

## Valuing vagueness. Constructing higher education quality in Dutch national policies since 1985

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### Abstract

Higher education quality is a crucial, though wicked concept in educational policies and funding. To increase our understanding of its wickedness, national policy makers' quality perspectives are singled out. We have analysed how quality is constructed and unfolds in Dutch governmental policies since 1985 by patterning change in quality frames and framing. Interpretation of policy documents points towards incremental change. 'Quality as excellence' has come to accompany the labour-market oriented notion of quality as 'fitness for purpose'. The analysis confirms that higher education quality is vague, and not concretised. Quality is oftentimes mentioned, but hardly ever specifically named, selected or categorized. Contrary to previous analyses we find that quality's vagueness has its value in the policy process, because it is open to further negotiation and decision making in daily valuing practices of relevant actors, amongst with educational professionals. The downside is that there are no publicly deliberated quality standards, indicators or definitions at the national level that could guarantee 'agreed-upon' quality.

### Keywords;

*higher education quality, wicked problems, values, vagueness, frames, framing, change, dialogue, deliberative policy analysis*

### Introduction

'What the Hell is quality?' researcher and policy advisor Christopher Ball asked in 1985 in a much-cited article (Ball 1985; Wittek and Kvernbekk 2011). When Ball raised his question frontrunners like the Netherlands and the United Kingdom developed a quality framework for higher education. Conceptualisations like 'fitness for purpose', 'excellence' and 'value for money', are since used by policy makers to 'catch' quality and define its meaning (Harvey and Green 1993).<sup>i</sup> However, in the nineties research showed that formal quality concepts did not match situated meanings held by educational professionals (Barnett 1992; Newton 2000; 2002; 2010). The notion that quality at different times means different things to different people gained broad support (Harvey and Green 1993; Westerheijden, Stensaker, and Rosa 2007). Nowadays researchers criticize the idea that it can be captured or defined. It is conceived as elusive, vague, multi-faceted and without an essential core (Harvey and Newton 2007; Wittek and Kvernbekk 2011).

Quality remains however a crucial concept in higher education and its policies. In the Netherlands we currently witness a complex and multi-level debate about higher education governance and funding, which involves different actors. A conflict with students, academic staff and management at the University of Amsterdam, and a debate about national higher education policies are interrelated. Different perspectives on what higher education quality entails and how it should be valued are thereby involved. As Krause points out quality is a *'wicked, ill-defined problem, that is under-theorised, yet associated with high stakes-policy making and funding, particularly at the macro-national level. [...]it is socially complex, has multiple dimensions and is not easily addressed using traditional problem solving methods'* (Krause 2012, 285, 297).

Its complexity and wickedness lay in the varying definitions and different values that are attached to quality by individuals and groups operating at several levels. Stakeholders participate at different times and for various reasons. The problems change in scope and nature on a daily basis, and today's apparent solutions are no guarantee of tomorrow's success. Quality problems are therewith highly resistant to solution (Krause 2012). We can however increase our understanding of the quality concept and the complexities involved by singling out national policy makers' perspectives and values, and interpret how these evolve through time in interaction with different stakeholders. We are interested in the different ways that Dutch policy makers value and construct higher education quality through time, and whether and how they address situated meanings of educational professionals in their policies. How responsive is the national government, and do formal quality conceptions, valuations and policies change? How quality is constructed and unfolds in Dutch governmental policies since 1985 is not yet systematically addressed and patterned.

Quality's non-essentialist character is taken as a basis for a constructivist approach. To interpret how quality is valued and constructed in formal policies, interpretive approaches of frame- and framing analysis are combined with constructivist grounded theory. We analysed the ten national higher education policy plans published between 1988 and 2011, and the preceding 1985 HOAK-memorandum that addresses higher education quality.

### **Theorising and conceptualising higher education quality**

Higher education quality's elusive, subjective and multifaceted character leads to epistemological problems in research. How does one know that quality is addressed? In higher education studies the quality concept is under theorised, and usually related to the development of quality assurance and quality systems (Krause 2012; Harvey and Williams 2010; Westerheijden, Stensaker, and Rosa 2007). Most articles begin with their own definition of quality. Though these definitions and analyses are not uniform, they incorporate multidimensionality and subjective perspectives (Stensaker 2007, 107; Wittek and Kvernbekk 2011).

Wittek and Kvernbekk state that it is not necessary to look for unity in quality definitions, as these deploy what Wittgenstein calls 'family resemblances'. Members of a family do not need to resemble each other by other by build, eyes etc. to be part of the family. General terms like quality can have meaning without pinning them down in essentialist definition. We may have to settle for as explicit

and accurate stipulations as possible, since no universal definition is to be had. (Wittek and Kvernbekk 2011).

Our investigation does not start with a definition. 'Constructivist grounded theory' is used to theorise upon the quality concept, and analyse how it gains meaning and is constructed in social interaction. Grounded theory studies use inductive data to construct analytic categories through an iterative research process. It is a method for collecting and analysing data to construct theories from the data themselves (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2014). Constructivist grounded theory differs from traditional grounded theory approaches in the attention that is paid to subjective and interactional aspects of the analysis. It has become a commonplace in social sciences that the worlds we live in are not just here to be discovered, but constructed by a whole range of different practices (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Charmaz positions the development of theoretical notions as a flexible and interactional process. *[...] Data do not provide a window on reality. Rather, the „discovered“ reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural context*' (Charmaz 2008, 17). Theory construction is not aimed at explanation, but at improving abstract understandings of concepts like higher education quality. As described in the methods section, constructivist grounded theory is combined with frame- and framing analysis to interpret processes of meaning construction.

The inquiry wasn't started with a *tabula rasa*, though. In 1993 Harvey and Green published the classic article 'defining quality', which takes multidimensionality and divergent perspectives as a starting point for the identification of formal<sup>ii</sup> quality conceptions (Harvey and Green 1993). They identify five different quality conceptions in higher education, that are derived from industrial uses and can be positioned in New Public Management ideology. These notions are overlapping, and boundaries are difficult to maintain (Wittek and Kvernbekk 2011). We can however use them as 'sensitizing concepts' that support the grounded theory approach and enable the investigation of the quality concept. Sensitizing concepts give researchers initial but tentative ideas to pursue and guide the study. They may neither be used as definitive categories, nor commandeer the research (Blumer 1954; Charmaz 2014, 30–31).

Harvey and Green identified the following perspectives on higher education quality;

- Quality as '**fitness for purpose**' relates to the purpose of a product of service, and is judged from this perspective. Any product is a good product if it serves its purpose. The education of students should match the requirements of work life. According to Stensaker this has become the dominant understanding of quality in higher education (Stensaker 2007, 103). This perspective is dynamic because its purposes can change. It however leads to questions like whose purposes were talking about.
- The concept of '**value for money**' is difficult to discern from 'fit for purpose'. It is explicitly linked to the economy and the measurement of quality in terms of profit, and the related concept of effectiveness.
- '**Quality as excellence**' encompasses two different notions;
  - **Quality as exception** is quite remote from quality as fit for purpose since it is distinctive and elitist, and by definition exclusive. It is difficult to measure and unattainable to most people, Harvey and Green emphasise that it requires constant modification of elitist standards to keep the distinction.

- **Quality as perfection or consistency** focusses on specifications for how quality is to be strived for in every part of a process. The result depends on the quality culture, whereby everybody in the system knows what the requirements are. The focus is on the process, and on the specific responsibility of the actors in the organization. It is characterized by checklist and focus on procedures.
- **Quality as transformation** relates to the transformative process that students go through, and is often addressed as *Bildung*. Two kinds of transformation can be discerned; enhancing the student, and empowering the student. As both Biesta and Wittek and Kvernbekk note these are again associated with effectiveness. The transformative account can be seen as output- oriented, though it changes the student. It is therewith hard to see how transformation itself can be talked of as quality. Rather, the quality process can be *of* higher or lower quality (Wittek and Kvernbekk 2011, 674).

The above sensitizing concepts can be related to formal quality perceptions. Academics' situated quality perceptions are depicted as contrastive with these formal notions, and described in terms like 'bureaucracy', 'burden', and 'lack of mutual trust' (Newton 2002). Educational professionals' quality perceptions are however not uniform, and can not be used as sensitizing concepts. Academics deploy different reactions towards quality monitoring. *'They respond, adapt or even resist, and while this may be patterned, it is not uniform'* (Newton 2002, 59). Boundaries with institutional management are there above difficult to draw, as professionals move positions during their working life. Policy makers that want to be responsive towards educational practitioners' quality perceptions have to deal with partial analyses, and perspectives put forward in debate and interaction. For our analysis this means that we rely on how policy makers frame educational professionals' values and quality conceptions.

### **Interpreting quality with constructivist grounded theory, and frame- and framing analysis**

The aim, question and subsequent methods position the investigation in the adjacent domains of interpretative policy analysis and deliberative policy analysis. Interpretive methods are based on the presupposition that the world we live in is characterized by the possibilities of multiple interpretations. Interpretive policy analysis focusses on the meanings that policies have for a broad range of publics (Yanow 2000; Wagenaar 2011). The aim here is however to interpret how the government values and constructs quality in interaction with those publics, specifically the higher education population. This shifts the investigation towards deliberative policy analysis, which analyses how the government deals with changes in the democratic society in which it operates (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).

Constructivist grounded theory is combined with frame- and framing analysis to interpret changes in governmental quality constructions as they are expressed in formal policy notes. Frames help to interpret how people perceive and construct reality, and what they value as important. Framing has to do with making sense, interpreting and giving meaning to what happens in the world. It is linked with people's specific sets of values, norms, objectives, interests, convictions and knowledge at a certain moment (Aarts and van Woerkum 2006, 229). Consciously or unconsciously, people construct specific frames to reach goals; *'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, 52).

Frame- and framing studies discern approaches that focus on the content of the frames (frame analysis), and more dynamic and contextual framing approaches (framing analysis). Framing approaches refer to symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman, who argues that meanings only arise in situated processes of interaction, interpretation and contextualisation (Goffman 1974; Vliegthart and Van Zoonen 2011; Van Hulst and Yanow 2014). This distinction nears the paradigmatic distinction between 'cognitive' and 'interactional' research approaches (Dewulf et al. 2009). Cognitive approaches treat frames as relative static entities that are stored in memory. Interactional approaches however treat frames as interactional alignment processes. These processes are negotiated and produced in ongoing interaction through *meta-communication* that indicates how a situation should be understood.

In this investigation a distinction between the different approaches is not made, since they can not be completely separated. Processes of frame construction in interaction are complex, interweaving many aspects of people's lives, prior knowledge and experiences, and thoughts (Aarts and van Woerkum 2006). It is in interaction that processes of *reframing* occur, where people come to new understandings and literally 'change their minds'.

The analysis of the frames and framing processes starts with the 1985 governmental white paper 'Higher Education Autonomy and Quality' (*Hoger Onderwijs Autonomie en Kwaliteit, or HOAK-nota*). The HOAK-paper marked a change towards a more systematic quality approach. The strategy was to increase institutional autonomy and reduce detailed and ineffective governmental steering. In return, the institutions and their representing bodies would develop a quality monitoring system and report about their performances.

The Dutch binary higher education system contains 'hogescholen' and universities. Hogescholen provide vocational education, and only since 2002 receive funding for research activities. The HOAK-policy applied to both institutional types, but there are some differences in the implementation of the quality system by the institutions and their representing associations, the VSNU and the HBO-Raad<sup>iii</sup> (Jeliazkova and Westerheijden 2007).

The HOAK-paper anticipated a planned steering approach whereby strategic documents were used to shape the ministerial planning and interaction processes. Since 1988 ten planning documents have been published, we analyse the final drafts that were sent to the House of Parliament.<sup>iv</sup> The documents were first named 'Higher Education Research Plan' (*Hoger Onderwijs Onderzoeks Plan, or HOOP*), and in 2007 renamed into 'Strategic Agenda' (*Strategische Agenda Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek*). The most recent Strategic Agenda dates from 2011, a new one is 'under construction'. The first plans were biannual, since 2000 the cycle takes four years. The HOOPs and Strategic Agendas are generic planning documents, that address both higher education quality as well as the other governmental goals of ensuring accessibility and realising efficiency.

The policy notes contain the results of the governmental dialogue and interactions with different stakeholders. They enable the pattering of quality frames and identification of frame change. The

formal policy documents are treated as '*belonging to other texts, as a material trace of a conversation that was or is taking place*' (Czarniawska 1997, 69). The actual interactions and 'framing on the spot' are however not visible. It is thereby difficult to relate the texts to framing actors. The policy makers that collectively write the texts remain invisible. The minister is both author and performer of the public act, but probably hasn't written a single word of the policy texts (Czarniawska 1997).

In the analysis of frame change the interactional perspective tends to disappear, but there are interpretive methods to increase our understanding of the framing processes involved. We analyse how the government shaped the dialogue with different actors through time, and how sense making is actively worded in governmental action strategies. Combining framing analysis with constructivist grounded theory strengthens this interpretive research strategy.

Constructivist grounded theory and framing analysis are both rooted in interpretive Chicago-school approaches, and combine well in practice because they are both aimed at identifying '*what it is that's going on*' (Goffman 1974; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2014). Key to the constructivist grounded theory research process is the constant comparison of differing and changing aspects, in our case through time. The analysis entails a two-phased coding process. In the 'initial phase' the text is coded. The subsequent 'focussed phase' entails an iterative process in which codes are constantly compared, and categories are constructed (Charmaz 2014). The initial coding is direct, and mostly line-by-line. Conform framing theory the aim is to identify the meanings that policy makers intended to give to the communicating texts that interact with different stakeholders (Entman 1993). The focus is thereby on what is directly or indirectly *named, selected and categorised* as quality. What the authors *select* concerning the issue at stake, and how they *name* and *categorise* different aspects helps to understand the framing processes (Van Hulst and Yanow 2014). The constant comparative method is used to grasp implicit, tacit notions of quality. 'Improving flexibility of the curriculum' is for example occasionally mentioned as an instrument to improve quality, and thus draws attention in other policy texts. The constant comparative method herewith starts in the initial phase.

There are no *a priori* selections made in the policy notes, because the texts as a whole are instruments of meaning whereby content and form are interrelated. It is for example salient whether performance indicators are put forward as negotiable agents of quality, or not mentioned and moved to the appendix. This approach is in line with early frame analyses that highlight that (news) frames are socially constructed (Vliegenthart and Van Zoonen 2011, 103). Moreover, making *a priori* selections would interfere with the constructivist approach. Which definition or criteria could apply to identify quality?<sup>v</sup> All text is read, but only the text that directly or indirectly relates to quality is coded. The sensitizing concepts that were identified in the previous section help to identify quality. As we shall see, it is however not possible to circumvent operating in grey zones with the identification of quality. The choices and interpretations are for each policy note documented in memos, and explicated and described in this paper.

## Preliminary results

This section contains preliminary results. All policy documents are read, memos are written, and about 70% of the relevant text is coded. The initial phase is supported by a simple computer supported 'frequency word count' of single words like 'quality', 'educational professional' (*docent*) and 'standards' in the different policy texts (using Atlas-TI, see table 1, page 21). This word count is however only initial and tentative, as the texts differ in length and what is included. There above our interpretive approach is aimed at identifying meaning creation, which includes salience and is not just mentioning. Specific results of the initial phase are further explored upon, there is no clear distinction between the initial and focussed phase.

The analysis points out that quality is oftentimes mentioned, but hardly ever specifically named, selected or categorized. We can recognise the concepts that Harvey and Green originally identified. Two of them are prominent; this century excellence has come to accompany the prevailing fitness for purpose perspective. An analysis of the strategic sections of the HOOPs and Strategic Agendas points towards incremental changes in the quality frames.

### *The first half of the nineties; fitness for purpose in dialogue*

The HOOPs that are published in the eighties and early nineties breathe a fitness for purpose-perspective. They contain labour market forecasts for the Dutch economy at the macro level, and for different societal and educational domains at a meso-level. These statistics are compared with student forecasts (*'studentenramingen'*) and inform a bounded rational planning dialogue with different stakeholders, primarily the institutions (Simon 1955). We identify the planning strategy as 'bounded rational' because it is centrally organised and the focus is on the development of different scenario's, while it is acknowledged that information falls short. Institutions have to deliver institutional plans to enable the dialogue and strengthen accountability (HOOP 1990).

The fitness for purpose perspective is related to the economic and societal goal of educating students for the labour market. In the 1992 HOOP it is somewhat pitifully stated that the government can not force students to choose a specific study. The paragraphs that explicitly address quality follow fitness for purpose reasoning. Students are addressed as agents that can improve higher education quality by choosing the right study. To support their decision process better study- and labour market information should be available. The 1990 HOOP mentions the publication of the commercial Elsevier's *'studiealmanak'* (study guide) in 1989/90, that was published in cooperation with the institutions. Over the years was further extended into the development of both a public website that contains study information (*studiekeuze123*), and the delivery of public information about studies to commercial parties like the *'keuzegids'*.

Fitness for purpose is however not explicitly *named* as higher education quality. It is there above difficult to discern whether fitness for purpose relates to quality, or to the other governmental goals of improving access and realising efficient and effective governmental spending. 'Good education for many' was the slogan in 1994. Fitness for purpose is a goal of higher education, and as such related

to quality. Our initial analysis indicates however that fitness for purpose went further than that, and was the goal of Dutch higher education in general.

In the nineties quality was less prominent as a goal than the other governmental goals of improving access to higher education and effective and efficient government spending. Improving access is prominent in several HOOPs, and the strategic sections do not pay much attention to higher education quality. The generic aim to increase the educational level of the working population was not specifically related to problems concerning quality, but to access, efficiency and effectiveness. The share of people with a higher education had to grow. The 1990 forecasts were that the total number of students would not further increase, and thus the influx of specific groups in sectors where scarcity was foreseen had to grow (*'kies exact!'*).

Again, boundaries between the different governmental goals and problems are vague and difficult to discern. It was for example framed as a problem that specific groups of students would not graduate, or not graduate soon enough (*'het rendement van de HAVO-leerling'*). In 1990 student efficiency (rendement) was already present as a problem (see table 1, p 21). In current policies student efficiency is mainly framed as a quality problem. In the nineties it was however mainly framed as a problem concerning efficiency and accessibility. The problem in the 1990, 1992 and 1994 HOOPs was whether the educational system would provide enough higher educated people to the labour market.

Students had to be selected to improve higher education quality and efficiency. Student selection has become more prominent in governmental policies, but it was already an issue in the early nineties. At that time student selection was however primarily related to educating the right students to the labour market. Should studies contain a numerus fixus or not? At this moment student selection is closer related to quality as excellence. It concerns the selection of the best students and improving the general level of education.

In the early nineties the simultaneous realisation of the governmental goals of accessibility, quality and effectiveness was framed as difficult to realise. *'The advisory board for higher education (ARHO) notes in its suggestions for the draft HOOP that the participation in higher education is relative high internationally. The board states that the impression about the quality of our higher education is not positive. From its viewpoint of low higher education efficiency, the ARHO requests attention for the relation between mass-education and quality'* (HOOP 1990). The government disagrees with this standpoint, and states that the increased participation is a result of the social and economic necessity to keep and develop a high educational level of the labour force. The frame that higher education quality, efficiency and effectiveness, and accessibility are irreconcilable is however set. This 'trilemma-frame' is adopted as a social law (wetmatigheid). Studies on governmental education policies have adopted it, and we see it for example reflected in the current policies to select students, and increase demands on the general level of vocational education (Bronneman-Helmers 2011). In these studies and policies it is however not further concretised what quality and the other societal goals mean.

In those early HOOPs the strategic sections addressing higher education policy goals were not related to the sections that specifically addressed higher education quality. These quality sections primarily addressed quality *assurance*. This is striking, since the gist of the HOAK-paper was that the new

steering relation between government and institutions would lead to more quality. With the HOAK-nota it was agreed upon that the institutions and their umbrella bodies VSNU and HBO-Raad would be responsible for the development of a quality system. The government would keep an additional responsibility for the deliverance and monitoring of higher education quality to society. The government would not use the outcomes of the quality assessments to change funding of higher education (Jeliazkova and Westerheijden 2007, 330).

The HOAK-paper did not provide a definition or standards for higher education quality. Expectations were that these would be put forward in the policy dialogue, that was to be supported by the HOOPs. The HOAK-philosophy was that increased autonomy would pay itself back through systems dynamisation, and thus lead to more quality.<sup>vi</sup> The government would not predetermine policies, but the institutions would be accountable afterwards. It was seen as a responsibility of the institutions to use the 'increased room for policy manoeuvre'.

In first three HOOPs (1988, 1990 and 1992), 'dialogue' is explicitly positioned as a 'core concept' in the policy process. The word 'dialogue' is mentioned 134 times in the 1990 HOOP. The government situated the dialogue at several places;

- In the societal relation between the government, institutions and society. Parties involved are educational actors like the institutions, and representatives in the labour system.
- The dialogue between the government and the institutions ('the system in dialogue').
- Direct negotiations addressing educational quality in the 'Higher Education Room'(HO-Kamer).

The dialogue was centrally organised, and the first HOOPS contained planning of interactions with different stakeholders. In the *HO-Kamer* the Ministry (including the Minister), the umbrella bodies and the inspectorate were in formal dialogue about quality, standards, and quality assurance. The results would be visible in the HOOPs, which functioned as a planning document. The umbrella bodies were considered as representatives of the entire system and its actors. The dialogue was (bounded) rational, there are however different accounts on whether it was informed by Habermas' ideas on communicative rationality.<sup>vii</sup>

While the parties were *in dialogue*, the institutions already started to develop the quality system.

The quality sections of the 1990 HOOP, named 'quality; standardization and assurance (*normering en zorg*)' addressed both the development of the quality system, as well as the setting of goals and standards. The intent was to have a rational, technical (*zakelijke*) dialogue, whereby different positions and valuations were to be addressed, eventually leading to concretization of the quality concept. '*The determination of the quality of higher education is more complex [than the valuation of research]. There are different thoughts about scientific, societal and personality aspects related to the graduated, and about the usefulness, added value and efficiency of the educational process. Several parties with diverse interests and value orientations make statements about this. Given their expertise and commitment, all are entitled to speak. A varied set of supporting devices should be applied to receive and value the ordeals of students, educational professionals, customers ('afnemers'), and graduated. The question what is to be understood as quality, can be better discussed, if the used concepts are specified. The operationalisation of abstract and/or globally formulated goals can clarify where value orientations differ, and lead to a more rational (zakelijke) dialogue'* (HOOP 1990).

In the early nineties the notion of quality as an essentialist concept was brought forward. *More than ever the understanding is that in fact there is only one guiding principle and one standard: the quality of education and within education the centrality of the student*" (HOOP 1992). The dialogue eventually had to lead to a shared set of quality indicators. These had to be common and shared by government and institutions, but the institutions could also develop their own indicators. The institutions were primarily responsible for those parts of quality assurance that addressed the measuring and valuation of education and research. *'This does not take away that institutions [...] have a responsibility for the development of quality indicators'* (HOOP 1990). In the HO-Room the Ministry, the umbrella organisations and the inspectorate agreed to develop a shared set of quality indicators. The parties strived for the development of a 'common language'. The common language and performance indicators were considered necessary because they *'would express the intended division in responsibilities between the distinctive administrative layers'*, and because they *'would have a disciplinary effect on the relationship between the government and the institutions'* (HOOP 1990, p. 319).

Though only a few parties were gathered in the room, it was a genuine governmental attempt to address quality's wickedness, and value the different values and experiences. However, a shared language and sense making of higher education quality and performance indicators could not be reached. A final set of performance indicators was not formulated. This conclusion is supported by the analysis of Miriam Lips of the interaction and communication between the Ministry of Education, umbrella bodies and inspectorate during the development and implementation of the HOAK-nota. Even a rational, organised and informed dialogue, including all actors that were considered relevant in the room, did not lead to shared sensemaking and understandings of higher education quality and related concepts like performance indicators and quality assurance. Ambiguity remained (Lips 1996).

The ambiguity in language and performance indicators did not resist a successful implementation of the quality system. In the nineties the Dutch quality system became a success story and an international example for other countries (Jeliazkova and Westerheijden 2007).

#### *The second half of the nineties; further differentiation*

The quality dialogue slowly faded out, and would not be revived in this form. The word 'dialogue' was mentioned 134 times in the 1990 HOOP, 37 times in 1994, not mentioned in 1996, to have some recurrence in 2011 (18 times mentioned). This can be related to an incremental change from 'governing to governance' (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). The government moved further away from the central planning approach. The HOAK-strategy marked the start of increasing autonomy of the institutions. In the first HOOPs the government holds a classic, bounded rational steering perspective. Labour market forecasts support the interactional decision process with the institutions about new studies. These responsibilities however gradually become assigned to the institutions, and the macro-statistical analysis becomes less prominent.

The societal context came to be perceived as more complex, and the government responded to these perceptions with a plea for more differentiation and variation. There were no new essentialist approaches towards higher education quality, or attempts to come to central indicators or standards. On the contrary, a 'differentiation and selectivity perspective' became prominent. This is most

prominent in the 2004 HOOP and 2007 and 2011 Strategic Agendas, but already visible in the 1996 HOOP. In this policy document the balancing of the different goals of accessibility, quality and financing is framed as *the mission* for the next decade. The frame is that the tension between quality and massiveness can be solved by increasing differentiation and selectivity of higher education. This differentiation- and selectivity frame is repeated in the following policy documents. It becomes more prominent, as the international context becomes stronger identified as complex. 'More meaningful differentiation' is the adagio in 1994, 'differentiation of studies' in 1996, 'meeting diverse needs' in 1998, 'strong and flexible institutions' in 2000, 'qualitative differentiation' in 2004, and 'differentiation' in 2007. Finally, the 2011 Strategic Agenda is called 'Quality in variety' (kwaliteit in verscheidenheid).

The government demanded from both the institutions, as well as the students that they would be more flexible and respond to societal demands. With the increased responsibility the government urged the institutions to be more flexible and responsive towards society. There is a growing emphasis on the institutional strategic plans to state how this flexibility towards society should be reached.

Our analysis indicates that in the second half of the nineties the 'value for money perspective' was not advocated in formal governmental policies on quality. This conclusion depends however on whether one interprets value for money as related to commercial activities, or primarily as efficient governmental spending. Where we have seen that tacit notions and reasoning clearly point towards fitness for purpose quality perceptions, this is less evident with value for money. The government focused on efficiency and effective public expenditures. Reactions towards institutional commercialization were however reserved and explicitly negative. The role of the government vis-à-vis commercial institutions was addressed and concerned their position in the regulative order, including quality assessments. The focus in the HOOPS was however on the steering and financing of *public* financed institutions. The documents contain traces of a public debate on the tasks and roles of higher education institutions. Some parts of the HOOPS are explicit negative on commercialization. Commercial activities were however allowed, though limited. In the second half of the nineties the HOOPS addressed the regulation of those activities. The commercial value for money perspective is not related to educational quality. In this century valorization and private investments have become stronger related to public higher education, but this relates more to research than to education.

Though the fitness for purpose frame is prominent, 'education as transformation' has a small presence in the policy texts. Again, a distinction between these concepts is difficult to make, as they are both output- and outcome-oriented. The economic perspective is prominent and focused on education for the labour market. The societal outcomes of higher education are however also broader defined, especially in the early HOOPS. In the 2000 HOOP a difference is made between vocational higher education, and research universities. *Bildung* is stronger related to Research Universities, than to Hogescholen that are framed as educating for specific professions. Like the other quality conceptions 'quality as transformation' is not explicitly named or defined as quality.

'Quality as consistency, or perfection' can be related to educational professionals, as it addresses the quality process. In the policy documents students are both addressed as stakeholders and as the

'result' of higher education. Educational professionals are however not visible in the output-oriented quality approach. The HOOPs and Strategic Agendas mainly address the steering relation with the institutions, and the relationship with students as customers.

In the HOAK-memo and first HOOPs educational professionals are not mentioned. This changes though. In the 2000 HOOP staff (*'personeel'*) is explicitly named as a prerequisite for quality. Forecasts are that there will be a shortage of educational professionals. The influx has to grow, and institutional umbrella bodies are asked to critically assess that the quality protocols assure professionalization and throughput (*'doorstroom'*) of educational talent. Educational professionals are considered essential for the attainment of educational quality. It is noted that educational professionals should be valued more for their work (Strategische Agenda 2007). They are however also considered as a risk. Especially in the institutions for vocational higher education, the level of the educational professionals has to be 'upgraded' (HOOP 2004). In the 2011 Strategic Agenda much attention is paid to the role of educational professionals as the 'carriers of educational quality'. In this document educational professionals (docenten) are mentioned 104 times, a huge increase towards earlier years. All educational professionals in higher vocational education should possess a Masters Degree, to be better prepared to perform their educational role. Educational professionals at both *hogescholen* and research universities should obtain standardised qualifications (*'basis- en seniore kwalificaties onderwijs'*). The focus on protocols and qualifications can be related to 'quality as perfection'. As we shall see in the next sections the upgrading of educational professionals can however also be related to the excellence-perspective.

The 2011 Strategic Agenda specifically addresses risks for the maintenance of Dutch higher education quality. Since the second half of the nineties the policy documents emphasise the relatively high quality of Dutch higher education institutions. This 'quality plateau' is related to the Dutch quality system, though concrete comparisons with other countries are not made. In 2010 the assurance of this general level was threatened by a scandal with regard to the issuing of diploma's at a *hogeschool*. To assure the quality level several measures were taken that further standardized quality processes and assessments. The 2011 Strategic Agenda does not address them, but refers to policy measures taken to remove doubts concerning the quality of the diplomas for professional higher education.

#### *This century; moving towards excellence in differentiation*

The 2011 Strategic Agenda 'Quality in differentiation/variety' ('kwaliteit in verscheidenheid') displays a focus on quality as excellence. The relation between quality and excellence is explicit, and aimed at reaching the top. *'Entrepreneurs, researchers, educational professionals and students should be more challenged to excel'*. Quality as excellence is perceived as competitive, and related to an international context. *'The government aspires a forefront position amongst knowledge economies'*. In the foreword the Secretary of State for Education, Culture and Science and the Minister for Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation state that the earning capacities of Dutch society depends on its international position. *'That is why the government strives for a higher education system with international stature, world class research with a strong attractive power towards scientific talent, and strengthening of the international position of the business community.'* Quality is

unmistakably related to excellence. Quality as excellence is however just as much, or maybe even more, related to research and innovation.

The 2011 excellence perspective strongly differs from the fitness for purpose perspective that was dominant in the nineties. Where the adagio was first 'good education for many', it has now become competitive, and focusses on differences between institutions and students. Students can be selected 'at the gate', and outstanding students can follow excellence tracks. This will have to lead to excellent studies. *'In 2025[...] Limiting the number of studies has considerably increased the quality of education and strengthened the knowledge base'*. What this future quality exactly means is however not further specified.

Contrary to previous policies, the funding of the institutions partially (currently 7%) come to depend on performance. The quality system however does not provide the criteria or inputs for the funding decisions. These criteria differ per institution, and were to be further negotiated upon with the individual institutions. There were no general defined quality criteria or standards at a national level.

The shift towards the excellence frame is incremental, and can be related to several contextual developments. When people frame they link text to context, and the quality frames reflect changes in contextual perceptions. What is important to note here, is that there is no context that infringes itself upon us. *'[...]context does not cause that which is contextualized to have meaning. Meaning is produced when the two –the context and the text-, are brought together'* (Chenail 1995, 1).

The excellence frame goes hand in hand with a shift towards an international perspective. In the early HOOPs the societal context is primarily national. The forecasts address the national labour market, though internationalisation and competition are mentioned. In 1992 'Internationalisation' is a 'theme' in higher education and not very prominent in the policy document. While international competition is mentioned, the focus is mainly on regional cooperation with institutions in neighbouring countries. This changes however in the second half of the nineties.

The contextual shift in perspective is most prominent around the millennium change. What is salient is that the Dutch national quality system only gets mentioned once in 1994, and five times in 2000. There are no other references to the national quality system as a whole. In 2000 the Bologna-declaration was signed, and there were deliberations about integrating the different European quality systems. At this moment considerations about the quality system as a whole become relevant, and an answer has to be formulated. The 2000 HOOP also contains reflections and describes the different perspectives on how the institutions should be represented abroad. There is a concrete issue about the reputation of the Dutch hogescholen, as the European Union works towards the realisation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA), with a Bachelor-Master structure. It turns out to be difficult to represent the Dutch binary system. Can the hogescholen be called 'universities' abroad? The standpoints of the government itself, the hogescholen, and the universities are described. The government decided at that moment not to change the binary system, gain further information and postpone decision making.

The shift in perspective is most prominent in the first years of this century. The 2004 HOOP relates the transition towards a knowledge society to globalisation, and the main issue is the adaption of

higher education to a changing world. The European Bologna process harmonized different forms of higher education, and initiated the Bachelor – Master structure. Differences in higher education systems were perceived as hindering international cooperation and student-exchange, and harmonization should diminish this. For the Netherlands these changes raised questions about how the Dutch binary system should be represented abroad, and what this meant for the institutions. In this period the Dutch quality is compared to other quality systems, and valued as good. What this means is however not specified. International standards become explicitly mentioned as point of reference (HOOP 2000, 2004). What these standards mean is however neither specified in the HOOPS, it is just *'the standard'*.

### **Discussion; vague concept, vague problems?**

#### *Higher education quality as a vague concept...*

The patterning of the quality frames shows incremental change in formal quality conceptions. 'Quality as excellence', has come to accompany the prevailing 'fitness for purpose frame'. Its meaning changes with the context, which has become perceived as global and competitive. The analysis however also shows that higher education quality does not get concretised in formal governmental policies. It remains vague and elusive.

Higher education quality's elusive, non-essentialist and vague character is noted and analysed in many studies (Vidovich 2001; Stensaker 2007; Harvey and Newton 2007; Saarinen 2007). These studies address quality's vague character in both discourse- as well as situated quality analyses, but it remains undetermined what it exactly is that makes higher education quality vague. More recently a language-philosophical analysis of higher education quality's vagueness is provided by Wittek and Kvernbekk. They conclude that higher education quality is a vague concept because we can not determine whether the term applies or not. Identifying quality's vagueness becomes problematic in boundary cases, where one can not determine whether something possesses enough quality or not. Oftentimes we recognise quality 'when we see it', but in borderline cases this is not evident, and we can not determine whether a grade falls from A to B. This indeterminacy resides in the vagueness of what quality refers to; the object that it refers to is vaguely described (Wittek and Kvernbekk 2011).

Our analysis confirms and grounds higher education quality's vagueness, as it does not get concretised in the governmental quality frames and framing. It is vague in the way it is *named* (1), *selected* (2) and *categorised* (3) in the policy texts.

#### **1. Naming quality**

Quality is oftentimes *named*, but in its naming it is not further specified what this means.

We have interpreted about 70% of the policy texts, and in these texts we were not able to localise quality definitions. We can relate the implicit quality frames to the different quality conceptions that Harvey and Green originally identified, but quality is not explicitly named as 'fitness for purpose', 'transformation', or 'value for money'. These are our own interpretations. The one exception is 'quality as excellence', as the 2011 HOOP specifically names quality as excellence. This nears a stipulative definition. It remains however vague, as 'quality as excellence' in the governmental

policies is both distinctive, as it refers to exceptions and differences, as well as 'general', as it aims to further improve the general attainment level of higher education.

In strategic policy texts concrete issues are tactically avoided. What these texts do is *suggest* that the institutions and educational programs possess and improve quality, without nearing any border conflict.<sup>viii</sup> Policy decisions are made before or after the publication of the strategic policy notes. The documents leave room for manoeuvre and budget change, and do not refer to tangible issues. The new policy in the 2011 Strategic Agenda was for example that a part of the institutional funding came to depend on performances, noted down in performance agreements with the institutions. This strategy was however no news, and the agreements were not concretised in the Strategic Agenda. The agreements and review criteria were to be negotiated upon with the individual institutions, whereby the external 'Review commission Higher Education and Research' advised the Ministry.

The analysis shows that higher education quality is chameleon-like, it changes with its context and moves towards 'excellence' in a global and competitive world. In its vagueness quality frames have become recursive. The flexibility approach the government advocates since the mid-nineties has become widespread at the institutions, and is now advocated by students. National policies contribute to European competitive strategies, the European commission launches programs to improve higher education quality, and national policy makers and institutions suggest quality in their proposals. In all plans quality is suggested, but they differ in the way that context and text are combined, thus creating new meaning. In their repetitiveness the policy plans and programs keep the suggestion of quality alive (Chenail 1995).

It has to be checked in other policy documents and practices whether quality frames indeed do act recursively. One needs not put much effort in though, to see that in 2010 the quality as excellence perspective was prominent in policy plans. At that time Dutch sectoral plans, institutional plans and program proposals referred to the ambition to reach a top five position amongst knowledge economies. This ambition was worded in the 2009 'motie Hamer'<sup>ix</sup>, a resolution that both the Parliament and Government unanimously subscribed. The different plans stated that their proposal contributes to this goal, by containing research- and educational quality. Educational quality in the sense of excellence here goes together with research excellence, notably in research institutions. The aim to reach a top five position is a goal of the 2011 Governmental Strategic Agenda '*Kwaliteit in verscheidenheid*' (Quality in variety).

## 2. Selecting quality

The analysis shows that it is oftentimes difficult to discern quality from the other societal goals, and from the beginning problems and governmental goals concerning efficiency, accessibility and quality are intertwined. With the growing focus on quality the problems concerning student efficiency (rendement) and outputs are predominantly related to quality. The interrelation of quality with efficiency is in the current debate framed as a problem. Our analysis shows however that in the nineties these problems were primarily related to the interrelation of efficiency with accessibility, less to the interrelation of efficiency with quality. Higher education quality is not only vague in the way it is named, but also in the way that it is selected.

Related to the intermingling of the different governmental goals is that the notions like 'fitness for purpose' or 'excellence' that Harvey and Green originally related to higher education quality, turned

out to be general goals for higher education. Our conclusion that quality relates to the entire domain of higher education confirms findings in other studies. Biesta pleads for a focus on 'good education' instead of quality, this makes sense regarding the intermingling of the different governmental goals (Stensaker 2007, 100–101; Biesta 2009; Westerheijden, Stensaker, and Rosa 2007).

### 3. Categorising quality

Quality is *categorised* indirectly, through the construction of artefacts like quality indicators, benchmarks and standards (Yanow 2000; Yanow 2003). These artefacts function as frames of reference that allow valuation, we can not value quality directly. They enable us to decide whether the educational object at stake contains enough quality or not. Assessment theories are for example based on the precept that quality assessors and evaluators need frames of reference like regulations, policy theories, standards and quality indicators to value the 'educational object at stake' against. Even 'constructivist' or 'hermeneutic' evaluation and standardisation approaches like Guba and Lincoln's 'fourth generation evaluation' apply to this principle. In constructivist valuation approaches different values, frames, subject positions and experiences of the stakeholders involved in the issue at stake are actively addressed and made explicit (Guba and Lincoln 1989).

Processes of realising frames of reference to enable the valuation process happen constantly. They can be explicit and formal, but oftentimes take place unconsciously (Kahneman 2011). In practice formal evaluations use both explicit and implicit referencing, and oftentimes these approaches are intermingled. Student performances can be related to other student's performances, and peer-review is an important principle of the valuation process. After problems concerning the issuing of diplomas, the valuing process at hogescholen is recently strengthened. There is both more emphasis on standardised examinations, and 'external eyes' need to be involved in decisions about the issuing of diplomas.

There is a classic debate on where the formal norm setting should be situated and who should be involved in this process. Should it be closer to the objects and issue at stake and address the situated notions, experiences, values and frames of the actors involved? Or should one emphasise standardisation and equal treatment, and formulate standards at a more general level by a rational, deliberative policy process? This issue involves different conceptions of what democracy is and should be. In policy analysis a mediating position is brought forward (Bloxham 2012). In practice formal and informal processes are situated and located at several places.

In the categorisation of quality it is not specified in what the educational object at stake refers to, and the standards, norms etc. remain vague at the formal, national level. It is oftentimes not clear what the fundamental object of the evaluation is. '*Is it the educational provider, or the specific programme, or the learner, or the output of the programme or institution?*' (Harvey and Newton 2004, 150).

Our analysis shows that different standards, indicators, benchmarks etc. are not specified in the strategic policy documents. There are no publicly deliberated quality standards, indicators or definitions at the national level. The early attempts to come to quality indicators through a rational dialogue did not lead to shared definitions or quality conceptions. There was no follow up of this dialogue, and what we see right now is that the government takes a differentiated approach and

negotiates with the individual institutions about the criteria for funding based on performances. It remains vague and ambiguous what quality exactly relates to. One can question whether national public deliberated quality standards, indicators or definitions that could guarantee 'agreed-upon' quality are possible at all, given the different quality perspectives and values. Our analysis of how quality gains meaning in policy practices confirms that in practice it is not possible to discern whether the term applies or not.

### *Higher education quality as a vague problem?*

The analysis shows and confirms that higher education quality is a vague concept, that does not get concretised in policy texts. What does this mean for the wicked problem called higher education quality? Several studies criticize higher education quality's vague character, but one can question whether its vagueness is the source of the troubles. In this discussion section we first address the critique on higher education quality as a vague concept, and then explore upon its meaning for different actors involved. Higher education quality's vagueness allows it to be moulded, shaped and negotiated by different actors in daily, situated practices. The downside is that there are no publicly deliberated quality standards, indicators or definitions at the national level that could guarantee 'agreed-upon' quality.

Harvey and Newton are very explicit in their critique of higher education quality's vagueness. *'Phrases such as 'fitness for purpose', 'fitness of purpose', 'value for money', 'achieving excellence' are linked to quality in higher education, all purporting, in some way or another, to be definitions of a concept that, deep down, there appears to be a reluctance to define at all.[...] Quality as fitness for purpose, for example, is not a definition and lacks any theoretical or conceptual gravitas'* (Harvey and Newton 2007: 232). They plea for reconstitution of the quality concept towards a core concept, that addresses its essential goodness. It is about essence and transformation, a dialectical process of deconstruction and reconstruction. *'[...]an understanding of quality assurance revolves around the pivotal notion of quality as essence. This means that quality assurance needs to explore, dig down, to the essential quality of the programme or institution that it is reviewing: a mission-based, fitness-for-purpose checklist will not do'*. Harvey and Newton conclude that quality itself has been cloaked in an ideological gloss that transmuted into quality process, and that quality as concept needs reconstitution (Harvey and Newton 2007, 234–235).

Vidovich criticises quality's vagueness from another angle, and argues that its chameleonic character enabled the Australian political elite to actively mould and deploy different and competing quality discourses to strengthen its grip on the institutions (Vidovich 2001). If one looks at it from a critical standpoint, it can enable the government to strengthen its grip on other actors. How one values this, however depends on the point of view. Heuts and Mol stay out of normative discussions like these by identifying different registers that are used when valuing 'what makes a tomato good'. These registers can lead to valuing clashes and instantiate each other's criticism (Heuts and Mol 2013, 129). It remains however difficult, if not impossible, to hold a distanced view on how the government acts in relation to higher education quality's vagueness.

What is important to note here is that quality's vagueness itself does not contain any values. We may not like it, but that does not change that it is just there to be dealt with. There is an agreed

understanding of higher education quality as a vague concept, which we have confirmed with our analysis. It is difficult to pin down exactly what makes quality vague, but that it is a vague concept is not contested. We take quality's vagueness as a constructed reality that can be valued differently (Ford 1999). If one holds a more realistic ontological view, one can say that quality's vagueness is a fact. No matter how you look at it, quality remains vague. Trying to get rid of this vagueness means changing higher education, as its complexities are related to different actors, dynamic positions and issues involved.

Higher education quality's vagueness enables it to be flexible and malleable. Our analysis indicates that its recursive character allows it to function as a 'boundary object' that mediates between different perspectives and positions. Boundary objects are *'objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites'* (Star and Griesemer 1989, p...; Star 2010). Following Giddens' structuration theory, Newton suggests that *"quality" acts as a 'modality', through which 'structure'- the quality system and quality policy - can be understood by actors. This in turn reveals the importance of gaining access to 'local practices', and to the 'back-stage' and 'under the stage' responses to policy implementation* (Newton 2002, 59). Our initial analysis suggests that the 'flexibility and variety frame' enables quality to function as a boundary object because it is widely accepted, and reframed in different contexts. The Dutch quality system is perceived as well functioning, despite the lack of agreed upon quality definitions. It is however not clear yet whether quality really acts as a boundary object. The 'flexibility and variety frame' seems to be recursive and top-down initiated, but we lack knowledge of how it relates to institutional- and educational professionals' quality frames.

Higher education quality's vagueness not only invites it to be malleable, flexible and repetitive, it is also associated with technicization. Higher education quality has become 'plastic', a word without meaning. According to Van der Laan *'[...]the term 'plastic words' describes language in which words become plastic, that is flexible and malleable, but also [...] modular so that they resemble the plastic building blocks made famous by Lego. As language becomes technicized along with the culture that sustains it, it begins to take the attributes of its technological milieu* (van der Laan 2001). The early attempt to come to quality indicators displays this technical and value-neutralising tendency, as it aimed to realise clear quality specs and a more rational dialogue.

For policy makers at the national level quality's vagueness and plasticity serve its purpose as it keeps different options open to future negotiations and decision making, without having to address tangible issues. It allows the government to adapt to changing contexts and situations. From a critical perspective one can hold the opinion that quality's plasticity and potentiality to act as a boundary object invite government to infringe its meaning upon the institutions and other actors. As noted above, this can be valued differently. For the Netherlands the picture is not consonant. The government demanded from the institutions to be flexible towards changing society, and competitive in the international arena. It is however not possible to identify the government as the sole initiator of the excellence- and flexibility-frame. In 2010 the excellence was unanimously subscribed to by the house of parliament, and it is still put forward in formal universities' standpoints. Next to that the picture is that of a government that negotiates with the institutions about steering relations and funding in a changing context. The consequences of the HOAK-notion of

'steering at a distance' were debated recurrently. It was for example a recurrently issue how making the institutions responsible for the supply in studies would relate to labour market and societal demands. In its quality frames the government tended to be more reactive and problem-oriented than determining, the international positioning of the institutions became a problem when European policies changed.

For policy makers quality's vagueness also has a downside. As the current debate about performance agreements with the institutions shows, it means continuous deliberations about what quality means. It is there above difficult to treat the institutions and other actors equally, or address the different quality conceptions at the national level. Dutch researchers recently plead for the integration of different quality notions and perceptions in formal quality definitions (Van der Sluis 2014). Our analysis shows however that these formal quality definitions, standards, indicators etc. are not formulated in the analysed strategic documents. The vagueness in the formulation of the policy goals also means that it is not possible to value whether these non-descript goals have been reached. To allow valuation Van der Knaap pleas for temporal explication and freezing of policy goals (van der Knaap 2004).

It is difficult for the government to guarantee quality to society, because we do not know what it relates to. To assure the quality of the Universities for Applied Sciences, informal frames and 'peer review' have become more systemised and institutionalised in the valuation process. Quality's vagueness also means that the government does not provide the evaluating body NVAO and the educational publicly negotiated upon standards or criteria to adhere to in its situated decision processes. Further research will have to show whether this is really the case, or that such a national deliberation process does take place elsewhere and is reflected in other governmental policy documents. The national accreditation organisation NVAO looks at the supra-national level for standards to enhance situated valuing practices. It uses the open, processual standards of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and adopts these to the Dutch situation. Studies show that the impact of these European standards on national valuation practices is limited (Stensaker et al. 2010). Recently the NVAO however signed an agreement to cooperate with commercial, global accreditation organisations. One can question how this will influence both standardisation processes and situated valuations.

For the institutions, educational professionals and students quality's vague, plastic and recursive character means adaptation to a changing society and changing (informal) quality standards. 'Translation' is more often used with this regard (Stensaker 2007), and what our analysis clearly shows that the government urges institutions and students to be responsive and flexible to changing societal demands. The government does not provide the different actors grip in these processes. Again, the excellence frame is dominant, and we can not identify where this starts.

For institutional actors, including educational professionals, quality's vagueness means that it is open to further negotiation and that there should be room for situated quality perceptions. The analysis indicates that the room and responsibility of educational professionals for the realisation of higher educational quality grows. The 2011 Strategic Agenda more explicitly addresses educational professionals as the ones to realise educational quality in practice. Further, situated and interactional

research will have to point out whether this is indeed the case, or whether this room is not taken or limited by other actors and institutional practices.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of Dutch national policy frames and framing confirms that higher education quality is a vague concept that does not get concretised by deliberative policy practices at a national level. That quality is a vague and non-essentialist concept does in itself not have meaning or values, but allows the government and other actors to deploy and mould it in situated policy- and educational processes. Quality's vagueness renders it open for different actors like educational professionals to constitute, negotiate and value it in daily, situated practices. However, the lack of agreed upon standards and other formal points of reference also makes it at all levels and positions difficult to decide whether something possesses quality or not. It *is* a problem when doubts are whether a performance is good enough to pass the exam, whether the institution or study program meets the requirements to be funded, or whether it is not clear whether the government assures the requested level of quality. Higher education quality's vagueness does not cause it to be a wicked problem, but it doesn't reduce the complexities involved either. Further research will have to point out how the lack of agreed upon quality standards, indicators or definitions at the national level influence both the situated educational process as well as valuation processes.

<b>Table 1. Frequency count of single words for 7 of the 11 strategic policy documents</b>								
	HOAK	1990	1994	1996	2000	2004	2011	Total
Dialogue	1	134	37	0	5	5	18	<b>200</b>
committee (commissie)	40	134	100	17	8	9	138	<b>446</b>
quality	49	88	136	75	73	43	200	<b>664</b>
educational quality (onderwijskwaliteit)	0	1	3	3	0	11	15	<b>33</b>
research quality (onderzoekskwaliteit)	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	<b>3</b>
quality assurance / (kwaliteitszorg, care)	0	31	82	20	63	1	6	<b>203</b>
quality assurance / (kwaliteitsbewaking, safe guarding)	50	41	1	1	0	0	1	<b>94</b>
quality valuation(s) (kwaliteitsbeoordelingen)	1	14	0	2	5	0	0	<b>22</b>
quality assurance system (kwaliteitszorgstelsel, national system)	0	0	1	0	5	0	0	<b>6</b>
quality judgements (kwaliteitsoordelen)	0	5	4	4	1	0	2	<b>16</b>
quality indicators	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	<b>3</b>
Indicators (indicatoren)	0	26	4	0	2	15	26	<b>73</b>
quality standards	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
quality problems	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	<b>6</b>
quality improvement	1	4	15	5	1	0	17	<b>43</b>
quality criteria	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	<b>1</b>
quality funding (kwaliteitsbekostiging)	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	<b>13</b>
educational professional's quality (docentenkwaliteit)	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	<b>2</b>
government (overheid)	166	176	174	32	79	90	64	<b>781</b>
educational system (stelsel, national)	32	80	69	33	69	11	26	<b>320</b>
institution(s)	365	827	483	163	310	132	355	<b>2635</b>
university / universities	81	463	336	159	278	80	216	<b>1613</b>
professional higher education (hbo, sector)	81	106	89	27	278	164	317	<b>1062</b>
institutions for professional higher education (hogescholen)	6	210	142	76	200	45	163	<b>842</b>
student(s)	85	308	340	201	331	234	391	<b>1890</b>
educational professional(s) (docenten)	4	27	29	2	30	22	104	<b>218</b>
Social and economic council of the Netherlands (SER)	0	5	20	0	26	14	64	<b>129</b>

<b>Table 1. Frequency count of single words for 7 of the 11 strategic policy documents</b>								
	HOAK	1990	1994	1996	2000	2004	2011	Total
Education council of the Netherlands	16	14	5	15	29	9	17	<b>105</b>
Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)	0	0	0	0	0	1	22	<b>23</b>
inspection / inspectorate ('inspectie' refers to action and institution)	20	28	17	11	26	0	20	<b>122</b>
Europe / European / EU / EG	3	66	82	13	38	87	79	<b>368</b>
globalisation	3	4	3	0	0	19	6	<b>35</b>
international	2	110	204	29	137	83	108	<b>673</b>
internationalisation	0	43	72	1	23	4	13	<b>156</b>
labour market	7	77	46	43	90	13	115	<b>391</b>
excellence	0	6	4	2	0	17	56	<b>85</b>
performance agreements	0	0	0	0	0	15	32	<b>47</b>
efficiency (rendement)	0	61	9	11	23	51	24	<b>179</b>
selection	5	14	15	43	1	16	68	<b>162</b>
influx (instroom)	2	151	39	26	31	26	19	<b>294</b>
studyability (studeerbaarheid)	0	0	36	44	4	6	0	<b>90</b>
accessibility	0	2	15	18	13	12	24	<b>84</b>
Differentiation	6	25	51	57	11	13	71	<b>234</b>
flexible	1	16	6	2	42	8	9	<b>84</b>
flexibility/ flexibilisation	4	17	17	1	37	1	15	<b>92</b>
Standards	1	2	2	4	3	0	2	<b>14</b>
standardisation	1	6	1	2	1	0	0	<b>11</b>
examination committee(s)	85	1	1	1	0	0	9	<b>97</b>
exam(s)	225	17	1	0	0	0	11	<b>254</b>
examination regulations	22	0	0	0	1	0	1	<b>24</b>
accreditation	0	0	0	0	25	3	11	<b>39</b>
evaluation(s)	49	59	18	2	31	2	12	<b>173</b>
accountability (verantwoording and rekenschap)	6	23	33	2	30	12	11	<b>117</b>
<b>Total words in policy document</b>	45737	162354	87753	39393	51863	30719	74668	492487

## **Analysed strategic policy documents**

Kamerstukken TK 1985-1986, 19253 nr. 2 *Hoger onderwijs: autonomie en kwaliteit. Nota.* (governmental white paper, final version, 1985)

Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, *Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek Plan. Kerndocument.* (draft, 1987)

Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, *Ontwerp Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek Plan 1990* (draft, 1989)

Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, *Ontwerp Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek Plan 1992* (draft, 1991)

Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen, *Ontwerp Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek Plan 1994* (draft, 1993)

Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen, *Ontwerp Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek Plan 1996* (draft, 1995)

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<sup>i</sup> Different forms of quality regulation exist since the middle ages, the Netherlands developed a systematic approach in the eighties.

<sup>ii</sup> In the early nineties it was acknowledged that quality relates to different perspectives, but the distinction between formal policies and situated notions was not yet explicitly made.

<sup>iii</sup> Since 2013 the 'HBO-Raad' is called 'Vereniging Hogescholen'.

<sup>iv</sup> Of the HOAK-nota we have analysed the final version, after the political debate in the House of Parliament.

<sup>v</sup> Another way to investigate how different stakeholders value quality is the 'conjoint approach' ('vignettenmethode'). Such an analysis focusses on the values these stakeholders attach to predefined quality attributes. See (Van der Sluis 2014).

<sup>vi</sup> In its comments on the draft HOAK-memo the Education Council of the Netherlands (Onderwijsraad) noted that there is no logical relation between increased autonomy and quality. The Government decided however to hold on to this strategy, because the idea was that 'systems dynamisation' would lead to more quality.

<sup>vii</sup> Miriam Lip's PhD 'Autonomie in Kwaliteit' was supervised by Prof. dr. Roel in 't Veld, responsible for the HOAK-policy and State secretary for Education. Lips' analysis of the communication processes doesn't mention Habermas, but policy makers indirectly involved do. This will be further investigated.

<sup>ix</sup> Kamerstukken II, 2009-2010, 32 123 nr.10, [Motie van het Lid Hamer c.s.](#)