

Synergy between Research and Teaching at Dutch Universities of Applied Sciences

An analysis of strategic documents

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Synergy between Research and Teaching at Dutch Universities of Applied Sciences: An analysis of strategic documents

Universities of Applied Sciences (UASs) have been transforming into hybrid organisations since the addition of research as a second core task next to teaching. Combining two different core processes in one organisation is a costly and logistically challenging endeavour. Therefore, to be sustainable as a hybrid organisation, UASs have to aim for synergy between research and teaching. This research investigates the intended synergy between research and teaching of six Dutch UASs by analysing their strategic documents. The findings show 35 varieties of synergy, divided over 6 themes: students, graduates, education, research, professional practice and institution. The results provide an overview of possible synergies between research and teaching UASs could aim for.

Introduction and background

Universities of Applied Sciences (UASs) play an essential role in educating future professionals working in professional practice (Weert & Soo, 2009). Our current society is characterized by *supercomplexity* (Barnett, 2000), which implies that professionals working in society have to deal with a growing body of complex knowledge. Scholars have argued professionals need research abilities to be able to do this (e.g. Brew, 2010; Jenkins, Healey & Zetter, 2007). In this light, the European Commission (2017) has stated UASs need to integrate research into their organisations in order to teach students these abilities. As a consequence, UASs across Europe are transforming into hybrid organisations that combine both research and teaching as core activities.

Hybrid organisations combine different sets of “material practices and symbolic constructions” – also referred to as ‘institutional logics’ (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p.248). Combining two ‘institutional logics’ in one organisation, can lead to tension and conflicts between these logics. In the case of UASs, the institutional logics of research and teaching are combined in one organisation. Research and teaching complement each other in some aspects, such as the beneficial effects of research for students and teachers (Harland, 2016), but can also compete with one another. For example, research and teaching are funded separately (Brew, 2006), are said to require different competencies from employees (Griffioen, 2018), and are valued differently (Hattie & Marsh, 2004).

Due to differences between the institutional logics, hybrid organisations are often unstable entities and may only retain one logic over time (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). Therefore, it is said that in order to be sustainable as a hybrid entity, hybrid organisations should actively create synergy between the institutional logics they incorporate (e.g. Burke-Smalley, et al., 2017). In the light of this research, synergy between research and teaching is defined as the larger effect that can be achieved when research and teaching are connected.

Much of the literature focuses on how research and teaching can be connected (e.g. students that do research, or researchers that teach; see Trowler & Wareham, 2008), but little empirical research has shown possible synergies that can be achieved through connecting research and teaching. On the conceptual level, some scholars do provide examples of synergies between research and teaching. Heggen, Karseth, and Kyvik (2010), for example, provide four examples of synergy through integrating research into UASs: teaching will improve if employees engage in research; students will learn more if they engage in research; professional practice will improve if future professionals learn how to work evidence-based; and the quality of professional programmes and practice will improve due to knowledge-production by professional programmes. Others have argued

the connection can improve teachers' and researchers' professionalism (Visser-Wijnveen, 2013), or the quality of research and teaching of the university as a whole (Zubrick, Reid, & Rosseter, 2001).

While it is known that UASs implement research into their organisations, it is unknown if UASs also aim for synergies between research and teaching. Moreover, there are signs that developments in policy and structure of universities are driving research and teaching apart (Brew, 2006). If UASs are strategically aiming for synergies between research and teaching, it is likely they make mention of these synergies in their strategic planning (Freeman & Maybin, 2011). Therefore, this study investigates the strategic planning of UASs (in this case within The Netherlands), to create an insight into the synergies between research and teaching UASs aim for. The research question is: "What is the intended synergy between research and teaching of Dutch UASs?"

Relation to track-theme

This research relates to track theme 1, as it focusses on the strategic governance of UASs by means of their strategic planning. Moreover, the results provide an overview of the synergistic effects that Dutch UASs aim for between research and teaching. As such, the results can be used by policy makers of UASs to develop strategies to achieve synergy between research and teaching, which is needed to sustainably maintain the hybrid nature of UASs.

Methods and analysis

To investigate the intended synergy between research and teaching of Dutch UASs, an analysis of $N=13$ strategic documents (i.e. formal institutional policy) of 6 UASs (Organisation A-F) in The Netherlands was conducted. Documents were retrieved from the websites of the UASs, or through UASs' employees if documents were not publicly available.

For data reduction, grounded coding (Charmaz, 2006) was applied by two researchers using Atlas.ti8. In the first phase, two researchers searched for text sections that were structured as: teaching + research = synergy. An example of such a text section is:

"The connection between education, research and practice is essential for giving our students a good position on the job market of the future" (Organisation B)

Through several iterations of open coding, discussing, merging codes and applying the coding scheme, the final coding scheme was created. This consists of six themes with 35 codes (Table 1).

Table 1.

Themes and number of codes (i.e. varieties of synergies) within themes

Themes	Description themes	N Codes
Students	Synergy directed to students.	7
Graduates	Synergy directed to graduates of the UAS.	10
Education	Synergy directed to the education of the UAS.	5
Research	Synergy directed to research within the UAS.	4
Professional practice	Synergy directed to professional practice.	1
Institution	Synergy directed to the UAS as a whole, or the organisation of the UAS.	8
Totals		35

Results

Table 1 shows that the UASs mentioned 35 varieties of synergy in total. These varieties of synergy are all the result of connections between research and teaching. They can be divided over six themes: student, graduates, education, research, professional practice, and institution.

The findings show that synergies related to 'students' and 'graduates' were mostly about them acquiring certain abilities, or being able to work in a certain way. Synergies related to 'education' were about improving the quality of education, innovating education, or research being integrated

into education. The theme ‘research’ included synergies such as the improvement of research quality, a greater research capacity, or the development of a research culture. Synergy related to ‘professional practice’ included one code, which is ‘innovating/improving professional practice’. The theme ‘institution’ included synergies such as the professional development of the employees of the UAS, giving the UAS a distinctive feature, or transforming the UAS into a knowledge institution.

Table 2 shows the varieties of synergy that were mentioned by more than half of the UASs (at least four out of six UASs). It appears that most UASs mention they want to improve the quality of their education, the research abilities of their students/graduates, the innovation of professional practice and the knowledge of students about professional practice, through connecting research and teaching. The themes ‘research’ and ‘institution’ do not show any synergies that were mentioned by at least four UASs.

Table 2.

Varieties of synergy mentioned by at least 4 UASs

Themes	Synergetic effects mentioned by ≥ 4 UASs
Students	Students develop research abilities (6) Students acquire knowledge about professional practice (4)
Graduates	Graduates have research abilities (5)
Education	Higher educational quality (5)
Research	-
Professional practice	Innovating/improving professional practice (6)
Institution	-

Table 3 shows the amount of varieties of synergy that the UASs have mentioned divided over the themes. It appears that two UASs mention at least one variety of synergy on every theme, while the other UASs mention varieties of synergy on at least four out of the six themes. Looking at the focus of the UASs on certain themes, UASs mention most varieties of synergy (on average 4) on the themes ‘students’ and ‘graduates’. Organisation B mentions a lot of synergies on the theme ‘institution’, compared to the other UASs. Furthermore, three of the six UASs do not mention any synergies on the theme ‘research’.

Table 3.

Amount of synergistic effects mentioned by the UASs (A-F) per theme

Themes	Total <i>N</i> Codes	A	B	C	D	E	F	Average
Students	7	2	6	2	4	5	2	4
Graduates	10	10	3	6		3	2	4
Education	5	1	3	2	1	2	2	2
Research	4	3	1		1			1
Professional practice	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Institution	8	2	8	1	1	1		2
Totals	35	19	23	12	9	12	7	14

Conclusion & discussion

UASs aim to achieve different varieties of synergy on a range of themes through connecting research and teaching, but they mainly focus on synergies directed to students and graduates. This is something one would expect from UASs, as their main goal remains to educate (future) professionals (i.e. students/graduates; Weert, & Soo, 2009). Interestingly, the current results show eight varieties of synergy on the theme ‘institution’, while the literature shows very few synergies on this theme (e.g. see Visser-Wijnveen, 2013). Synergies such as ‘working together with professional practice as a UAS’, or ‘innovating and improving the organisation of the UAS’ were not mentioned in the literature before. Furthermore, synergies directed to the research of the UAS appear to be less popular in the current results than synergies on the other five themes. This finding corresponds with the focus in

the literature (e.g. Healey, 2005; Heggen, et al., 2010), which is mostly about how connections between research and teaching can positively influence 'education' and 'students', and less about how these positively influence 'research'. Nevertheless, the current findings still show that some UASs do mention synergies directed to the research of their institutions.

Reflection on results

The current body of knowledge presents a few conceptual studies into possible synergies of connections between research and teaching (e.g. Heggen, et al., 2010), but this paper is the first to offer empirical support for these conceptual notions. Furthermore, little research has been conducted into the connection between research and teaching at the level of institutional policy. The current findings provide an overview of synergies of research-teaching connections UASs aim for on a wide range of levels, including synergies directed to the organisation of the UAS that have been mentioned less often in the literature. As such, the findings provide input for institutional practice as well as for future empirical research.

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Key words

Higher education, Hybrid organisations, Policy, Document analysis, Universities of Applied Sciences