informing them about the value of responding, or engaging students through other students. Similar actions were taken towards abusive behaviour, and initiatives included instructing students to provide appropriate feedback through the system. Academics felt that students should be educated in feedback skills and that teachers should pay attention to that in their courses.

Strategies to change student behaviour were accompanied by actions to engage students and strengthen the student voice, especially in Uni-A. A project aimed to better support students in student representation, among other things exploring what they needed to speak out about regarding education. Students noted, for example, that it took a lot of time to understand what was going on in programme committees and what was relevant in conversation with more experienced staff. The project was additional to other faculty practices to increase engagement instead of consumerism and extend networks of involved students.

The measures in Uni-A strengthened the student voice as a goal in itself, but also as a way to improve education and teaching. This was valued more highly in programmes where programme committee students organised additional focus groups and among lecturers who organised formal and informal evaluations themselves. As one lecturer noted:

> In the end, I still find validity more important than reliability... So, if I have the conversation with three carefully selected students...

These qualitative evaluations were used in addition to quantitative evaluations to hear more about motivations. The quantitative evaluations were also considered

valuable, however, especially for things that students considered difficult to address in public.

The value of having a good conversation between lecturers and students was stressed in both universities, whereby their positions were balanced and adjusted in relation to each other. This concerned, for example, how students' feedback was processed and what was considered valuable. Academics in both universities noted that they applied pedagogies whereby students received less direct instruction on how to approach a certain assignment, thereby causing more critiques and insecurity among students. As a Uni-B programme committee chair (lecturer) noted:

> So, the teachers who are the most dedicated are also the teachers who ask the most, who look the most for new ways to achieve something, and who get the most shit thrown at them... I think that correlates quite strongly... That sucks. And then it is also up to us to understand this towards a teacher and to acknowledge this and put it on the table, 'We understand this and let's see together how we can both accommodate students and better include why we do things'.

The strategy was to accommodate student behaviour but also accept that students do not value certain aspects in teaching. Academics in programme committees and coordinating and managerial positions supported teachers but also understood these dynamics as part of the conversation for which lecturers have to take responsibility as part of their professional development: 'That you think, "wait, maybe it wasn't that clear after all"'. It was therefore estimated how to value the comments and the reactions that would be appropriate in student-lecturer dynamics. As a programme committee chair (lecturer) in Uni-A noted:

> So, I think we have to find a nice balance in that, so that students feel free to indicate, 'This is, this isn't going well, we have something here'.

Student representatives in programme committees and faculty boards themselves wanted to strengthen their voice and effectiveness, but also identified as problematic other students' lack of engagement and the tone of feedback. The strategies to improve education and care for student-lecturer conversations through evaluative practices contributed to regulating their own peer group's behaviour. They

concerned actions in students' and academics' situated figurations as those who learn and those who teach, but also as those who act upon these interactions as programme committee members and educational management.

Discussion

This study addressed the question of how student evaluation trajectories in two Dutch research universities developed in evaluation practices and policy processes, and how actors deal with tensions involved. Framing analysis and Elias' notion of human figurations were combined as a complexity perspective to understand these developments.

The reconstruction showed that practices and policy processes differed between the universities. Lecturers in different positions in Uni-B (including management) experienced more analytical and relational issues in evaluation processes, which were more articulate and debated in policy processes.

The trajectories, however, showed several similarities for the two universities. The policy measures at faculty and institutional level concerned primarily improving the usefulness of student evaluations for formative purposes. In Uni-A, responsibilities for evaluations were already put low in the organisation, and, in Uni-B, academics in different roles and support staff also opted for more flexibility and a move away from a one-size-fits-all approach. In both universities, tensions were dealt with by actors directly engaged in evaluation practices such as programme committees (involving students and experienced lecturers) and middle management. The aim was to strengthen the value of the evaluations for educational purposes, while also mindful of lecturers' and students' vulnerabilities. Programme committees and management guided lecturers and students in adjusting behaviours towards each other. Students were, for example, made aware of the impact of their comments, and lecturers were invited to be responsive.

Issues persisted in both universities, and the balancing and smoothing of tensions in evaluation practices left problems underarticulated at policy level. Structural problems like occupational stress or unfairness, and systematic discriminatory effects on faculty hiring and promotion decisions, were identified by lecturers in different positions, but supposed to be solved in practice or not yet acted upon in the policy trajectories. Issues concerning (gender) bias suffer from such biases being less seen in practice, but require abstraction.

Understanding SET trajectories

The reconstruction of the uses and deliberations in SET trajectories introduces a practice perspective in the normative debate on purposes and tensions concerning the uses of student evaluations. It shows that analytical issues as well as negative effects on lecturers and academic relationships are seen and identified, and balanced primarily by adjusting the situated evaluation process by actors, such as programme committee members and managers. Elias' perspective on human figurations enables us to understand these processes from an interdependency perspective. It draws attention to the regulation and adjustment of actors' behaviour towards one another as civilising processes that occur in complex environments, whereby these actors maintain a certain distance but also depend upon one another. The role of programme committees in particular stands out in this respect, as a place where lecturers and students deliberate with each other and contribute to adjustments in evaluation processes in practice. The analysis of changing *habitus* in this respect broadens Foucauldian analyses (Barrow & Grant, 2016) that highlight the disciplining character of change processes concerning SET (Paulle & Emirbayer, 2016; Van Krieken, 1990).

The interdependency perspective on human relations also points to the difficulties that occur when issues are dealt with primarily by those directly involved in the education process. Issues concerning bias, for example, are underarticulated at policy level. Questions that transcend the educational domain, such as the improvement of teacher evaluations, were framed as a type of issue to be addressed by human resources management in change trajectories like Recognition and Rewards, rather than in projects concerning student evaluations. There were, in this respect, different policy streams within the organisations (Zahariadis, 2016). Student evaluations operated as boundary objects (Star, 2010), bringing certain elements and perspectives together, while leaving other problems untouched. This conclusion is supported by updates from Dutch universities that identify policy trajectories to change academic career assessment frameworks as only obliquely connected to those concerning SETs (Program Management Recognitions & Rewards Coalition, 2023).

Implications for practice, limitations and further analysis

The study suggests that providing flexibility and assigning responsibilities to those actively engaged in evaluation practices strengthens the perceived satisfaction with SETs. More articulate deliberation and concerted action across different levels within universities are however needed in policy processes, especially concerning persistent negative structural effects. Additional knowledge is required

regarding issues that seem persistent but underarticulated, such as SETs as a source of occupational stress (Hutchinson et al., 2023).

This study is limited in this respect, as it involved only actors who are actively engaged in shaping and deliberating on student evaluations, not, for example, early career academics.

For the Netherlands, the analysis supports the present authors' previous studies, which found that issues concerning the realisation of educational quality are balanced and mediated in situated figurations and practices (Weenink et al., 2022, 2023). More research is needed to understand how the trajectories in this respect develop in other countries. The use of SETs for formative purposes is also foregrounded in German universities (Pineda & Steinhardt, 2023) and Swedish universities assign a formal role to programme committees as deliberating bodies in quality assurance (Beerkens & Groeneweg, 2022). Heffernan and Harpur's (2023) analysis of Australian discriminatory university policies suggests, though, that sensitivities in teacher-student dynamics are less acted upon in situated practice there.

Although students are directed towards changing feedback behaviours, it can be questioned whether the patterns really show actual changes or actions and wishes of other actors (including the students active in student representation) to change these. Abusive comments and a lack of response are seen as persistent problems, and students' current behaviours are identified as long-term developments strengthened by COVID-19. We therefore recommend looking at developments for longer time periods to assess whether or not we really see further developments of what Elias called civilising processes (Van Krieken, 1990).

CHAPTER 6

Synthesis

Introduction

The starting point of this dissertation is the idea that the abstract character of higher education quality can drive change and bring people together in a certain direction. In other situations, these same characteristics can strengthen control or render it powerless, elusive, and subject to different understandings, values, and dependencies. There is a lack of knowledge on how people's situated quality understandings relate to one another and how quality is constituted within and across specific contexts. To understand how the notion is made as a social phenomenon by people in interdependence with their environment and how we can engage with it in analysis and practice, the dissertation has combined Wittgenstein's language games with framing analysis and Norbert Elias' notion of human figurations.

This synthesis brings insights together from the four empirical studies that I conducted on Dutch higher education. It answers the questions of how the quality notion is played out by people within and across different contexts (RQ1), the issues that they thereby experience, how they deal with them, and how these processes relate to changes in their environment as significantly shaped by social figurations (RQ2), and what the combined analytical perspective has elucidated concerning the question of how quality is made and 'works' (RQ3). The combined analytical perspective was first of all used as a lens in the different studies to analyse how quality is played out as a positive and abstract notion within and across contexts, but these findings can be further understood in comparison with other studies and perspectives. The final conclusion brings the different insights together, and the synthesis ends with recommendations for further research and practice.

Synthesis of the results: answering the research questions

RQ1. How is quality played out within and across contexts?
The first study, in Chapter 2, concerned an analysis of how quality was played out in governmental policy texts over time, whereas the other three studies, in Chapters 3 to 5, used interviews and focus groups with different groups of actors to study how the notion was enacted and understood within educational institutions. As further addressed in the next sections, how quality was played out in formal governmental policy documents differed strongly from how it was understood in everyday practices at different sites within the institutions. The studies within

the institutions also show, however, that the positive space and responsibility to organise good education in practices strengthens the pervasiveness of multilevel (self-)control. The analysis within and across contexts reveals that how educational quality is played out within a university as a complex, hierarchical organisation with different policy streams not only relates to developments in the educational realm, but also depends on people's concerns with achieving and improving other goals – especially research.

The next section addresses how quality is played out within the educational realm and is followed by a section that further addresses how it is played out beyond universities' educational domain.

Playing out quality in the educational realm: autonomy and control
Higher education quality is persistently presented in a positive way in different situations and contexts. The study on governmental policies started with the HOAK paper, in which higher education quality was enacted as a key concept in the changing of the steering relations between the government and the institutions. It fostered the realisation of a new quality assurance system, whereby quality was explicitly articulated in relation to the positive notion of institutions' autonomy.

Quality was cloaked in how it was presented in the strategic policy texts and its different understandings were not explicitly contested or articulated against one another.

How quality was played out was not undirected, though, and related to changes in the involved environment. The steering relationship with the institutions remained key, but evolved, as well as the relationship with other formal actors and people. Until 2011, the policy documents showed an international orientation and a strengthening of the competition and complexity narrative. Quality conceptions changed in tandem, and institutions were supposed to be more competitive and prolific: 'average is not good enough'. The Strategic Agenda of 2015, however, displayed a stronger awareness of the different purposes of higher education in practices and paid attention to students and the situated educational process.

Higher education quality was balanced with competing, yet complementary, goals in governmental policies. The government identified a persistent but evolving trilemma regarding quality, accessibility, and efficiency concerning the provision of higher education in the Netherlands. Decentralisation remained the answer for a long time. The institutions were expected to provide flexible solutions for this

trilemma and to deal with societal complexity by increasing differentiation and institutional profiling.

Language games with the institutions and other formal actors were initially oriented at dialogue, creating shared indicators and intentions to relate the development of the quality assurance system to the formulation of policy goals. These aspects did not figure in the later Strategic Agendas however, which emphasised institutional differentiation and was accompanied by individual institutional performance agreements. The policy developments at national level demanded actions and changes from the universities, but also ensured that the institutions maintained their autonomy to accentuate their own quality perspectives.

Quality in educational practices
These perspectives on autonomy and control recurred in how quality was played out within the universities. The quality understandings within the universities differed strongly from those of the government though. The 'lively' and 'fully developed' quality assurance system foregrounds self-assessment and situated responsibilities, mainly at programme level. Programme directors (see Chapter 3) identified the guidelines and concomitant standards as open and flexible enough for specific situated cases.

The notion of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996, 2001) became the underpinning educational quality perspective at different sites within the university organisation. The analyses of language games and the framing analyses show that people within the university do not contest or explicitly articulate different quality notions against one another, but in these processes select from their environment those interests, perspectives, instruments, and policies that they consider relevant for the situation and the improvement of the quality of their teaching, programme, and so on – given the space that the relatively open quality standards and guidelines provide. Interviews with programme directors and people involved in trajectories of student evaluations indicated that attention was consistently paid to the curriculum, including what students learned and how teacher-student interactions could be strengthened. It is therefore difficult to distinguish whether people are talking about educational quality or good education.

People such as programme directors create their own world with people close to them. They select from their larger environment what they consider valuable and relevant, and thereby deliberately balance their own higher education perspective with other perspectives and interests within the university.

Spaces of autonomy and control are nested within one another, and the quality processes in Dutch universities simultaneously foster autonomy and hierarchical forms of control and (self-)regulation from the top of the figuration (including the government and its environment) to the situated teaching process. The study concerning student evaluations as included in Chapter 5 reveals that ongoing processes of assessing and improving higher education are constantly attuned, whereby academics and students in managerial and representative roles guide the behaviour of others. Tensions between students and lecturers are smoothened in evaluation procedures, including to protect lecturers against negative effects of student evaluations such as harsh comments.

The powers to play out their quality views in engagement with their near environment differ for people with different positions in the academic hierarchy. The study in Chapter 3 shows, for example, that programme directors in the position of full professor have more room for manoeuvre in their department than directors with the position of assistant professor. The three empirical studies that we conducted within the universities reveal that early career academics entering the teaching profession are the least able to create their own world in engagement with their near environment.

Although I did not further assess the relative powers of universities' executive boards or faculty deans, the analysis indicates that no single person or group of people determines directions for the extended figuration. The three studies conducted in universities reveal that academics cannot identify a key actor and point to the layered and complex character of decision processes. Whereas the HOAK paper concerned the steering relationship between the government and the institutions, responsibilities regarding quality improvement and accountability of education are now assigned at the different levels of the (extended) figuration. Continuous situated processes of improvement and accountability engage with quality as being constituted and gaining value at multiple sites such as different programmes and in teaching. People with different positions thereby take other perspectives into account and reflect upon developments beyond their own sphere of influence. The quality concept is currently not used to bring people actively together in processes of change like in the rearrangement of steering relations in the 1980s. The nested figurations are, however, open to quality policies and changes from above, such as governmental performance agreements. Notions of autonomy and control are thus intertwined throughout the academic figurations.

Playing out quality beyond the educational realm

The comparison across different contexts shows that higher education and concomitant quality understandings are constituted in the educational realm with their own specific goals, practices, values, (e-)valuation processes, quality standards, steering dynamics, and regulations. Other domains within the university are also involved, especially research, as universities aim to accomplish complementary yet competing goals, and academics often have to perform multiple tasks.

Universities work as sites within networked figurations where people relate to one another and different hierarchical positions are negotiated, balanced, and valued. We started the analysis of the figurations with the idea that we should take the educational networks within and beyond the universities into account, but the interviews with programme directors in Chapter 3 indicated that their space to play out educational quality views also depends on how research quality is made within and beyond universities. The study on how people play out the teaching-research nexus in Chapter 4 indicates that how higher education quality is made follows environmental developments and maintains academic hierarchies. How people deal with (potential) problems plays an important role in this.

RQ2: How do people engage with issues and environmental developments?

All four studies elucidate that tensions regarding the realisation of higher education quality were acted upon in practice, and that the process of improving quality education was in itself not seen as problematic. The three studies that we conducted within universities show that issues concerning the improvement of quality education, a lack of synergy between research and education, the systematic undervaluation of education, or improving how educational quality is measured were seen as important. These education-related problems were not, however, framed as the sole or *the key* problems to act upon, but hung together with other problems that academics experienced in realising the competing yet complementary goals within the university as a complex organisation.

The framing analyses in Chapters 2 to 5 revealed two interwoven types of persistent tensions and constraints that academics in different positions experienced in realising higher education quality: tensions concerning the realisation of quality within the educational realm and tensions concerning the realisation of higher education as interwoven with other goals – especially research – within the university as a complex, hierarchical organisation with different policy streams. In both

regards, issues were resolved on the ground, and early career academics in particular experienced personal problems such as being critically evaluated on two tasks that were difficult to combine.

In particular, the study concerning the teaching-research nexus in Chapter 4 and the study on student evaluations in Chapter 5 showed that tensions existed at the intersection of human relationships and performances at individual and group level. They concerned, for example, finding a balance and developing a career or improving student-lecturer engagements in student evaluations. Academics saw the relationship between research and education as concerning two tasks, both of which were valued and considered important, while striving for mutual fertilisation at team and individual level. They faced personal difficulties in contributing to these, such as a lack of time to find a balance and develop a career, being undervalued on their educational performances, or skewed relationships or harsh comments by students in course evaluations.

Quality is also about determining what or who is being evaluated (Kuipers & Franssen, 2020), and especially the studies on student evaluations and balancing the teaching-research nexus elucidated that issues concerned the (e-)valuation not so much of the worth of education, as of the people who have to make it. In making quality, we also tacitly or more explicitly value those who make it. Studies of how higher education quality is grounded in the interactional teaching process usually – and for good reasons – focus on assessing what students have learned and how they have developed in the educational process. The interviews and focus groups showed all kinds of persistent issues and struggles though, concerning the simultaneous (e-)valuation of both education and academics such as lecturers, course coordinators, and programme managers responsible for making higher education quality. These tensions and struggles concerned how quality is made within the educational realm, but also for example how academics are valued on their teaching and research performances.

Balancing, bracketing, buffering, compromising, and smoothening with a plastic notion

The studies within universities showed that issues related to higher education quality were dealt with in practices. Academics deploy different strategies to deal with tensions while aiming to achieve complementary yet competing goals and uphold their position within the university. Especially the study on the teaching-research nexus showed that strategies that academic actors in all positions deployed included bracketing their work in smaller pieces, balancing different de-

mands, buffering in the academic hierarchy, and compromising different interests and values. Such strategies are common for complex organisations (Smets et al., 2015).

Quality proved to be a plastic and flexible notion (Poerksen, 1995; Van Der Laan, 2001) that strengthened the compromising strategy. To uphold their programme and their own position, programme directors put their efforts into those aspects that they could change if they were constrained in changing what they wanted to. Quality's multiplicity and plasticity provided the flexibility to maintain the notion of quality improvement, even though this altered what they considered education-al quality. *Something* can always be improved, suggesting that people downplay ambitions concerning the improvement of educational quality.

These strategies to balance, bracket, buffer, compromise, and smoothen enabled people to deal with tensions but did not substantially resolve the issues and strengthened the stability of the academic power ratios. We did see changes in the figurations though. The flexibility of the quality notion fostered this persistence of tensions and the stability of the power ratios. How quality of education was played out within the organisation depended on people's relative position within their department. Programme directors with the position of full professors, for example, displayed more leeway to realise their quality views than assistant or associate professors. In particular, the study on how academics in different positions play out the teaching-research nexus revealed that early career academics with a lower hierarchical position experienced more difficulties within the university in performing in both domains. They were busy just staying afloat, whereas associate professors could deploy more leeway for themselves and junior colleagues. The latter also complied with existing regulations, however, and critiqued their colleagues when they did not perform on education. The study on student evaluations shows, furthermore, that tensions in student-lecturer dynamics were smoothened by urging students and lecturers to adjust their behaviours towards each other.

People with more leeway to change organisational processes in a certain direction took the larger configuration and often conflicting demands into account. Together with the strategy to deal with issues in practice, this paradoxically led to the reproduction and strengthening of existing patterns. The study on the teaching-research balance showed that full professors wanted to change the rules of the game to improve the position of academic staff and create more room within the organisation. They felt responsible, though, for group performance and

market-driven demands in both education and research. They faced dilemmas in engaging with the broader academic environment, for example in supporting colleagues to move away from a focus on publications. 'That only works if you have your own bubble without incoming and outgoing traffic' (Weenink et al., 2023, p. 13). Strategies to deal with tensions concerning the teaching-research nexus involved guiding staff in a specific direction or hiring academics with a focus on either teaching or research.

These strategies kept existing power balances and hierarchies intact. They also changed, however, the composition of the human figuration in line with the pattern of divergence of teaching and research within the university. In the university as a complex but highly regulated organisation with different policy streams (Zahariadis, 2016), change processes are apparently becoming organised within specific domains. This also became evident in the study concerning student evaluations, which shows that issues concerning the assessment and evaluation of academic performance were framed as a concern for the human resources department, not for education. Student evaluations – rather than the quality notion itself – operated as boundary objects that bound perspectives concerning specific issues but left interrelated questions unattended.

RQ3: How can evolvements be understood from a language-centred and interdependency perspective?

What does the combination of Wittgenstein's language games, framing analysis, and Elias' human figurations make us see to which we otherwise would not pay attention, and how can we understand these findings?

All in all, we can conclude that how the notion is played out follows contextual developments and maintains and moves along with changes in academic figurations in the Netherlands. Without a definition of the quality notion, higher education and its quality assurance frameworks have evolved in such a way that quality works as an implicit notion that follows contextual developments. The combined analytical perspective makes us see that these evolvements are the result of human actions. Quality's positive yet vague, ambiguous, and ambivalent characteristics support people's inert and paradoxical strategies to deal with multiple and often contradictory demands.

My analysis of how higher education quality is played out in the education realm draws attention to the interplay of notions of autonomy and control as related to the seeking of independence throughout the tightly regulated figuration. It

supports Huisman and Westerheijden (2010), who identified the Bologna process and its quality policies as a clear example of decoupling between policies at national and supra-level and teaching and learning practices and quality perspectives within universities. Academics retain the autonomy, but also the responsibility, to shape their education and play out their quality views with one another in their departments. Leišytė (2016) notes in this respect that academics have developed protected spaces nested within one another in response to quasi-market logics.

The unplanned consequences of the strategy to create one's own world are problematic however, as they reproduce existing power balances. The analysis supports the views of Dahler-Larsen (2019) and Morley (2004) who assert that the positive space and the responsibility to organise good education in practices strengthens the pervasiveness of multilevel (self-)control and affects the *habitus* of actors in different positions, who balance, adapt, and smoothen demands from above. Developments are not antithetical, but rather transpire in a complex and multilevel figuration with at least two tiers. The critique concerning the exertion of control in this respect relates to substantive quality views, as well as to the adjustments that are (to be) made in relation to one another.

Figurations as fields of relational dynamics
The combination of language games with framing analysis and human figurations elicits how people make higher education quality in engagement with their environment, and what these efforts do with their environment. Aspects such as issues with different values and evaluations come to the fore, but I did not further scrutinise the multiple logics and rationales at stake in valuation processes as part of how quality is made in social interaction. The study of governmental policies once again confirmed the difficulties in relating practices to Harvey and Green's (1993) quality categorisations.

The studies with programme directors and academics in different positions also showed that academics often still value research more highly than education in their work. Bourdieu's work (Bourdieu, 1979/1984, 1988, 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) can enhance our understanding of the processes that we identified, especially concerning the persistent tensions amongst academics in realising good education in combination with research. Kuipers and Franssen (2020) note that Bourdieu has written extensively about processes of evaluation and classification, which are simultaneously at stake in everyday moments of judging things and situations. Whenever we determine the quality of something, we are also

classifying: assessing the wider class or category of things and persons to which it belongs (Kuipers & Franssen, 2020, p. 143). Referring to Bourdieu (1979/1984), Kuipers and Franssen (2020) note that what is considered a good 'something' is ultimately the result of who has gained the upper hand in 'classification struggles'.

Like Elias, Bourdieu (1985) applies the games analogy and draws attention to struggles and interrelations. For Bourdieu, struggles take place within fields and between fields in society as a whole. Dépelteau (2013) and Paulle et al. (2012) identify similarities between Elias' figurations and Bourdieu's notion of field in their main theories. For both, fields/figurations are primarily relational fields of power, or as Elias (1939/1994, p. 389) put it, *a field of relational dynamics* [italics added]. Our analysis indicates that higher education and concomitant quality understandings are constituted as a subsystem (Luhmann, 1977) or independent field (Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) within universities; a domain with its own specific practices, values, (e-)valuation processes, quality standards, steering dynamics, and regulations. It also relates, however, to other fields, especially research, as universities aim to accomplish complementary yet competing goals.

Dépelteau (2013), however, argues that Bourdieu's games analogy differs from Elias' in that he understands players' strategies and feel for the game as being shaped and oriented by unconscious schemes and perceptions connected to objective structures. The powers that people 'have' determine their chances of profit in a certain field (Bourdieu, 1985). Kuipers and Franssen (2020) note that, for Bourdieu, people's value judgements follow directly from classification systems and that their individual actions and interactions reproduce the social order. Such a perspective does not match with Wittgenstein's language games and Elias' games models, which foreground the intersubjective and reflective (though troubled) character of ongoing processes of meaning making as related to change. Elias explicitly identifies relations of force as having their own irreducible dynamics.

Elias and Bourdieu both analysed developments in academic fields/figurations and pointed to the necessity for scientific elites to build good relationships to maximise their positions within scientific disciplines. Bourdieu elucidated in 'Homo academicus' (1988) how French academics in the 1980s maintained their capital and powers, whereas in 'Scientific establishments' (1982) Elias depicted how professors became leaders of local scientific establishment in the 19th and

20th century, 'perhaps together with senior members of their staff who head the middle rung of an institute or a department followed at the lower rungs of the ladder by junior members hoping to ascend' (Elias, 1982, p. 4). Their leading role in fighting scientific controversies or establishing consensus enabled them to control the access and careers of academic staff and strengthen the autonomy of their departments. Their specific discipline and competition amongst scientists and research groups became the knowledge base of their mode of working and their self-esteem (Elias, 1982; Elias & Whitley, 1982).4

Under the influence of developments such as globalisation, marketisation, new public management, and increasing complexity, universities have developed new legitimacies since the 1980s and transformed themselves into 'multiversities'. Although European universities remain attached to historical norms and rituals that preserve the status quo (Krücken, 2003), the academic workforce and its relationships have been reconfigured, including shifts in roles and responsibilities for professors (Henkel, 2016).

Both Elias's and Bourdieu's analytical perspectives can be used to understand the developments concerning higher education quality in relation to changes in their environment, but they bring different aspects to the fore. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the further divergence between education and research across different levels within the organisation and the seemingly stable power balances in the academic figurations can be seen as reproducing existing classification systems. This draws attention to the strengthening of the divergence of two fields, with different orders of classifying what is valuable. This is not necessarily bad for the development of higher education quality and increases attention on performances within the educational domain.

Attention on educational development and different educational career paths has been growing over the past years. Following a Bourdieusian perspective on research and teaching cultures, Deem and Lucas (2007) identified some changes in Scottish universities to develop new forms of 'academic capital', and research universities in the Netherlands and other European countries currently offer opportunities for academic staff to develop expertise to lead educational change (Fung et al., 2017). The studies in this dissertation, however, indicate that these developments are emerging only slowly in the Netherlands and that academics

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4   Becher and Trowler (1989/2001) further developed this discipline and knowledge-centred perspective in *Academic tribes and territories* but were apparently unaware of Elias' work (Burke, 2012).

themselves do not experience much change in practice. Crone et al. (2023) noted in this context that, in Utrecht University, the ability for participants in an educational leadership programme to shape their educational leadership was constrained also by circumstances beyond the programme, such as limitations within the department to realise reforms. The teaching-research connection remains therefore a field of relational struggles and academic hierarchies.

Elias' processual perspective invites us to see these emergent changes and the recursivity of academic developments as a result of the more or less reflective choices that people have made with one another in the past and the present – in interdependence with, and constitutive of, the broader organisational and societal developments. The strategies of balancing, mediating, bracketing, and buffering strengthen this recursive character of the changes across the nested figurations. The combination of Wittgenstein's language games with Elias' figuration theory draws attention to the human side and the multifaceted, contradictory, and unpredictable developments in making higher education quality together, resulting in both intended and unintended changes and reproductions.

Final conclusion and recommendations

I started the dissertation with the reflection that higher education quality is made by people in engagement with the environment, but that it can also have real consequences for society and play an important role in social change. The analysis of language games and the framings involved shows that people within the university do not contest or explicitly articulate different quality notions against one another but in these processes select from their environment those interests, perspectives, instruments, and policies that are relevant for people to realise higher education quality, in combination with achieving other goals and maintaining their position and relationships.

How quality is played out within academia relates to people's search for autonomy and professional identity as a result of past choices that people have made with one another to organise the different demands in higher education and deal with complexities. The quality notion has not been used to bring people together in processes of change. It does not 'do' much with its environment in this respect. Developments like creating one's own space, dynamics in autonomy and control, and divergent institutional logics have all been identified in analyses of academic work and organisational change that do not specifically relate these

developments to the quality notion (see, for example, Henkel, 2005, 2016; Krücken, 2003; Leišytė, 2016; Leišytė et al., 2009; Leišytė & Dee, 2012). Vidovich (2001) pointed to the chameleonic character of higher education quality, and my analysis draws attention to the limited powers of the quality concept as a catalyst for change in different contexts. Looking back at the developments in the 1980s, one can even identify the role of the quality concept in change processes at that time as limited – or not more than the lubricating oil in processes of rearranging (steering) relationships that were already emerging. The analysis also showed, however, that the higher education quality notion is an inherently social notion in how it is made within the institutions and consequently affects how people feel about themselves and their environment.

This dissertation has explored empirically and conceptually how the abstract and positive notion of higher education quality is made by people in interdependence with their environment. It can serve as an example for the study of abstract and positive notions in other domains, but it is far from exhaustive for higher education quality. The analytical framework can be further developed, and the figurations in the Netherlands can be further studied empirically and compared with developments in other countries. In particular, the conclusions regarding the nested character of sites where higher education quality is made, people's tendency to select from their environment that which is relevant to create their own world, and the (un)intended and recursive consequences of the strategies to deal with tensions in practices leaving the wider context untouched, provide food for thought in practice and research and reflections on these practices by different actors in relation to one another. The recommendations for analyses and practices as outlined in the next sections identify concrete options for this.

Recommendations for analyses and practices

This dissertation has focused mainly on how people make quality within universities, where the notion is not explicitly articulated in practices. Analyses of discretionary decision making in quality assurance processes can bring to the fore whether quality is more explicitly articulated there, what matters in the decision about whether quality is considered 'good enough', or whether the bar should be raised. The relatively new field of valuation studies can add to the analytical framework. It addresses, for example, the evaluation repertoires upon which people draw to value the worth of people and things in processes of meaning making (Lamont, 2012; Lamont & Thévenot, 2000). Although the work on valuation of nota bene Dewey (1939, 1943) is fundamental to the valuation studies domain, this field is to my knowledge not much drawn upon in higher education quality studies.

The combined analytical perspective has furthermore not been fully explored empirically. The patterns that we found for the Netherlands can be further compared with developments in other countries. The strategies to balance, bracket, buffer, compromise, and smoothen tensions with quality as a plastic notion may be typical for countries where the quality assurance system has become mature and tightly organised. Furthermore, in the Netherlands, strategies to make higher education quality could turn out differently in universities of applied sciences, as the power balances are configured differently there and reside less strongly in the scientific hierarchy. It would also be fruitful to expand the analysis within universities to domains beyond the social sciences.

In order to further improve how quality is dynamically made by people within and across different sites in the extended figuration and to be able to act upon (un) intended consequences, it is relevant to further assess developments at these different sites as interdependent with one another - including the effects of those developments at the top on the bottom of the figuration.

The study on how governmental policies evolve over time suggests that the figuration changed as a 'communicative figuration' (Hepp et al., 2018), as the communication patterns evolved and the higher education quality dialogue between the government and the institutions disappeared from the Strategic Agendas. The quality assurance system depoliticises and stabilises the situation to a certain extent. However, it is also open to new political demands in this respect, although there is not really an open dialogue across different publics on what students ought to learn and why they ought to learn this. The Dutch Inspectorate pointed, for example, to the risk of divergent quality perspectives between the institutions and societal demands (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2023).

Simultaneous with these developments at the top, there are changes at the bottom of the figuration, including growing attention on the quality of teaching. The Netherlands Initiative for Education Research, NRO, for example, specifically funds innovation projects of teachers and other higher education professionals (Kottmann et al., 2021), and universities have established centres to improve teaching and learning. A comparative study of such centres in Germany and Norway, however, indicated that a shared teaching and learning culture is difficult to establish (Kottmann, 2017). This relates to this dissertation's conclusions regarding the nested character of higher education, people's tendency to select from their environment that which is relevant to themselves, the frequently hierarchical

relationship of education and research, and the (un)intended consequences of people's strategies. This is a topic for further research and scrutiny in practices. Elken and Stensaker's (2018) observation that studies concerning the improvement of teaching and learning are not very well connected with organisational quality perspectives still stands in this respect, and this dissertation invites further analyses of the difficulties in connecting perspectives with one another in practices.

The analysis shows that people identify tensions in their near environment and deal with these tensions 'on the ground'. These strategies of balancing, compromising, and so on maintain and reproduce existing relational patterns that are the result of often conflicting societal and organisational demands. There is a responsibility for institutional management and organisations concerned with the assessment, assurance, and improvement of higher education quality such as the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, the Inspectorate, or the NVAO, to be responsive to those people who have to make quality in interdependent practices.

The dissertation shows, furthermore, that issues regarding how quality is made concern not only the quality of higher education as an object, but also the quality of the people who make it. The fact that quality is an inherently social notion means that it is made by real people, who also have to perform in other domains within the university and are evaluated on their educational performances. The interwoven processes of evaluating people and education are currently, however, treated as separate issues in higher education. The Dutch Recognition and Rewards programme shows that such issues can be taken together and invites universities to take concrete steps in this regard.

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Research data management

This thesis has been carried out under the Research Data Management (RDM) Policy of the Institute for Science in Society (ISiS) of Radboud University.

Ethics committee approval

For the second publication, 'We're stubborn enough to create our own world', interviews were conducted with programme directors. The ethics committee of the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) evaluated the application of this project 'Hoger onderwijskwaliteit en besluitvormingsprocessen van midden-managers op Nederlandse universiteiten' and approved the study under number 2016-CC-7235. The data are, however, stored at ISiS, as this is where the dissertation was progressed. The data policies of ASCoR and ISiS are consonant with each other and follow the 'Universities of the Netherlands' code of conduct for the use of personal data.

For the third study, 'I need a grant but spend time on teaching', focus group discussions were conducted with academics in different positions. The ethics committee of the Faculty of Science of Radboud University evaluated the application of the project 'Higher education and its relation with research: Focus group discussion' and approved the study under number REC21071.

For the fourth study, on the trajectories of student evaluations, interviews were conducted with people in various positions within two universities. The ethics committee of the Faculty of Science of Radboud University evaluated the application of the project 'The trajectories of student evaluations in a research university: A human-figurational analysis of qualities' and approved the study under number REC23031.

For these three studies, the ethics committees' evaluations concerned the project plans, informed consent procedures, and data management. For the third and the fourth publication, research data management plans were evaluated by Research Data Management Support of Radboud University.

Data storage

The dataset of governmental Higher Education Research and Education Plans and Strategic Agendas 1985-2015 is open and accessible through the DANS Data Station SSH ssh.datastations.nl/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.17026/SS/F1PVMU. Access to all other data collected and processed for the dissertation is

restricted. It is stored for inspection purposes at ISiS and accessible only by Prof. Dr Noelle Aarts and the ISiS data steward.

The privacy-sensitive raw data were deleted. They concern for the second publication, audio-recordings of the interviews; for the third publication, video-recordings of the focus group discussions; and for the fourth publication, audio-recordings and video-recordings of interviews.

The processed data contain pseudonymised transcripts of all audio- and video-recordings, analysed data files (Atlas TI), and, for the fourth study with student evaluations, non-privacy sensitive information like faculty policy guidelines and project plans. They are not publicly accessible and per study stored in the folder Z:\RDM Running Projects\626751_Kasja_Weenink_Aarts\Projects and data.

Personal data such as informed consent forms and the document that links the codes to the personal information (e.g., participants' names) are password-protected and per study stored in the folder Z:\RDM Research Data Archive\Thesis_Weenink_Aarts. This folder also contains the audit trail and per study the data concerning ethics committee approval (including project plan, interview guidelines, examples of the informed consent documents).

Summary

Higher education quality is an abstract concept that is difficult to define or capture. It is vague, ambiguous, and ambivalent, making it difficult for people to relate to it. At the same time, its vague character ensures that people easily recognise themselves in its different versions, without having to define it. Quality is furthermore a positive notion. Policymakers at national level and in higher education institutions in countries like the Netherlands and the UK easily accepted it as a fashionable management concept in the 1980s, and initiated the development of quality assurance frameworks. Quality's positive character, however, draws attention away from the ambivalences involved. It united policymakers and managers in processes of change, but its implementation came with mixed reactions in the institutions. Academics used denotations such as bureaucracy, burden, and lack of mutual trust and found that it impacted on academic values. There was no articulate counternarrative though, and people deployed various reactions to quality monitoring in different situations and contexts.

This dissertation is about the development of higher education quality in the Netherlands since 1985 and what happened after the concept went out of fashion. I have analysed in four empirical studies how quality is 'made' by people in engagement with their environment in social processes that involve multiple actors. Quality can play a role in processes of change, but it is also made by people in engagement with evolving environments. These processes are understood as mutually constitutive and interwoven. The dissertation addresses when and how quality is adopted, contested, or otherwise enacted by people in varying situations and how and when it relates to larger social developments and power-ridden dynamics. Whereas the first study in the dissertation concerns national governmental policies regarding the entire higher education field in the Netherlands, the three subsequent studies were conducted within research universities and specifically concern education in the social sciences. They address understandings and enactments of educational programme directors, academics in various positions who combine research and teaching, and people who use, shape, and deliberate on student evaluations.

Higher education quality is a much-researched topic, but the study of the notion itself was scrapped from the research agenda at the turn of the century, as researchers could not get a grip on it. Studies of higher education quality treat it as something that can be objectified, but also find that it can be categorised in different ways, is multiple, relative, and open to different understandings and enactments by people in varying situations and contexts. How it is made by people in engagement with these different environments is understudied. Analyses of what

matters to quality teaching are not, for example, very well connected to those of organisational change.

Rather than starting with a definition, I have used Wittgenstein's concept of language games to elucidate how people 'play quality out' in engagement with different situations and contexts. Language's flexibility provides a multitude of ways to express notions like quality, including objectifications and clear uses or vague indications. From the second study onwards, framing analysis and Elias' notion of human figurations are added to the analytical perspective to better understand how quality is made by people in different situations, positions, and practices and what they select as salient from their larger environment. This combined analytical perspective allows us to relate people's quality understandings and enactments to complex processes of change. People actively construct frames that fit their interests, feelings, convictions, and backgrounds to achieve specific goals. Framing is a language-driven ordering process through which people select and label the relevant features of the situation, structure these into an understandable whole, and behave accordingly. Power therefore develops within relationships as people are mutually dependent. Elias understands a human figuration as a constellation of mutually oriented and dependent people, with shifting asymmetrical power balances: a nexus of human interdependencies. The lecturer and the student have control over each other, as they are both needed to realise good teaching. Interdependencies are at least bipolar, but often multipolar, and also engage, for example, higher management or policymakers. Figurations are in this sense interdependency networks.

The main research question is: How is higher education quality played out by people in varying situated practices, how do these understandings and enactments relate to larger social processes across different contexts, and how can we understand these evolvements by using Wittgenstein, framing analysis, and Elias as a complexity perspective? The following questions guided the research: 1. How do people in different positions play out higher education as an abstract concept within and across specific, changing, contexts? 2. What issues do they thereby experience, how do they deal with them, and how do these processes relate to changes in their environment? 3. What is the contribution of the combined analytical perspective, and how can we understand the evolvements in how higher education quality is played out from a language-centred and interdependency perspective on complexity and social developments?

I have applied an interpretive approach throughout the dissertation to understand how quality is played out by people within and across contexts. The first study, in Chapter 2, draws upon Wittgenstein's language games to understand how the notion has been played out by governmental policymakers in engagement with their environment since 1985 in a specific body of strategic policy texts concerning Dutch higher education. The study found that quality was not used contrastively or contested. How quality was played out was not undirected though. Governmental quality understandings moved along with societal developments like internationalisation and increasing competitiveness at the turn of the century. Alongside attention on the relationship with the institutions, the policy texts came to pay more attention to quality as being realised in teaching practices. At the governmental level complex tensions were experienced concerning the achievement of multiple goals such as improving the accessibility of higher education, its quality, and effective and efficient budget spending. Institutions were supposed to provide flexible solutions. Strategies such as educational differentiation and strengthening one's institutional profile were brought to the fore for the institutions.

The second study, in Chapter 3, assesses, through 24 semi-structured in-depth interviews, how higher education quality is understood and (strategically) handled by a specific group of key university actors: directors of educational programmes. Framing analysis and Elias' figurational perspective are used to assess how bachelor-programme directors in Dutch social science departments understand and enact quality, while maintaining multiple commitments. The analysis reveals that directors share a non-problematic understanding of quality as realising a good educational programme. Constructive alignment is the underpinning perspective, and directors 'create their own world' with the people near to them by selecting perspectives and aspects in their environment that they consider relevant. The analysis shows that directors apply different strategies, such as balancing different goals and interests, to uphold their programme and smoothen tensions. The directors' room for manoeuvre to enact their quality views is, however, position-dependent. Whereas some directors can play quality out in any direction, others experience responsibility without power. Quality's plasticity provides the flexibility to maintain the idea of improvement, even in limiting circumstances, while preventing structural changes at a more fundamental level. You can always improve something.

As the second study indicates that the room for manoeuvrability concerns how higher education quality is played out in the educational realm but also relates to academic hierarchies, the third study, in Chapter 4, specifically addresses how

academics in different positions play out the teaching-research nexus in inter-dependence with their larger academic environment and deal with tensions. Ten homogeneous focus group discussions were conducted with assistant, associate, and full professors to understand their room for manoeuvre and strategies within the figuration. In line with the first and second study, this analysis reveals that tensions are dealt with in practices within the institutions. All academics identify tensions regarding the balancing of research and teaching and a systemic under-valuation of teaching. They balance the different tasks and smoothen tensions, but their games also differ. Assistant professors experience personal insecurities, whereas associate professors face further differentiation of tasks. They experi-ence more leeway to play relationships and 'form a shield' against demands from above, but also maintain values and, for example, 'push' their colleagues and re-mind them of the importance of achieving learning outcomes. Full professors deal with responsibilities concerning group performance and market-driven demands in both research and education. Several professors want to change the rules of the game, but also feel constrained as 'that only works if you have your own bubble without incoming and outgoing traffic'. In some academic settings, research and teaching are balanced at team level. Paradoxically, all academics' strategies tend to reproduce and strengthen patterns that exist at collective level, including main-taining tensions and the divergence of education and research.

The fourth study, in Chapter 5, uses framing analysis and Elias' processual approach to understand how different actors navigate tensions and purposes concerning student evaluations and how they use, shape, and deliberate them in practices and policy processes. Student evaluations of courses and teaching (SETs) are used for various purposes, are omnipresent in academic teaching, and cause tensions within universities. Their analytical power is contested, and specif-ic uses are problematised for negative effects on lecturers and academic relation-ships. I conducted 21 interviews (9+12) in two universities with people who are actively involved in using, shaping, and deliberating SETs, ranging from lecturers and students to programme committees, management, and project leaders at central institutional level. The two universities differ in their articulation of prob-lems and policy trajectories. In one university, problems in using SETs for educa-tional assessment and improvement are dealt with by flexibilisation of systems and procedures, and assigning responsibilities for conducting student evaluations at a low level in the organisation at course and programme level. In both uni-versities, management and programme committees with lecturers and students smoothen tensions by guiding lecturers and students in adjusting behaviours towards each other. Issues persist though. In both universities, multifaceted ques-

tions such as using student evaluations for performance evaluations of lecturers are addressed only indirectly. Student evaluations operate as boundary objects, bounding specific perspectives and problems while leaving others untouched. The study invites more articulate deliberation and concerted action in universities, especially concerning persistent negative structural effects.

The synthesis brings the insights of the four studies together concerning the research questions. Concerning the first research question on how the notion is played out within and across contexts, it is concluded that quality is played out in a positive way and that its uses are not explicitly articulated against one another or contested. Academics thereby 'create their own world' with people near to them. Constructive alignment is used as the underpinning quality perspective, and people select from their environment what and which perspectives they consider to be relevant in constant processes of improvement. Maintaining academic autonomy and placing responsibilities for dealing with complexities at a low level in the organisation consistently come to the fore. Spaces of autonomy and control are nested within one another, and the quality processes in Dutch universities simultaneously foster autonomy and hierarchical forms of control and (self-)regulation from the top of the figuration (including the government and its environment) to the situated teaching process.

The room for manoeuvre to play out their quality views differs for people in different positions, but no single person or group of people determines directions for the extended figuration. Academics' space to play out their quality views depends on power differentials in the educational realm, but also relates to other complementary yet conflicting goals, broader academic hierarchies, and societal complexity. Regarding the second research question of how people deal with quality-related issues and how these engagements relate to larger processes of change, it is concluded that issues such as a lack of synergy between research and education, systematic undervaluation of education, or improvement of how educational quality is measured are not framed as the sole or key problem to act upon. They are related to other problems that academics experience in achieving multiple goals in the university as a complex, hierarchical organisation. Strategies – such as balancing, compromising, bracketing, and buffering with quality as a plastic notion – to deal with these tensions in practices paradoxically maintain and reproduce existing patterns and interdependencies in the extended figuration.

All in all, it can be concluded that how the notion is played out follows contextual developments and thereby maintains and moves along with changes in academic

figurations in the Netherlands. Without a definition of the quality notion, higher education and its quality assurance frameworks have evolved in such a way that quality works as an implicit concept that follows contextual developments. The chameleonic character of higher education quality has already been identified, and our analysis draws attention to the limited powers of the quality concept as a catalyst for change in different contexts.

Regarding the third research question, the combined analytical perspective makes us see that these evolvements are the result of human actions. Quality's positive yet vague, ambiguous, and ambivalent characteristics support people's inert and paradoxical strategies to deal with multiple and often contradictory demands. The dissertation brings the human side of making higher education quality in larger organisational and societal settings to the fore, including the difficulties in dealing with (un)intended consequences such as evaluating academics' performances. The analytical perspective can thus be used to study how abstract and positive concepts are made in other situations and domains.

Samenvatting

Hoger onderwijskwaliteit is een abstract concept dat moeilijk te definiëren of te vatten is. Het is vaag, ambigu en ambivalent, waardoor mensen zich er moeilijk mee kunnen identificeren. Tegelijkertijd zorgt het vage karakter ervoor dat mensen zichzelf gemakkelijk herkennen in de verschillende versies, zonder dat ze het hoeven te definiëren. Kwaliteit is bovendien een positief begrip. In de jaren tachtig werd het in landen als Nederland en Groot-Brittannië gemakkelijk geaccepteerd als modieus managementconcept, en beleidsmakers op nationaal en instelling-sniveau gebruikten het bij de ontwikkeling van een kwaliteitszorgstelsel. Het positieve karakter van kwaliteit leidt echter de aandacht af van de ambivalenties die ermee gepaard gaan. Terwijl het beleidsmakers en managers samenbracht in veranderingsprocessen leidde de implementatie van kwaliteitszorg op de instel-lingen tot gemengde reacties. Academici gebruikten termen als 'bureaucratie', 'verantwoordingslast' en 'gebrek aan wederzijds vertrouwen' en vonden dat het academische waarden beïnvloedde. Er was echter geen uitgesproken tegenverhaal en mensen reageerden op uiteenlopende manieren op kwaliteitsmonitoring in verschillende situaties en contexten.

Dit proefschrift gaat over de ontwikkeling van hoger onderwijskwaliteit in Neder-land sinds 1985 en wat er gebeurde nadat het concept uit de mode raakte. In vier empirische onderzoeken heb ik geanalyseerd hoe kwaliteit 'gemaakt' wordt door mensen in interactie met hun omgeving, in sociale processen waarbij meerdere actoren betrokken zijn. Kwaliteit kan een rol spelen in veranderingsprocessen, maar wordt ook gemaakt door mensen vanuit veranderende omgevingen. Deze processen vormen elkaar wederzijds en zijn met elkaar verweven. Het proefschrift analyseert hoe kwaliteit wordt overgenomen, betwist of anderszins wordt bewerk-stelligd door mensen in verschillende situaties, en hoe dit verband houdt met gro-tere sociale ontwikkelingen en machtsdynamieken. Het eerste onderzoek van het proefschrift betreft het nationale overheidsbeleid in relatie tot het gehele publiek gefinancierde Nederlandse hoger onderwijsveld, maar de drie daaropvolgende on-derzoeken zijn uitgevoerd binnen universiteiten en hebben specifiek betrekking op het onderwijs in de sociale wetenschappen. Deze studies adresseren hoe kwaliteit in de praktijk richting krijgt door respectievelijk opleidingsdirecteuren, academici in verschillende posities die onderwijs en onderzoek combineren, en mensen die studentenevaluaties gebruiken en vormgeven.

Er wordt veel onderzoek gedaan naar hoger onderwijskwaliteit, maar de studie van het begrip zelf werd rond de eeuwwisseling van de onderzoeksagenda ge-schrapt omdat onderzoekers er geen grip op konden krijgen. Kwaliteit wordt ge-zien als iets dat geobjectiveerd kan worden, maar ook beschouwd als een concept

dat meervoudig en relatief is, op verschillende manieren gecategoriseerd kan worden, en openstaat voor verschillende inzichten en uitvoeringen door mensen in uiteenlopende situaties en contexten. Hoe kwaliteit wordt gemaakt door mensen in uiteenlopende contexten is nog onvoldoende bestudeerd. Analyses van wat belangrijk is voor de kwaliteit van het geven van onderwijs sluiten bijvoorbeeld niet goed aan bij die van organisatieverandering.

In plaats van te beginnen met een definitie, heb ik Wittgensteins concept van 'taalspelen' gebruikt om te verduidelijken hoe mensen kwaliteit 'uitspelen' in verschillende situaties en contexten. De flexibiliteit van taal biedt oneindig veel manieren om begrippen als kwaliteit uit te drukken, inclusief objectiveringen en duidelijke toepassingen of vage aanduidingen. Om beter te begrijpen hoe kwaliteit wordt gemaakt door mensen in verschillende situaties en contexten en wat zij daarbij als saillant naar voren brengen, zijn vanaf de tweede studie 'framing analyse' en Elias' notie van 'menselijke figuraties' toegevoegd aan het analytisch perspectief. Dit gecombineerde perspectief stelt ons in staat om de kwaliteitsperspectieven en het maken van kwaliteit te relateren aan complexe veranderingsprocessen. Mensen construeren actief frames die passen bij hun interesses, gevoelens, overtuigingen en achtergronden om specifieke doelen te bereiken. Framing is een taalgestuurd ordeningsproces waarbij mensen in een bepaalde situatie de relevante kenmerken selecteren en labelen, deze tot een begrijpelijk geheel structureren en zich dienovereenkomstig gedragen. Macht ontstaat daarbij binnen relaties omdat mensen onderling afhankelijk zijn. Elias ziet een menselijke figuratie als een constellatie van onderling georiënteerde en afhankelijke mensen, met verschuivende asymmetrische machtsevenwichten. Docent en student hebben zeggenschap over elkaar, omdat ze beiden nodig zijn om goed onderwijs te realiseren. Deze onderlinge afhankelijkheden zijn op zijn minst bipolair, maar vaak multipolair, en betrekken bijvoorbeeld ook het hogere management of beleidsmakers. Figuraties zijn aldus netwerken van onderlinge afhankelijkheden.

De onderzoeksvraag is: hoe wordt de kwaliteit van het hoger onderwijs uitgespeeld door mensen in verschillende gesitueerde praktijken, hoe verhoudt dit zich tot sociale processen in verschillende contexten, en hoe kunnen we deze ontwikkelingen begrijpen door gebruik te maken van Wittgenstein, framing analyse en Elias als complexiteitsperspectief? De volgende vragen waren leidend voor het onderzoek: 1. Hoe spelen mensen hoger onderwijskwaliteit uit binnen en over veranderende contexten? 2. Welke spanningen ervaren zij daarbij, hoe gaan zij daarmee om, en hoe verhoudt dit zich tot sociale veranderingen in hun omgeving? 3. Wat is de bijdrage van het analytisch perspectief, en hoe kunnen we de

ontwikkelingen in de manier waarop hoger onderwijskwaliteit wordt uitgespeeld begrijpen vanuit een taalgericht en interdependentie-perspectief op complexiteit en sociale ontwikkelingen?

Ik heb een interpretatieve benadering gebruikt om te begrijpen hoe kwaliteit wordt uitgespeeld door mensen binnen en over contexten heen. De eerste studie in Hoofdstuk 2 gebruikt Wittgenstein's taalspelen om te begrijpen hoe het concept sinds 1985 op nationaal niveau is uitgespeeld door beleidsmakers in relatie met hun omgeving, in een reeks Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoeks Plannen en Strategische Agenda's. Uit het onderzoek blijkt dat kwaliteit niet op contrasterende wijze werd gebruikt of werd betwist. Hoe kwaliteit werd uitgespeeld, was echter niet ongericht. Het kwaliteitsbegrip van de overheid evolueerde mee met maatschappelijke ontwikkelingen zoals internationalisering en toenemende concurrentiekracht rond de eeuwwisseling. Naast aandacht voor de relatie met de instellingen is er in de beleidsteksten meer aandacht gekomen voor de kwaliteit zoals die in de onderwijspraktijk wordt gerealiseerd. Op regeringsniveau werden daarbij spanningen ervaren in het bereiken van meerdere doelen zoals het verbeteren van de toegankelijkheid van het hoger onderwijs, de kwaliteit ervan, en het effectief en efficiënt omgaan met budgetten. Instellingen werden geacht om flexibele oplossingen te realiseren voor deze spanningen. Strategieën als onderwijsdifferentiatie en het versterken van het institutionele profiel werden richting de instellingen naar voren gebracht.

De tweede studie, in Hoofdstuk 3, analyseert door middel van 24 semigestructureerde diepte-interviews, hoe de kwaliteit van het hoger onderwijs wordt begrepen en (strategisch) gerealiseerd door een specifieke groep van belangrijke universitaire actoren: opleidingsdirecteuren van bachelor programma's. Framing analyse en Elias' figuratieve perspectief zijn gebruikt om te beoordelen hoe zij kwaliteit begrijpen en realiseren, gegeven meerdere afhankelijkheden. Uit de analyse blijkt dat opleidingsdirecteuren een niet-problematische kwaliteitsopvatting delen en kwaliteit zien als het realiseren van een goed onderwijsprogramma. 'Constructive alignment' vormt daarbij het onderliggende perspectief. Directeuren 'creëren hun eigen wereld' met mensen dicht bij hen, door uit hun omgeving de perspectieven en aspecten te selecteren die zij relevant achten. Uit de analyse blijkt dat zij verschillende strategieën toepassen om hun programma staande te houden en spanningen te verzachten, zoals het balanceren van verschillende doelen en belangen. De manoeuvreerruimte van de directeuren om hun kwaliteitsopvattingen te verwezenlijken is echter positie afhankelijk. Waar sommigen kwaliteit in alle richtingen kunnen uitspelen, ervaren anderen verantwoordelijkheden zonder macht. De plasticiteit

van kwaliteit biedt de flexibiliteit om zelfs onder beperkte omstandigheden het idee van verbetering in stand te houden. Je kunt altijd iets verbeteren. Structurele veranderingen blijven daarmee uit.

Omdat uit de tweede studie naar voren kwam dat manoeuvreerruimte van mensen om kwaliteit te realiseren vorm krijgt in de onderwijscontext, maar ook vorm krijgt in relatie tot academische hiërarchieën, gaat de derde studie in hoofdstuk 4 nader in op de manier waarop academici in verschillende posities de onderwijs-onderzoeks nexus vormgeven en daarbij omgaan met spanningen in complexe interdependenties. Er zijn tien homogene focus groep discussies gehouden met universitair docenten, universitair hoofddocenten en hoogleraren om inzicht te krijgen in hun manoeuvreerruimte en strategieën binnen de figuratie. In lijn met het eerste en het tweede onderzoek blijkt uit deze analyse dat er wordt gehandeld op spanningen in de praktijk, binnen de instellingen. Alle academici signaleren spanningen met betrekking tot de balans tussen onderzoek en onderwijs en een systematische onderwaardering van onderwijs. Ze balanceren de verschillende taken en verzachten de spanningen, maar hun spelen verschillen ook. Universitair docenten ervaren persoonlijke onzekerheden, terwijl universitair hoofddocenten te maken krijgen met verdere differentiatie van taken. Ze ervaren meer speelruimte om relaties te bespelen en 'een schild te vormen' tegen eisen van bovenaf, maar beschermen ook waarden en 'pushen' bijvoorbeeld hun collega's om meer te letten op de leeropbrengsten. Hoogleraren hebben te maken met verantwoordelijkheden op het gebied van groepsprestaties en marktgedreven eisen in zowel onderzoek als onderwijs. Verschillende hoogleraren willen de spelregels veranderen, maar voelen zich ook beperkt omdat 'dat alleen werkt als je een eigen bubbel hebt zonder in- en uitgaand verkeer'. In sommige academische omgevingen zijn onderzoek en onderwijs op teamniveau in balans. Paradoxaal genoeg hebben de strategieën van academici de neiging om patronen die op collectief niveau bestaan te reproduceren en te versterken, inclusief het in stand houden van spanningen en de divergentie van onderwijs en onderzoek.

De vierde studie, in Hoofdstuk 5, maakt gebruik van framing analyse en de procesmatige benadering van Elias om te begrijpen hoe verschillende actoren omgaan met spanningen en doelen met betrekking tot studentenevaluaties en hoe zij deze gebruiken, vormgeven en erover nadenken in praktijken en beleidsprocessen. Studentevaluaties van cursussen en onderwijs geven worden voor verschillende doeleinden gebruikt, zijn alomtegenwoordig in het wetenschappelijk onderwijs en veroorzaken spanningen binnen universiteiten. Hun analytische kracht wordt betwist en specifieke toepassingen worden geproblematiseerd vanwege de

negatieve effecten op docenten en academische verhoudingen. Ik heb op twee universiteiten 21 interviews (9+12) gehouden met mensen die actief betrokken zijn bij het gebruiken, vormgeven en overleggen van student evaluaties, variërend van docenten en studenten in opleidingscommissies tot onderwijsmanagement en projectleiders op instellingsniveau. De twee universiteiten verschillen in hun articulatie van problemen en beleidstrajecten. Op één universiteit worden problemen bij het gebruik van student evaluaties voor onderwijsbeoordeling en -verbetering aangepakt door systemen en procedures te flexibiliseren en verantwoordelijkheden op een laag niveau te beleggen in de organisatie, op cursus- en programmaniveau. Bij beide universiteiten verzachten opleidingsmanagement en opleidingscommissies de spanningen door docenten en studenten te begeleiden in het aanpassen van hun gedrag ten opzichte van elkaar. Er blijven echter problemen bestaan. Aan beide universiteiten worden complexe vraagstukken zoals het gebruik van studentenevaluaties voor prestatiebeoordelingen van docenten slechts indirect geadresseerd. Studentevaluaties functioneren als grensobjecten (boundary objects), die specifieke perspectieven en problemen naar voren brengen, terwijl andere kwesties onaangeroerd blijven. De studie nodigt uit tot meer gericht overleg en gecoördineerde acties op universiteiten, vooral betreffende aanhoudende negatieve structurele effecten.

De synthese van het proefschrift brengt de inzichten van de vier studies samen en beantwoordt de onderzoeksvragen. Voor de eerste deelvraag over hoe kwaliteit binnen en over contexten heen vorm krijgt, wordt geconcludeerd dat het concept op een positieve manier wordt uitgespeeld en dat perspectieven niet expliciet tegen elkaar worden afgezet of betwist. Academici creëren daarbij 'hun eigen wereld' met mensen die dichtbij hen staan. 'Constructive alignment' wordt gebruikt als het onderliggende kwaliteitsperspectief, en mensen selecteren uit hun omgeving de specifieke aspecten die zij relevant achten in voortdurende verbeteringsprocessen. Het behouden van de academische autonomie en het op een laag niveau beleggen van verantwoordelijkheden in de omgang met complexe afhankelijkheden komen telkens terug. Ruimtes met autonomie en controle zijn daarbij in elkaar genest. Kwaliteitsprocessen op de Nederlandse universiteiten bevorderen tegelijkertijd autonomie en hiërarchische vormen van controle en (zelf)regulering, vanaf de top van de figuratie (inclusief de overheid en haar omgeving) tot aan het gesitueerde onderwijsproces aan toe.

De ruimte om hun kwaliteitsperspectieven in de praktijk te brengen loopt uiteen voor mensen in verschillende posities, maar er is geen enkele persoon of groep die de richting bepaalt voor de grotere figuratie. De ruimte die academici hebben

om hun kwaliteitsvisies uit te dragen hangt af van machtsverschillen in het onderwijs, maar houdt ook verband met andere complementaire maar tegenstrijdige doelen, bredere academische hiërarchieën en maatschappelijke complexiteit. Met betrekking tot de tweede deelvraag hoe mensen omgaan met kwaliteitsgerelateerde kwesties en hoe zich dit verhoudt tot grotere veranderingsprocessen, wordt geconcludeerd dat kwesties zoals een gebrek aan synergie tussen onderzoek en onderwijs, systematische onderwaardering van onderwijs, of verbetering van de manier waarop onderwijskwaliteit wordt gemeten, niet gezien worden als het enige of belangrijkste probleem. Deze kwesties houden verband met andere problemen die academici ervaren bij het bereiken van meerdere doelen in de complexe, hiërarchisch georganiseerde universiteit. Strategieën om met deze spanningen om te gaan zoals balanceren, compromissen sluiten, opdelen van werkzaamheden en het bufferen met kwaliteit als een plastisch begrip, handhaven en reproduceren paradoxaal genoeg bestaande patronen en onderlinge afhankelijkheden in de uitgebreide figuratie.

Al met al kan worden geconcludeerd dat de invulling van het begrip op Nederlandse universiteiten meebeweegt met contextuele veranderingen, en daarin veranderingen in academische figuraties volgt en handhaaft. Zonder kwaliteit te hebben gedefinieerd, zijn het hoger onderwijs en haar kwaliteitszorgkaders zo geëvolueerd dat kwaliteit als een impliciet concept contextuele ontwikkelingen volgt. Eerdere studies wezen al op het kameleontische karakter van hoger onderwijskwaliteit, en onze analyse vestigt de aandacht op de beperkte kracht van het kwaliteitsconcept als katalysator voor verandering in verschillende contexten. Met betrekking tot de derde deelvraag laat het gecombineerde analytische perspectief ons zien dat deze ontwikkelingen het resultaat zijn van menselijk handelen. De positieve maar vage, ambigue en ambivalente kenmerken van kwaliteit ondersteunen de inerte en paradoxale strategieën van mensen om met meerdere en vaak tegenstrijdige eisen om te gaan. Het proefschrift brengt de menselijke kant van het verbeteren van de kwaliteit van hoger onderwijs in grotere organisatorische en maatschappelijke contexten naar voren, inclusief de moeilijkheden in het omgaan met (on)bedoelde gevolgen, zoals het beoordelen van de prestaties van academici. Het analytische perspectief kan hiermee ook in andere situaties en contexten worden gebruikt om te bestuderen hoe abstracte en positieve concepten tot stand komen.

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Qua university affiliations, I started the dissertation at the University of Amsterdam and Wageningen University to 'land' at the Institute for Science in Society (ISiS) at Radboud University. I have met many academics during this trajectory whom I would have wanted to know better and spend more time with, but my position as an external PhD student living in Voorburg made this quite difficult. ISiS, in particular, has been a 'warm bath' though. I felt very welcome in this open academic community with much room for discussions and critical reflections. A good quality culture is difficult to catch or define, but it is definitely there.

I am happy to pursue working on higher education quality at the NVAO. My first steps in the organisation strengthen the impression that the NVAO staff share a feel for creating a quality culture with one another, as well as for supporting those people who have to make quality in the institutions.

As for my personal environment, I would like to thank the people on my hockey team and in the 'friet en film groep' who moved along with me in this whole stressful project and were flexible enough to deal with my continuous and ever moving deadlines (kom er maar in, Mo). For all games, it is true that what happens off the field is just as important as what happens on it. What remains after all those years are not the battles lost or won, but the friendships and fun in play. The best paradox of the game is that, although I have critiqued Heleen and Digna so harshly for their (perceived) lack of defensive hockey skills, they will provide my extra line of defence in that ritual called the PhD ceremony.

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Curriculum Vitae

Curriculum Vitae

Kasja Weenink was born in Vlissingen on 1 May 1972. She studied history in Groningen, where she already combined interests in social processes, writing, and language. After graduating, she conducted a PhD at the University of Amsterdam on the integration of German migrants in the Netherlands since 1870, which she did not finish. She has fulfilled several non-academic positions in (higher) education and research at, respectively, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, SURF, Delft University of Technology, and Kennisnet. Kasja also obtained a bachelor's degree in public administration.

This dissertation was undertaken as an external PhD student (buitenpromovendus) at the Institute for Science in Society (ISiS) at Radboud University. It was combined with lecturing in communication studies at The Hague University of Applied Sciences and a research position at the Higher Education Research and Innovation research group (HERI) at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Her research at HERI concerned the development of bachelor students towards becoming professionals and concomitant notions of professionalism. Kasja continues to work on higher education quality at the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), where she started in April 2024 in the combined position of researcher/policy advisor.

Doctoral education

Several courses were followed in addition to thesis supervision. As a PhD student in migration history, Kasja completed the PhD programme offered by the Netherlands Research School for Economic and Social History, the N.W. Posthumus Institute, followed by additional courses at the Netherlands Research School of Gender Studies.

During her PhD study on higher education quality, Kasja participated in the online PhD workshop *'Thinking with Elias: Norbert Elias and social research'*, offered by The Norbert Elias Foundation and European Centre for the Study of Culture and Inequality (ECCI). Knowledge of interpretive research methods was furthermore strengthened at several interpretive policy analysis conferences, where she co-organised sessions on framing analysis.

Kasja acquired further knowledge of higher education studies as well as science and technology studies by active participation in higher education conferences such as HECU, ECER, CHER, and the Dutch ORD, and through colloquia and

knowledge sessions with colleagues at HERI and ISiS. She has presented and discussed her work with various higher education publics, lately with a focus on student evaluations.

The question 'What the hell is quality?' has been subject to heated discussions since Pirsig posed it in 1974 in *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance*. To this day no conclusive answer has been formulated. And yet, the notion of higher education quality is here to stay. This dissertation investigates how people in Dutch higher education 'make' quality in different situations, while interacting with their environment. Four studies address how governmental policy makers, educational programme directors, lecturers, students and others in universities understand and enact higher education quality. The studies found that they all use their specific room for manoeuvre while facing different issues, such as dealing with student evaluations or combining teaching and research. No single actor can however determine quality directions at the collective level. Quality is therefore a 'plastic concept' with limited powers as a catalyst for change.