

**Social Work Research in a Comparative and European Context**

**Inaugural Lecture  
Dr. Nol Reverda**

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### *Acknowledgement*

I would like to thank the many colleagues, associates, supporters, family and friends who have made this inauguration possible including, the Hogeschool Zuyd Board of Governors, the Directors of the Social Work Faculties, colleague Lectors academics and the MA CESS network. Thanks also go to my direct CESRT colleagues without whom CESRT could never be what it is today.

It is a great honour and privilege for me to share with you my thoughts and ambitions with regard to the 'Comparative European Social Research and Theory' research centre at my inauguration. Given the research centre's rather long name, I shall use its acronym CESRT from now on.

My lecture will address the following topics:

- Research, *Hogescholen* and CESRT;
- The comparative and European dimensions in CESRT;
- The CESRT 'state of the art' and future ambitions.

## 1. Research, Hogescholen and CESRT

The introduction of research at hogescholen in the Netherlands some years ago created a serious and passionate debate on the difference between research conducted at traditional universities and research conducted at hogescholen. The discussion resulted in a statement identifying research at traditional universities as fundamental and research at hogescholen as applied research. From then on, hogescholen presented themselves internationally as universities of applied sciences. Although I have yet to see an academically accepted definition of what is meant by fundamental and applied, I can assure you that there are many traditional universities producing, what I understand to be applied research, and also that it is too early to make any conclusions on whether the new universities – the hogescholen - will be conducting fundamental research in the future.

What strikes me most in this discussion is the overall agreement about what is generally understood by research; a positivistic approach in which reality is explained through the application of strict, quantitative measures and procedures. In this somewhat narrow-minded discussion, the difference between fundamental and applied research is not one of approach or methodology, but one of profundity of research outcomes. In this context, applied research is portrayed as superficial while fundamental research comes across as the more profound of the two, and thus more likely to produce research-based knowledge. Ultimately, I believe this to be a political discussion that only supports the differentiated status of hogescholen and traditional universities, rather than a meaningful, constructive exercise to support and enhance academic excellence and achievement in Dutch higher education. This narrow point of view about research is astonishing, especially if one considers the variety of perspectives in the field. Let me explore two of them: the different approaches of social and natural sciences.

### *- Social and natural sciences*

Let me say first and foremost, that research is meant to generate knowledge and expertise relevant for education and society as a whole. There are various ways to produce this knowledge, but regardless of the perspective taken, the research process itself is required to reflect particular, standard research characteristics. The research must demonstrate that it is controlled, rigorous, systematic, critical, valid and reliable - there is no discussion about these standard research values (Freitas, 2005a). This means that these standards are applicable to both social and natural sciences, regardless of initial perspective. Let us have a closer look at these two perspectives.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, classical sociology - mainly in Germany - was involved in an academic debate to identify the characteristics of social knowledge and research in opposition to the natural sciences. One of the main thinkers of the time was Heinrich Rickert (1986) who explored the differences between cultural sciences and natural sciences in a book entitled

*Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft*. For reasons of consistency, I will go on to use the term social sciences instead of cultural sciences. Rickert operationalised the question of the difference between social and natural sciences by analysing the object of both approaches (material object - the what) and their respective ways towards knowledge creation (methodological domain - the how).

In the social sciences, the object of study is *culture*; in the natural sciences it is *nature*. The main difference between these two concepts is that while nature is just there, culture is connected to values and meaning. The objects of culture are, by definition, historical and the objects of nature are ahistorical, lacking intrinsic meaning. So, where the natural sciences try to know the objective and ahistorical reality of nature, social sciences try to understand cultural reality through history and meaning. More simply stated, the objects of nature are *knowledgeable*, while the objects of culture are *understandable*.

With respect to the differences in research methodologies, it is clear that both the social and natural sciences aim to produce generalisations and patterns, based on a particular conception of reality. However, the difference between these is significant. Natural sciences focus on the development of general, applicable and valid laws of nature that are concentrated in general concepts and formulas; indifferent to time and place. In contrast, the social sciences concentrate on historical, unique phenomena and try to understand the effects on (the social) reality; time and place are fundamental to this understanding. Furthermore, where natural sciences attempt to analyse a reality that is defined as objective, value-free and meaningless, the social sciences attempt to rationally understand a subjective and value-based reality that is full of meaning.

In short, I argue that the natural sciences are embedded in a positivistic tradition that generalises. The object is value-free and meaningless with an explanatory, ahistorical methodology. The focus is on 'being' and on producing facts. The social sciences, on the other hand, are embedded in (neo-) Kantian thinking that individualises. The object is value-based and meaning-giving. The methodology is characterised by history and interpretation with a focus on 'meaning' that leads to the production of understanding.<sup>1</sup>

- *The formal object of CESRT: social work researchers as legislators and interpreters*

The distinction (not division) between the social and natural sciences I just described fits the typology of social work research perfectly. In a collaborative article I wrote with a MA CESS colleague (Reverda and Richardson, 2001), an analysis is made of MA CESS student dissertations, which highlights a shift towards the natural scientific perspective in social work thinking and research. There seems to be a desire to define social professional work purely in terms of training and competences (Goossens et al., 2005). This development, however, reduces social work to the acquisition of skills and competencies, involving little critical thinking on the process. In it, social work becomes a matter of technical skills where the social worker makes use of a professional *bag of tools* to deliver 'a good piece of work' that is measured, calculated, evaluated and replicated time after time. To a large extent, this shift is the outcome of the rise of *managerialism* in the provision of public and social services, which not only identifies the 'appropriate performance', but also the 'appropriate knowledge' required to 'do the job' (Roberts 1998).

Appropriate knowledge, however, is rooted in the traditions of both natural and social sciences and a relation can be made with two types of social work research. In the aforementioned article,

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<sup>1</sup> Note that also 'facts' are the outcomes of a socially constructed reality (Kuhn, 1962; Berger and Luckman, 1966)

these two types of social work research were distinctively called *legislating* research and *interpreting* research, thus making social workers either legislators or interpreters (Bauman, 1997). Legislators base their work on the assumptions and methodologies of the natural sciences. Interpreters are identified by the social scientific approach characterised by Rickert. For legislators, clients are perceived as *objects* of intervention and research, and for interpreters clients are *subjects* of intervention and research. By connecting this distinction to the two main fields of social work research, namely social practice and social policy, four types of research activities are identified: legislating social practice and policy on the one hand, and interpreting social practice and policy on the other.

Legislating social practice is linked to a positivist application of empirical scientific methods. In this typology, the role of research is to clarify and enhance the theory and practice of social work. The social work practitioner approaches the client as an object, whose well-being can be improved by the application of empirical data, based on scientifically 'proven' methods. The current development of evidence-based social work practice is a clear example of this. One of the CESRT members is conducting a PhD research in this field. The research on the reintegration of lone mothers in the labour market is another example.

The second type of research refers to legislating social policy. Here, social work is seen as part of the overall system of welfare provision, which can be researched similarly within other parts of the state. Thus the research findings should be relevant for social work (ers) and social policy (makers) alike. The approach carries an assumption of neutrality on the part of the researcher and the research mainly focuses on the improvement and controllability of the provision of social services. Core issues in this research approach include measures of efficiency, quality assurance, output registration and public-private partnerships. Current CESRT projects on partnership approaches for tackling social issues and the local provision of social services are good examples.

The third type is research based upon the assumption that the client plays a key role in the research process and outcomes. The client is not only an object of study, but a dynamic actor in the research process, outcomes, and is perceived as a critical citizen. It recognises the client's ability to articulate his own position on exclusion and to contribute to the development of own strategies for inclusion. Here, the relationship between the researcher and the researched is described as a presence; it is a lived experience. Social work research is thus seen as an activity that encourages clients to achieve a greater understanding of themselves, which in turn, refines and redefines social work practice. The CESRT project on the impact of social interventions on abused women is an example. The Euregional (comparative) research project on poverty and migration also involves components of this approach, as does the research on client needs within the new Law on Social Support.

The fourth and last type refers to an interpretative approach towards clients in relation to social policy whereby clients are not only seen as critical citizens, but also as consumers of social services. Their critical participation and evaluation of the forms of social provision serve to counterbalance the potential bias of public administrations and authorities. 'Subjectivising' social services reflect the idea of user involvement and engagement. The CESRT research on exchange practices in the social profit sector highlights this approach.

- *The material object: social exclusion*

The four types of research activities (legislating social practice and policy and interpreting social practice and policy) form a strong basis for CESRT to research the concepts of *social exclusion* and

*integration*. Originating in the poverty discourse, today we identify social exclusion and integration as dynamic forces in the construction of society. Where we once focused on the impact of problematic groups on society's institutional frameworks, we now discuss the quality of society as a result of diversity. This is a paradigm shift from a target group-oriented or *categorical* approach towards a more *contextual*, integrative approach. Let me explore this in more detail.

Categorical concepts focus on specific target groups or problematic situations. The most well-known concepts are poverty, marginalisation and social exclusion (Estivill 2003; Jehoel-Gijsbers 2004). In social work, *poverty* is the oldest of the concepts and refers to a lack of sufficient material resources that threatens the survival of individuals and families. In this context, mainstream social work interventions concentrate on charity and improved living conditions for the poor through the provision of food, clothing and adequate accommodation. The interventions did not focus on structural changes in society or a planned redistribution of commodities, but on relieving the situation of the poor and educating them in relation to the norms and values of the middle class. Belonging to society and sharing in its facilities were a matter of education and socialisation, and thus of culture, not of structure.

This changed with the introduction of the concept of *marginalisation*. From then on, the reasons for (relative) deprivation from material and immaterial goods were not based on different attitudes or deviant norms and values, but on opportunities and accessibility. The core institutions of society like labour market, housing, education, health care were so linked to the power and influence of the privileged groups, that there was little opportunity for the non-powerful to make use of these core institutions. Thus social work interventions shifted from the individualised issues of the poor towards the accessibility of core institutions in society. In doing so, a move was made towards equal opportunities as a manner of thinking about society.

*Social exclusion* is a much more current concept that refers to the exclusion of individuals and groups from participation in society. This exclusion embraces both material conditions like income, labour, accommodation and health care - the structural dimension of exclusion - and immaterial matters like language, values and (social) skills - the cultural dimension of exclusion. Ultimately social exclusion combines the poverty and the marginalisation perspectives, and in addition to individuals and groups, society is perceived as having a responsibility for the excluded position of its members.

What poverty, marginalisation and social exclusion have in common is that they focus on specific groups characterised by a lack of social integration in society. The quality of society itself is not put into question but simply the lack of social integration within it. This categorical approach separates people, leading to victimisation and stigmatisation (Nijhof, 1978; Goffman, 1963). Fortunately, however, it is an approach that is gradually diminishing in the political and social sciences and a more contextual perspective is replacing it. Interestingly, this development is also leading to a rediscovery of community work, a long-time tradition in social work.

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## Office for Dutch Social and Cultural Planning: Social Exclusion Characteristics

Social-cultural exclusion

*Insufficient social participation*

Insufficient participation in formal and informal social networks, including leisure activities; insufficient social support; social isolation; insufficient social engagement; lack of contact between migrants and members of the host country.

	<p><i>Insufficient cultural/ normative integration</i>  Insufficient socialisation of core values and norms, related to active citizenship: low labour ethos, low willingness for education, low political involvement, abuse of social security, delinquent behaviour, deviant ideas on child rearing and the respective roles and rights of men and women.</p>
Economic-structural exclusion	<p><i>Material deprivation</i>  Lack of basic means and material goods to survive; 'life style' deprivation; debt, particularly the rent; not access to loans and other financial resources.</p>
	<p><i>Insufficient access to social rights</i>  Waiting lists and financial barriers in health care; education mainly designed for children and young people; bad maintenance of accommodation; lack of legal and social support; no change in labour mediation, both in profit and non-profit sector; insufficient safety and environmental quality of life in neighbourhoods.</p>

Bron: Jehoel-Gijsbers, G., (SCP) 2004, p.34.

Contextual concepts on the other hand like social integration, social cohesion, social capital and creative capital encompass the whole political, economic and social-cultural context as a factor for social exclusion in their analysis. These concepts are not specific and exclusive, but integral and inclusive. *Social integration* is the opposite of social exclusion and refers to the process, through which peoples' activities contribute to the performance of society. These contributions lead to collective ways of thinking and acting (institutionalisation), in which every individual finds an own place and position. From this perspective, social problems can only be solved through the implementation of concerted cooperation among social policy fields: a partnership approach. Central to this, is the extent to which policy makers and social service providers are able to create meaningful networks with relevant stakeholders in society.

*Social cohesion* is much more perceived as an outcome; a result of social processes; an ideal state for society in which everyone has found a place in the complexity of society. It presupposes the existence of vibrant networks of interaction, sustainable cooperation and shared values and norms to prevent social exclusion. Much of the current discussions revolve around how much social cohesion is missing in modern society and how it can be fostered in a pluralistic, individualistic society. The discussion suggests that social cohesion and pluralism are mutually exclusive principles, which does not have to be the case at all. Social cohesion as a binding concept can indeed refer to the need for more homogeneity in society (*Gemeinschaft*), but equally refers to respect for diversity in values, opinions and preferences (*Gesellschaft*).

How can social cohesion emerge in a context of various interests, identities and ideals? First and foremost we have to consider the most important dimensions and characteristics of social cohesion, namely *civil society* (the domain, where meaningful structures are developed through citizenship and social capital), *social capital* (all formal and informal human collective activities, that lead towards active citizenship, mutual trust, shared norms and democratic values) and *identity* (the feeling of belonging to and identification with others and the routines and habits of every-day-life). Robert Putnam (2000) demonstrated convincingly that all three characteristics contribute to social cohesion and are a strong added value for economic performance and stable public administrative bodies, but its expression changes over time. By this I mean that Putnam clearly demonstrates how *bonding* social capital is a type of social capital that refers to a fully institutionalised social reality with clear boundaries within and between communities. This type

of social capital is put under pressure through mobility, migration and a 24-hour economy with rationalisation and individualisation of society as an outcome. He goes on to identify the rise of new forms of social capital, namely *bridging* social capital which is a form of social capital, based on the organisation of collective interests in networks and platforms - an opportunity to bind people of various backgrounds, ideas and preferences rather than through purely common characteristics and identities. Social cohesion emerges thus through networks, partnerships, platforms, virtual communities - in short, flexible human connections by way of vital and vibrant interactions.

Richard Florida (2002) continues where Putnam ends. Moving from Putnam's bridging social capital, Florida introduces the concept of creative capital. The path towards social cohesion and prosperity is the use of diversity for the development of a *people's climate* (rather than a business climate) characterised by the availability of technology, talent and tolerance (Ibid. p. 249). Diversity in this context is an indication for an inspiring and open public, cultural and political environment, in which people are invited to design the lifestyle that fits them best.

“Traditional notions of what it means to be a close cohesive community and society tend to inhibit economic growth and innovation. Where strong ties among people were once important, weak ties are now more effective. Where old social structures were once nurturing now they are restricting. Communities that once attracted people now repel them. Our evolving communities and emerging society are marked by a greater diversity of friendships, more individualistic pursuits and weaker ties within the community. People want diversity, low entry barriers and the ability to be themselves.” (Ibid. p. 269)

I now come to a conclusion. CESRT research concentrates upon issues of social exclusion, where diversity, the empowerment of individuals and groups, and the creation of networks play a central role in the process of social integration. CESRT embraces social cohesion as an outcome of this effort and aims to contribute to the quality of our society.

## 2. The Comparative and European dimension

### - *The conceptual triangle*

The *conceptual triangle* (Reverda, 2004) is the analytical framework used in CESRT to research processes of social exclusion and integration. The main components of this triangle are the state, the market and civil society. Each component has its own content and characteristics, which are simultaneously dependent on the functioning of the other two components. The key role of the state within this triangle is the structuring of the market and civil society by way of solid laws and regulations. In doing so, the state identifies the rights and duties of citizens and establishes the rules of the game from which the market sector competes and prospers. The main role of the market is the creation of material security and prosperity through competition, trade and innovative investments. Lastly, there is civil society whose core role is the construction and further development of meaningful institutions through which people derive their individual and collective identities. State, market and civil society constitute the parts of the conceptual triangle, and theoretically no single part has primacy over another (ibid. p. 224).

For a very long time, national states, or better-said *nation-states*, were the most dominant component in the triangle. Over a period of three centuries, they secured some of the most vital functions of society: the exercise of political and physical power, the collection of taxes, the redistribution of public resources, the guarantee of safety and security to citizens and also the exclusion of foreigners (Creveld, 1999; Dunn, 1995). In this context, citizenship became an important concept supported by the development of nationality law whereby the *nation-welfare-state* guaranteed its citizens civil, political and social rights (Marshall, 1992). These developments offered the nation-welfare-state a strong, central and dominant position in the conceptual triangle right through the 1960s and 1970s. Accordingly, social services and social professionals found themselves deeply integrated in state bureaucracies and fully dependent on the subsidies of public administrative bodies.

This nation-welfare-state is clearly disappearing. National political powers are eroding in light of both internal and international challenges. The overall economy and traditional market forces are in processes of internationalisation. Multinationals are thinking and acting globally and the transfer of money and trade are no longer restricted to national borders. This is particularly so in the transformation from industrial economies to post-industrial, knowledge and service economies (Bell, 1999). Decision-making on issues of economics and politics is becoming an activity for international panels like the European Union, the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund - just to mention a few. Environmental concerns are no longer perceived as internal, domestic affairs of single nation-states. Wars are immediate sources for international conflicts, leaving national authorities very little space to make individual choices on the use of military force. These developments place the sovereignty of the nation-welfare-state in serious question. There is moreover a decline in the internal functioning and power of the nation-welfare-state in relation to its unifying function, i.e., the command of loyalty and the development of a national identity. The emergence of multicultural societies and regional awareness detract peoples' commitment from state unity and a nationalistic culture (Bendix, 1996), although some populist movements ideologically deny this development.

I would now like to discuss two developments in the evolution of the national-welfare-state namely, the rise of neo-liberalism and the increasing relevance of the European context.

### - *The rise of neo-liberalism*

Although the concept of neo-liberalism has its origins in liberalism, there are significant differences between liberalism and neo-liberalism. The leading principles of 18<sup>th</sup> century liberalism were freedom and *liberty*, which were meant to free individuals from the chains, dependencies and irrationalities of feudalism (Seligman, 1995). It focused on independent individuals and their rights to be responsible for the political, economic and social-cultural construction of their lives. Neo-liberalism however does not identify individuals as independent and free human beings. Its leading principle is the *market*, where individuals are players on the market of supply and demand; they are identified as self-reliant clients and consumers. The state does not consider the investment in education, health care or social security as an added value for the quality of society, but qualifies it in terms of controlled, contained expenditures; efficiency becomes thus the core principle in the non-profit sector. Gradually, one sees the state leaning upon market forces to promote the idea of citizens that are responsible for their own well-being (also referred to as critical consumers), in light of the state's inability to provide a full range of social services, health care and education.

A question that remains, however, is whether recipients of social work services - generally the most vulnerable groups in society - have access to the information and opportunities required to develop the skills to make them the critical consumers they are supposed to become. The idea of neo-liberalism may very well turn out to be appropriate for those with a good starting position on the social services market but other, more vulnerable user groups, may need specific support and guidance to one day become self-determining, critical consumers of social services. The introduction of the Law on Social Support (*Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning*) in the Netherlands as of 2006 is a good example of this development. In this Law, universal access to care is replaced by neo-liberal principles. First, people are determined to be self-reliant; secondly they are expected to rely upon the voluntary sector and their own social networks. If these own resources fail citizens may then look to the local government for additional resources and care.

A very promising factor in this whole affair is the counter reaction from civil society towards the neo-liberal principles. By this, I mean that user groups that were previously organised in terms of *bonding* social capital are beginning to *bridge* their interests in partnerships and networks to oppose cutbacks in universal rights and services. The recent 'Maastricht Interest Group Platform' (*Platform Belangen Zorgvragers Maastricht*) established because of the introduction of the Law on Social Support, is a good example of this type of initiative (DDL, 2005). The platform comprises representative bodies from the disabled, psychiatric clients, elderly, welfare recipients, etc. and aims to protect their rights and to influence local government. Again, a promising initiative that demonstrates the dynamic nature and the organisational potential of a vital civil society in relation to politics and the market!

### - *Cross-border learning and Europe*

As demonstrated, the political, economic and social-cultural power of the nation-state has declined in favour of European organisations and institutions. This change has had a huge impact on the content and organisation of our political, economic and social-cultural environments. Let me start with the social-cultural environment and use higher education as an example. The importance placed on cross-border comparative studies and on the exchange of information and know-how is growing significantly. Comparison in itself is not new, but was mostly limited to developments within nation-states or groupings of these with similar characteristics e.g., industrialised countries. It was a comparison in terms of *time*. The comparisons had clear and geographically defined spaces that focused on differences between past and present. In short, they were quite similar to history. The opening of borders and the decline of the nation-state has

made comparison much more interesting in terms of *space*. We compare the practice and the thoughts of different countries with the clear aim to learn from one another. With this development, the bias of nationalism declines and societies are stimulated by the rediscovery of *other* ways of thinking and doing. This type of research has grown steadily and gets its expression in the concept of *good practice*; an excellent European concept that tackles the pitfalls of nationalism and dead-end-street discussions. The exchange of experience, expertise and the analysis of good practices, through which we can learn and improve our own practice, present some of the most promising developments for the European academic community. These exchanges that take place within well-known European programmes like SOCRATES, LINGUA, TEMPUS and MUNDUS demonstrates how Europe, especially the European Union, is promoting structural links between Member states even in a policy area (education) strictly based on national law and traditions. The European space for higher education is growing and challenging the often restrictive national legislation, such as resident permits and scholarships.

Many national governments are still ideologically opposed to this reality but the European Union is clearly developing in the direction of a supranational institution. The Single Market and its economic regulating power are evidence of this and further symbolised in the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). But does a European Political Union (EPU) and a European Social Union (ESU) also exist? In fact, the EU's original organisational framework by way of the European Council, the European Commission, the European Parliament, etc., provided a basis for European Political Union. The performance of these institutions however is still significantly dependent on the national interests of Member states, which restrict the political functioning required to develop transparent and solid laws and regulations. Indeed, the *Brussels bureaucracy* is not created by Brussels but by the fear of Member states to transfer power to another level of decision-making and thus blocking any development of transparent, democratic structures at a European level. Why not have a European parliament and a First Chamber composed of European political parties, that chose a European government and head of government as done at the local, regional and national level? It is unfortunate that the proposed European Constitution does not resolve this issue. First, the Constitution maintains the gap between the European political arena and the European citizen. This is largely due to the fact that the Constitution is a document developed by politicians and civil servants to rationalise the decision-making procedures in the EU in a functional manner. The document replaces 80% of the existing EU treaties and is not principally meant to identify the rights and duties of the European citizens. In this light, it does not represent a clear political vision on the functioning of democracy in Europe. Secondly, the Constitution is not rooted in the variety of civil societies in Europe and thus can be said to lack meaning or better yet, legitimacy, since this would require the Constitution to be embedded in the value systems of every day life. Finally, the Constitution will not reduce the distance between politics and the citizen without decentralising political power to the regional level in both Member states and at European level. The principle of subsidiarity should not be exclusively applied to Europe and the nation-states, but also to the regions (Reverda, 2004).

Without wishing to appear too sceptical of the pending Constitution, it should also be noted that the Constitution is also a product resulting from a long process of pacification and democratisation in the European continent over the last 50 years. In this sense, the Constitution is a master piece of collaborative work.

A strong EMU. A weak, somewhat obscure, yet existing EPU. What about the ESU or European Social Union? Will Europe add *social* to the civil and political rights of its citizens? I am afraid there is a long way to go before Europe can achieve such a goal. There is insufficient political will to establish common frameworks for social care and social security in Europe. These systems, like education, are deeply rooted in national structures. More and more, they become political and

ideological vehicles that carry new forms of nationalism and provide the argumentation necessary to close borders for newcomers.

On the other hand, an integrated European labour market would support the establishment of a European social policy. This does not imply the rise of *Eurocracy* or that the EU would necessarily become a *provider* of social services. However, as a *regulatory* body, the EU could establish rules to determine the responsibilities of Member states towards the poor, the sick and the elderly. Stephan Leibfried (2004) puts forward an interesting idea when he suggests the establishment a Stability Pact for the European Social Model in which Member states agree to spend a certain percentage of their Gross National Product on social security and social care. Such a step could certainly rescue the European Social Model from the challenges of neo-liberalism.

I hope to have made my position clear now: social work research and social work theory are enriched by the inclusion of the comparative and European perspective. They lead to innovative thinking, new forms of work and cross-border engagement to improve the quality of society. CESRT intends to play a part in this development.

### 3. CESRT and its future

The CESRT research centre exists for two and a half years now. Gradually, it has established a name for itself within the Hogeschool Zuyd and beyond it, as well. It started with eight members, and in just two and a half years, it has grown into a team of twelve professionals - and there is still capacity for one or two additional members in the short term. CESRT maintains well-established relations with the Faculty of Social Studies, with MA CESS, the Faculty of Social Law, and the first steps for cooperation have been taken with two Hogeschool Zuyd research centres namely, 'Autonomy and Participation' and 'Infonomia and New Media'. Furthermore, CESRT is part of an inspiring network of 'social' lecturers in Utrecht and has established good relations with working field organisations like RADAR, Trajekt and the Dutch Association of Social Workers. The relations with public administrative bodies like the Municipality of Maastricht and the Euregion Meuse-Rhine Foundation are very promising, as is the partnership with the Province of Limburg, which aims to develop a modern and vibrant regional society. In short, CESRT is steadily embedding itself in the Hogeschool Zuyd. On top of this, there is growing external recognition by relevant stakeholders and partners.<sup>2</sup>

CESRT's main aim has remained constant over time: to analyse change processes in order to reflect upon both social professional education and social professional practice. Thus, CESRT seeks to improve the quality standards in social professional education and to develop comparative social research on social practice in a European context. More concretely, CESRT focuses on an analysis of the challenges of integration - social exclusion and inclusion - and the involvement of the social professional as a practitioner.

In this line, the main research topics chosen are related to the processes of social exclusion and inclusion and refer to the accessibility of society's main institutions for citizens, i.e., education, health care, work, leisure, social services, public services and human rights. The changing positions of responsibilities of the state, the market and civil society - shared throughout Europe - create uncertainties for the target groups of both social practitioners and educators. CESRT themes are thus interdependent and seek to better understand the impact of this process on social professional practice and education, including the improvement of current practice. The goal is to generate knowledge about the processes of social exclusion and inclusion and issues of accessibility to society's institutions.

CESRT focuses its expertise in the following themes:

- Civil society, market and state
- Women and society
- Integration of migrants and ethnic minorities
- Evidence-based social work and social entrepreneurs
- Current developments in community work
- Social work curriculum development, i.e., pedagogical support, research and internationalisation

*Circles of expertise* have been created as nodal points with the objective to provide students, teachers, externals and CESRT members the opportunity to meet and to take advantage of each others expertise and to create a stimulating environment for creative and innovative thinking. Concretely, this has led to the development of the following CESRT research topics:

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<sup>2</sup> Details of the current CESRT activities and networks are available in the CESRT Yearly Plan 2005.

- Social and Multicultural Integration in the Euregion Meuse-Rhine (EMR- RECES<sup>3</sup>)
- Social Integration in the Province of Limburg
- Lecture Series on Social Integration: Welfare, Policy and Practice.
- Single mothers and their demand for intensive aid
- The New Law on Social Support (Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning - WMO)
- The Legitimacy of Social Work in the European Union Member-states
- Welfare and Exchange, Social Entrepreneurs and Entrepreneurship
- Evidence based practice and youth work
- The Reintegration of Single Mothers into the Labour Market
- Tackling Social Problems by using a Partnership Approach
- Social Work and (Higher-) Education in Europe

For the outcomes, products, presentations and publications on these projects, I refer you to our website.

At this point, I want to mention two broad ambitions for the near future of CESRT and research at the Hogeschool:

- *Developing knowledge.* I wish to further develop CESRT knowledge in the field of network development, the partnership approach, and the new Law on Social Support. The first – the development of networks – is particularly relevant for social work client groups. As people become more responsible for their own welfare and well-being and as they become more dependent on their direct and informal environment, society is obliged to provide these people with the appropriate skills to do so. The development of particular expertise in this area would be an asset. The same applies for the partnership approach. Society promotes cooperation between various institutions to tackle complex social problems only these forms of cooperation prove difficult to set up and to sustain. Research on ‘good practice’ in partnership approaches could provide relevant knowledge leading to improved practice. Finally, with respect to the introduction of the Law on Social Support, I would like to co-operate with field organisations and client interest groups to initiate a longitudinal study on the impact of the law on clients, their use of social services and also the quality of local social service provision. The research could aim to outline the move of the Dutch welfare state towards a differentiated welfare model. It could also provide important insight into how local authorities execute their responsibility to provide social services, including quality assurance and accessibility.
- *Embedding research at the Hogeschool Zuyd.* I would greatly welcome a stronger embedding of research in the core activities of this institution, which would, of course, have an impact on both financial and human resources policy. From a financial perspective, I would argue that every SKO Euro should be met by a euro from the Hogeschool Zuyd. The available budget for research centres could then rise from approximately one and a half to three million Euro, which by the way is a very modest amount in a total Hogeschool Zuyd budget of approximately 100 million Euro. This move would greatly accelerate the research potential of the Hogeschool by facilitating 20 FTE’s or 80 - 100 staff members for 1 to 1,5 day to conduct research. If, at the same time, human resource management would insist on a policy whereby the 10% of time available to improve staff expertise could be reserved for research centres, we could then add another 60 FTE’s (or 250 - 300 staff members for 1 to 1,5 day) to the Hogeschool Zuyd research centres. Through these rather simple measures, with little or no consequences for the Hogeschool facilities, we could involve half the teaching staff (340 - 400 people) in research. This would concretely structure and provide the context for the new

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<sup>3</sup> Réseau Euregional Contre L’exclusion Sociale

Hogeschool challenge, namely the development of research and expertise. This development could really help the Hogeschool Zuyd embark upon the development of a research culture; a culture in which creativity, curiosity and knowledge-development rule. Perfect happiness, would be to witness the recognition of the role of research at the Hogeschool by its inclusion in the employment profile descriptions. For me, this would imply the successful emancipation of research and the researcher in Dutch hogescholen.



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