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Greater Reach

Dutch National website providing information for academics about the advantages of Open Access to publicly financed research.

"We are increasingly members of a knowledge society. Therefore the free flow of knowledge is very important. From the researcher to the professional, from the knowledge institute to business and public sector and vice versa."



Doeke Terpstra

Dutch Association of Universities of Applied Sciences

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Jan Steyaert

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"Within higher education we sometimes behave as knowledge cuckoo's; we only make our knowledge products known through publishers and not through our own institutes. But as a knowledge institute, we also have to claim our products and showcase them."



Jan Steyaert

Fontys University of Applied Sciences

Should universities of applied sciences in fact do research?

The Netherlands is one of the few Western countries that has a binary system of higher education, with traditional universities on the one hand and "universities of applied sciences" on the other. The latter offer advanced vocational education and are characterized by their proximity to practice. About ten years ago, applied research officially became one of the core tasks of universities of applied sciences, in addition to their traditional focus on education. Resources were made available for research via both the direct and indirect funding channels. The year 2001 saw the establishment of a system of "lectorates", in which a "lector" – referred to in international contexts as an associate professor – occupies a chair at a university of applied sciences and is at the centre of a knowledge network, a kenniskring. The lector conducts applied research in a specific area of expertise and maintains contacts with the relevant branch of business or industry. Before then, we received only small amounts of money through contract research, with companies and local government outsourcing research to us on an ad hoc basis.

What is the relationship between research and teaching, traditionally the 'core business' of universities of applied sciences?

In the past two years, the political debate about the quality of higher vocational education – or lack of it – has shifted the focus back to teaching. We're particularly worried about the declining standard of students entering higher vocational education, especially because qualified secondary school pupils are increasingly choosing to go to traditional universities. It isn't clear whether this trend poses a threat to research at universities of applied sciences, or whether it actually represents an opportunity. There isn't any coherent overall view regarding the relationship between teaching and research in higher vocational education. That means that ad hoc developments are possible, based on the personal preferences of administrators. For example, Fontys University and, to a lesser extent, Utrecht University of Applied Sciences took steps toward becoming academic establishments by setting up doctoral programmes. It looks as though these programmes are now being abandoned, however, in part because different administrators are in charge.



How about publishing? What is the current practice like?

The main target group for publications by universities of applied sciences is made up of the professional group to which their own alumni belong, professionals who are now working in the field. Diplomas awarded today have a limited shelf life, and it is vital for all professionals to keep their knowledge up to date. But that takes more than just reading the latest publications, although even that is difficult enough. What's really needed is to combine reading with refresher training. There are few refresher courses available, however, and employers provide little opportunity for professionals to enrol in those that are available.

We have a highly diversified publications practice at present, ranging from items submitted to a newspaper or a Wiki to peer-reviewed articles in international journals. Generally, however, we're talking about Dutch-language publications in magazines published by professional associations or journals published by a commercial publishing house. Books also play an important role as a knowledge transfer medium in certain disciplines, for example the social sciences.

Researchers at universities of applied sciences are not – or not yet – subject to the same rigorous (and publication-biased) quality assessment as their colleagues at traditional universities, for example when they publish in international peer-reviewed journals or are ranked in citation indices. However, publication output is one of the criteria by which the quality of both researchers and research projects are assessed. Given the nature of universities of applied sciences and their proximity to professionals, output in both scholarly and professional publications or conferences is taken into account.

The target group has to be considered in all this as well. Besides professionals working in the field, that group includes our own instructors and students. Virtually all of them look up things using Google, and students often never go beyond that. What they can't find by Googling doesn't exist. Consequently, we have to make our publications accessible to them in terms of both traceability and content. We don't have the disciplined system of the traditional university world, where authors try to score points by publishing in international, limited-access A-list journals. That would put too much distance between us and our target group.



What is the status of Open Access in higher vocational education?

No-threshold access to knowledge is naturally vital in a knowledge-driven society. That is certainly also true of "higher vocational knowledge", which is clearly practical in nature. The Open Access movement at traditional universities is also taking hold in higher vocational education. We are now seeing Open Access journals, a good example of which is the classic journal *Sociale Interventie*, published by Lemma publishers, which earlier this year transferred to Igitur, Utrecht University's Open Access publishing unit. It's now being published in English under the name *Journal of Social Intervention*, and the idea is for it to acquire a Journal Impact Factor. Then there are journals distributed only to members of an organisation or to subscribers. Triggered by the Open Access debate, more and more of these journals are permitting their articles to be distributed via a repository, usually in an author's version and after an embargo period. Finally, there are authors who simply distribute their publications themselves, without asking too many questions. That's what I do. If I'm the author or co-author, then I publish immediately. If I publish through my regular publishers, I wait about six months before distributing my work, or until the publisher tells me that my publication has sold out. So far they've never complained, on the contrary. Because we mostly deal with non-commercial publishers and more with publishing activities of professional associations (e.g. the Dutch professional association of XYZ), they too give priority to wider dissemination rather than higher income.

Are there any obstacles?

Authors are still rather nervous about distributing their work more freely. The myth "it's not allowed so we won't do it" still plays a major role, without it being clear precisely what "it" is. The basic attitude is: do nothing and you won't do anything wrong. Authors are afraid of undermining their own publishing opportunities or of negative repercussions for their CV. There's really no reason to believe that, but it's hard to fight nameless fears.

Other obstacles that play a role in academia are less relevant or altogether irrelevant in higher vocational education. We don't have that tradition of relinquishing the copyright in a work in exchange for its publication. And if I'm asked to sign a form transferring my copyright, I simply alter it. My changes have always been accepted.

In truth, there's little standing in the way of Open Access in higher vocational education.

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And yet there are very few Open Access publications.

Well, there are more now than before. Everyone thinks it's a great idea, and a few pioneering souls are actually doing it. But due to a cocktail of unfamiliarity, vague fears and persistent habit, it isn't customary practice. Someone has to step up and say "Now's the time".

And so...?

On 26 November 2009, the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences [HBO-raad] intends to sign the Berlin Declaration. That should make it clear to the Association's partners that it's time to take concrete steps. There's the new system of accreditation for practice-based research, for example, which came into effect at the start of this year. This kind of quality assurance naturally also involves disseminating publications and making them accessible. In addition, higher vocational education has the Innovation Alliance Foundation [Stichting Innovatie Alliantie, SIA], the counterpart of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) in academia. The Foundation funds research programmes like RAAK-mkb, RAAK-public and RAAK-pro. Their funding covers about a third of all research carried out at universities of applied sciences. One very obvious funding requirement should be that the results must be published via Open Access. Finally, there's the Practice-based Research Forum, the professional association for lecturers. What could be more obvious than not only giving information on the lecturers on the Forum's website (www.lectoren.nl), but also providing access to their publications?

Ultimately, this trend may lead to a major increase in the number of publications that lecturers submit to the national repository for higher vocational education, the Knowledge Bank for Universities of Applied Sciences. Right now, that repository mainly contains reports on graduation projects. While that is useful, we can do a lot more with it. In other words, opportunities abound, but the higher vocational sector has to become more self-confident first.

And what about libraries? Do they still play a role?

Of course. As in academia, libraries are the obvious bodies to set up local repositories and collect publications for submission. But there are also major differences. One reason that Open Access has become so popular at traditional university libraries is the terribly high cost of scholarly and scientific journals. The idea is that an Open Access system will reduce the cost considerably. A recent study has in fact confirmed that theory for a number of countries, including the Netherlands. But it's an argument that plays little or no role in higher vocational education. We don't have to face the high cost of scholarly or scientific journals. We have a highly diversified range of small publishers, both commercial and non-commercial, as well as professional associations with publishing activities. The kind of package deals you see in academia, with fixed price rises of 5% or 6% per year, would be impossible in higher vocational education. Our media centres and libraries are also a lot smaller than at traditional universities. It isn't easy for them to also take on the job of a repository, and that is forcing them to work together much more than in the past. The good news is that they are doing so successfully through the SHB, the consortium of libraries at universities of applied sciences. SURF's role in this should not be underestimated.

*Interview by Leo Waaijers and Annemiek van der Kuil on 8 September 2009.
Photography by Annemiek van der Kuil*

Read more about Jan Steyaert's opinion on Open Access in '[Het open informatielandschap van de sociale professional](#)', *Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice*, 18(2)