# 3. Professionals Alike and Unlike

## A Tool for Dialogue on the Professional Diversity of Lecturers and Researchers in Higher Vocational Education

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### Introduction

There is a long history of dialogue on the meaning, importance and purpose of higher education (HE). From in-depth and comparative sources such as the 'History of Western Education' by Boyd & King (1921; 1975), 'Cultivating Humanity' by Martha Nussbaum (1997), and Shin & Cummings (2014), we can learn that having a debate on the role of HE and its employees is a continuous phenomenon.

In our work as lecturers, teachers, researchers, coaches or managers in a university of applied sciences, we do feel that the amount and variety of societal challenges on higher vocational education (HVE) is growing. Institutions in HE are in a process of transforming from traditional 'either or' research or education institutions into more complex hybrid knowledge institutions. Nowadays, universities of applied sciences (as institutions for HVE) in The Netherlands have three main objectives: providing education, conducting practice-oriented research to add to the professional knowledge base, and contributing to innovation in the professional fields of work. Education, research and innovation form the three pillars in the strategy of Dutch Universities of Applied Sciences (Educational Council of The Netherlands, 2015).

These changing societal demands form an impetus for educational reform and innovation at both organizational and individual employee levels (Cummings & Shin, 2014). Changes in context and roles lead to questions: As a teacher/lecturer/researcher, how do I relate to the different stakeholders? What is the real meaning of being a 'good' lecturer or researcher in creating added values, and for whom? Some propose that the new challenges concern everybody and thus should be everyone's job. But when everything becomes everyone's job, how can we really realize the required added values? Others promote a more differentiated approach of accurately fitting talents and tasks to create the flow and employee satisfaction that is needed to realize the desired outcomes. But then how do we work together and cooperate with such an individualistic approach? These opposing positions in the discourse concern the question of how to

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define the ‘professional me’ amongst the ‘we’. In other words, the challenge is how we define and navigate our professional identities within the context of a dynamic multiple-identity organization with increasing pressures for professional diversity (Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Aangenendt, 2015).

Against this background it is not surprising that calls are made to systematically engage staff in a dialogue on professional identities. The aim of this dialogue is to capture the benefits of self-articulation of professional profiles that focus on value creation for stakeholders and also fit one’s talents, drives and identifications. Such a dialogue may help to create a common ground and shared perspective about ourselves as professionals in HE. Furthermore, it may acknowledge and value the diversity of professional profiles and ideally discover the opportunities and pitfalls of that diversity. Explicit collaborative and dialogical exploration with colleagues in teams appears to be crucial in order to address the professional pluriformity needed to make it work for the innovation and adoption of new tasks.

The question then becomes: What could serve and facilitate such a dialogue on communalities and differences between colleagues building upon the togetherness of working in HE? How can we facilitate the emergence of a common language that overcomes the confusion of tongues, and how should such a tool and language be developed?

In the summer of 2017, a small team was brought together at The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS) to develop an evidence-based tool to elicit, engage and facilitate such a staff dialogue. This dialogue was held at the openings session of the Department Public Management, Law & Safety (PLS) of THUAS in August 2017.

For this mission we combined doctoral research by Aangenendt (2015) with practical work on the professional roles of civil servants by Neelen and Strijp (2007). We combined design-based research and a case study design as a research framework. In such a practice-oriented research strategy a series of short interactive cycles of ideation, rapid prototyping, field test and redesign was used (Norman & Veganti, 2014; Yin, 2014).

This chapter concerns just one action cycle and presents the efforts to design, test and re-design this tool for dialogue. First we sketch some of its theoretical and empirical foundations. Next, we describe the experiences and reflections gained with the development and use of the 0-version in practice. Subsequently, we present a new version of the tool to facilitate further discourse and dialogue at both individual and team levels. Lastly, we present some future perspectives.

We hope you find it interesting. We invite you to make it yours, fit it to your needs and then try it yourself.

## Professional identity and behaviour at work

*Professional identity as a mix of identifications*
Why bother with professional identity? The popularity of concepts such as identity and professional identity as a means to understand professional behaviour at work is growing. Identity is seen as a key concept to understand “why people think about their environments the way they do and why people do what they do in those environments” (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008: 334).

Here we define professional identity as “a mix of identifications with a selection of relevant foci in the context of work and career” (Aangenendt, Kuijpers, & Sanders, 2012; Aangenendt, 2015: 13). This definition is derived from the Social Identity approach, a bundle of well-established theories that focus on the explanation of individual behaviour in the context of social groups, on aspects of inter group diversity, antecedents of identification, and on the linkages between identification and behaviour (Van Dick, 2004).

The idea that people experience different (latent) social identities at the same time is basic to this theoretical framework (Turner, 1999). Not surprisingly, many authors emphasize the multifaceted character of professional identity, because each individual is part of various social groups and has different roles, not to mention personal characteristics, personality and character.

For each individual a different and extensive set of foci can be relevant, such as profession, department, lunch group, work group, age cohort, gender, project team, union, religious and ethnic groups, football club, fast track group, and so on. Thus, an individual’s social identity can be derived from various kinds of collectives.

Identification really matters, since we know that there are strong linkages between identification and social behaviour (Haslam, Knippenberg, Platow, & Ellemers, 2003). If you knew your most prominent identification at a specific moment you could almost predict your behavioural tendency. Extant studies suggest that employees’ organizational behaviour is often guided by the strength of the individuals’ specific identifications in the context of work (Van Dick, & Wagner, 2002; Ashforth et al, 2008).

Applying this ‘identity matching principle’ (Ullrich et al., 2007) to professionals in HE, it is proposed that an employee’s set of identifications will be related to their professional behaviour and achievements in research and education. Evidence indicates that employees’ perception and response to organizational climate and interventions show differences (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Griffioen & de Jong, 2014). Present identifications are expected to filter the perception and interpretation and therefore impact the response to the messages that are communicated by leadership and HRM interventions.

Identifications of individuals are not fixed by definition; the strength of a specific identification can change over time. Identifications can become either more or less important to the individual. The experienced fit between the personal and organizational demands and the personal career story seem to be crucial factors that relate to a change of identifications. Other factors involved in change include: private life events, career phase, organizational interventions such as introduction programs and high-quality leadership support, and one's own professional development strategy.

*Professional diversity in the context of HE*

Research shows that employees in HE can distinguish between at least four different categories of identifications at work: in occupational roles, various organizational collectives, different client groups, and with foci that are related to the personal domain (Van Dick & Wagner, 2002; Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Aangenendt, Kuijpers, & Sanders, 2012; Aangenendt, 2015).

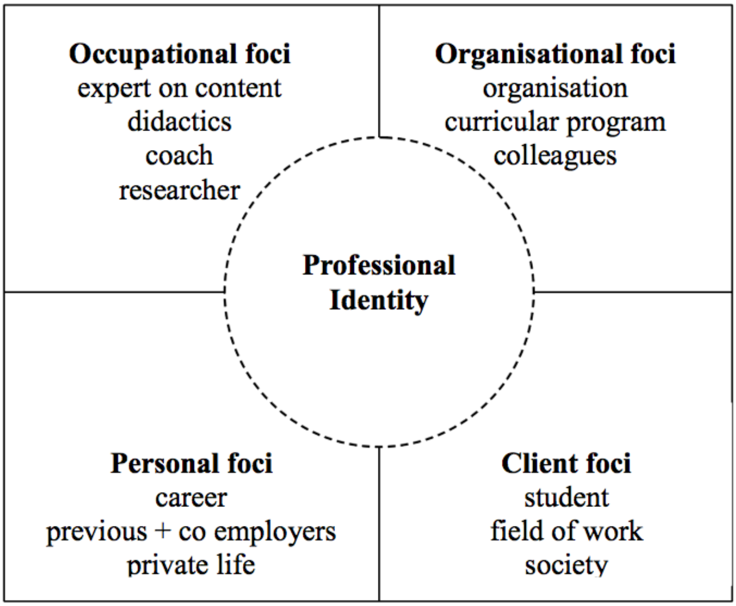


*Figure 1: Four categories of identifications for teachers in HE (adopted from Aangenendt, Kuijpers, & Sanders, 2012; Aangenendt, 2015)*

Identification with students is high on average, but looking at the spread a great variety can be observed. Prominent self-definitions can be described as follows. Some teachers are motivated to work with students regardless of the content of their expertise ('being a teacher has nothing to do with content'), while others focus on building a new society or strive to innovate the professional field. Others identify themselves as plainly curious, wanting to study an intriguing phenomenon, being a true researcher or identifying oneself as an expert on content, where students just happen to be, almost by coincidence, part of the context where one can do this work.

The same variety is found for the strength of identifications with colleagues and professional roles such as a coach, educationalist, or an expert on content. What is really key for the fit and flow for one colleague can be of no value to another. From this perspective each individual has one's own sense of meaning, setting the frames and boundaries of the personal theory of action at work.

**First experiences with the Professional Identity Mix Tool**

At THUAS, the Department of Public Management, Law and Safety (PLS) is working towards a new profile. As a first step we facilitated the dialogue with approximately 100 employees of the Department – including teachers, researchers, managers and support personnel - about their own personal professional profile. We consider building shared meaning and understanding of professional diversity as a crucial element to working in teams and building new profiles.

A tool was therefore needed to enable an open communication on professional identities. Such a tool is important since it offers a way to see differences and communalities amongst colleagues.

After a brief introduction based on the research of Aangenendt (2015), we issued a handout with a picture of 13 possible identifications and the following guiding questions:

- What brings me here in the business of HE?
- At the end of the day, my most important contribution is …
- I have noticed that I have no time for …
- My work is meaningless, unless …
- I get energized when …
- If I would wake at night, I would say …


*Figure 2. 0-version, handout with 13 possible professional identifications.*

The lecturers, researchers, administrators and support staff were invited in small groups to discuss what identifications they recognized in themselves and what identifications were rather unfamiliar to them. It was suggested that they choose one or more identifications that best suited them. As organizers of the dialogue we took a participatory observational perspective and were involved in some of the discussions. We observed and walked around the room to get an impression of the use of and responses to the tool. Furthermore, we explicitly asked some groups to reflect on the yields of the dialogue and the role of the tool.

The results of this first cycle of rapid prototyping and testing in this case can be summarized as follows:

Firstly, the 0-version of the tool allowed the dialogue between all participants to flow well. It had a huge face value and did not need a comprehensive explanation. The members of the Department found it easy to reveal their motives and perceptions of their professional role within the university. The picture handout and questions provided easy access to each other's prominent identifications, which facilitated the dialogues. The 0-version seemed to appeal more to the teachers, researchers and managers than to the support staff; further research on this assumption needs to be done.

Secondly, when it comes to the meaning and added value of these dialogues, the participants shared several reflections with us. One was the rather direct experience of an internal dialogue on sense making and identity construction when being confronted with the questions and the picture. Almost immediately, a process of self-reflection began in looking for the foci to which one’s professional self-definition belonged. In the observed dialogues these questions led to active self-defining behaviour, questioning oneself and colleagues on each other’s identity as a professional at work. Moreover, an awareness and sense of mixed belonging was activated. From the internal reflection and dialogue it became clear that one relates to several angles in the professional work at the same time but to a different extent. In other dialogues, the differences and communalities between sets of identification and professionals of a different kind were explored. Some participants also used the model to share and illustrate their career history and perspective, explaining their personal career transitions in terms of increased/diminished identification with specific foci. Others used the model to share and explain the tensions in their work when they experienced identification with foci as juxtaposed, for instance between serving the organization and the students or when they experienced a discrepancy between the personal preferred profile and the perceived organizational demands.

A third reflection concerned questions of purpose, added value and meaning. Participants considered whether there was a higher order ranking or solution that every professional should be striving towards. Should some foci be regarded as old school and therefore be avoided? Are some identifications more popular, modern or of higher rank? And from the perspective of the organization and its messaging and strategic perspective: Is there a preferred mix of identifications from the perspective of the university? Is identification with specific foci more popular, fruitful and rewarding for employees? Some implicit ranking with inclusion and exclusion from peer groups with different professional frames and issues of social dynamic within teams surfaced in the dialogues.

Although we tried to avoid suggesting any preferences as to the meaning of work for professionals in HE, in practice it appeared to be impossible to use names of the identifications that are perceived as neutrally formulated by all participants. To give an example, private life as an identification category at work may seem to some participants rather selfish and considered as ‘not done’, but could be very relevant to someone who is about to retire or has just has experienced some important changes in their private life. Thus attention, perception and decoding of one and the same word can almost automatically convey different meanings and strong messages when perceiving and decoding them through the eyes of a specific identification. Moreover, we know that people relate differently to professional identifications. Identification strengths can be experienced as a personal skill that belongs to and coincides with the person, rather than as a professional coat belonging to a temporary professional role that can be worn where necessary. In sum, these differences seemed to fuel the dynamic of the conversations.

Finally, although the 0-version of the tool has face value, it may require further explanation on details. This especially accounts for the identifications related to personal foci (career development, co-employers and private life). To make the tool attractive, we used – at random – different colours for the foci but this proved to be disturbing as respondents tried to find out correlations between colours that were not meant to be. Furthermore, there were suggestions made to include additional foci for the organization domain (team), the client domain (professional peers), and the personal domain (professional development). This may create a more balanced framework. We will deal with these suggestions in the next session.

**Modifying the tool and future perspectives**

In this final section we touch upon a few issues relating to the future perspectives of the tool describing its modification, perspectives for usage in practice and future research.

We modified the 0-version of the tool based on the input of some of the participants and on intensive discussions about our own impressions at the openings session. In the new model we again used the main four categories of identification: occupation, organization, client, and personal. But we added some specific subcategories.

We added ‘team’ as a focus of identification within the university, since employees reported that ‘relying on the group’ and working closely together in multidisciplinary groups and networks are becoming more important for goal realisation than in the past. Next we distinguished between the two identities of ‘career development’ and ‘professional development’. The first refers to the formal career steps in a career path – diagonal, horizontal and vertical – for instance upwards related to management. The second identity refers to becoming a better professional – developing one’s skills to create added value – which can be regarded as an in-depth career path. The distinction between these two identities is in line with literature on career paths and goal orientation (Patton & Mc Mahon, 2006). ‘Professional peers’ has been added to the client foci since employees can experience strong identification with groups outside the organization with the same educational and professional background. In the work on professional roles of civil servants, such a phenomenon was found to be especially true for lawyers and engineers (Neelen & Strijp, 2007). Finally, we changed the name ‘co-employers’ to ‘working duties elsewhere’ to reflect that some of the participants work only part-time for the university and have other professional duties that can be more important to them for their professional self-definition within the university. The modified tool is shown in Figure 3.

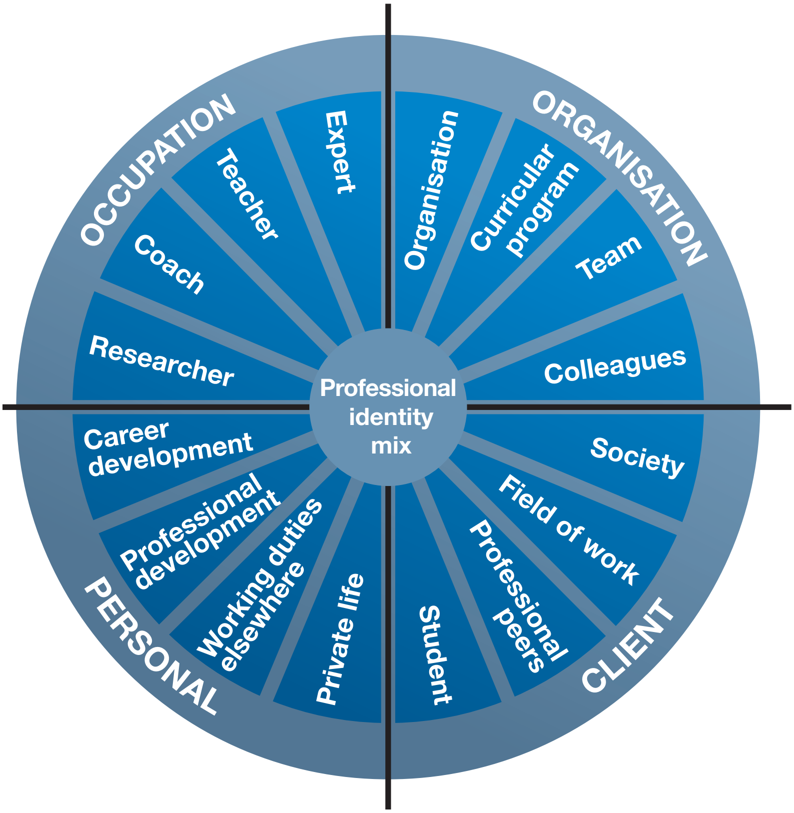


*Figure 3. The Professional Identity Mix Tool*

*How can this tool be used?*
Our intention from the start was to develop and test a tool to facilitate the dialogue between colleagues on their professional role and behaviour in universities. A shared language that enables us to understand the communalities and differences helps to balance the social dynamic in teams and serves to make professional diversity profitable.

One detailed practical suggestion to enhance the understanding of the concept of mixed professional identification is to apply scaling, for instance in a spider web model.

This way the users can score differently on the foci using a simple questionnaire. We suggest using five closed questions (yes = 1, no = 0), which offer a first scale (ranging from 0 to a maximum of 5). The same questions can be applied to assess the level of identification with other foci, for example: 'If my work does not contribute to (…..), it would be useless', and '(…..) at work is of great personal importance to me'. The guiding questions for dialogue presented above can serve as further inspiration.

As to usage, the tool seems fit to apply as a lens for individual reflection; it can be used as a base for a team building or team scan instrument, as a reference map for recruitment purposes, and to substantiate the strategic direction of the university to incorporate it in HRM policy. This model could be further developed and tailored to the specific purpose and usage.

In conversations with career consultants, the tool can also serve as a map or compass to highlight one's professional set of identifications. It serves *individual reflection*. One discourse is to explain the presence or absence of flow at work and to address the needs and options for changes in person-job and person-organization fit. Other discourses include the investigation of avenues for professional development, the alignment of task allotment, and the issue of job and career crafting.

In *team development trajectories* this model can add to other frames by giving words to the primary orientations and professional diversity amongst colleagues, and to the resulting social dynamic in the team. Developing a shared language that is open inclusive and stimulating can help to increase and handle the professional diversity that is needed to create added value for our stakeholders and our personal professional demands, both now and in the future. Increased understanding of the professional diversity and how this can become the strength of a team in facing the abovementioned challenges is just one of the possible usages of this tool.

As for *HRM policy*, resourcing and professional development strategies, the tool could also be used to articulate the necessity of recruiting professionals to our teams who have additional or complementary profiles, and to allow existing team members to bolster parts of their respective identities through personal developments tracks to strengthen the team's ability to face the challenges ahead.

Future research on the professional identity mix tool is the final issue that we would like to put forward. Up to now, we have worked rather intuitively within an action research design, while building explicitly on decades of research into social identification and employees' organizational behaviour. Taking social identity and identification as a framework, this language can be enriched by unlocking the growing body of knowledge on the social dynamics in and between (professional) groups, and gathering insights into how employees in knowledge intensive organizations navigate their career. In order to discover more about the social dynamic within our organizations, we recommend a comparative case study approach across universities (Wenger, 1998; Yin, 2014). A series of case studies can offer the building blocks that enable us to learn more about the effects of interventions in organizations (Kampen & Andriessen, 2015). We expect such case studies will substantiate our local experiences and knowledge, so we call for a collaborative organizational learning strategy to develop the shared understanding that is needed to fruitfully navigate the individual and organizational dynamics of professional diversity within universities.

*Finally, we invite you to build your own case on 'professionals alike and unlike', take this tool as example, fit it to your needs and try it yourself. And if you do, please let us know.*

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