

# **ESTABLISHING IDENTITY AND MEANINGFULNESS THROUGH IDENTITY CLAIMS**

## **Expressions of organisational and professional identity and work meaning by teachers in higher education**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the last two decades, a lot has been changing in the profession of teaching. Today's teacher has to be able to do much more than just simply teach, which has implications on their professional identity, organisational identity and their work meaning. This study investigates the organisational and professional identification of teachers and the meaningfulness of their work. To research this topic, nineteen interviews were conducted with teachers from a faculty of a university of applied sciences in the Netherlands. The results show that all respondents made identity claims to enhance both their organisational and professional identification and their work meaning. All identity claims included categorisations of ingroups and outgroups within both the university and broader society. Based upon these results, two models were created in which the ingroups (positive) and outgroups (negative) are presented in relation to organisational and professional identity and work meaning. From this research can be concluded that in the process of identification, disidentification is a very important aspect. Sometimes people find it easier to name groups they do not belong to than naming groups they do feel they belong to. Also, organisational and professional identification are flexible to some extent as the teachers perform several roles as teachers and within the organisation. Besides, professional identity and work meaning have some characteristics that overlap.

**Keywords:** work meaning, identity claims, professional identity, organisational identity, ingroups, outgroups.

## INTRODUCTION

For the past few years society has been changing due to computerisation and technological developments, also causing changes in the workplace. Bunting (2004) explains that due to these changes, people tend to get more frustrated and disappointed with their work and start looking for opportunities for greater self-expression and fulfilment. Hence, the topic 'work meaning' has received much attention in scientific studies in the last decade. However, having a meaningful job is not just a new trend amongst 21<sup>st</sup> century workers. The topic has been researched regularly since the 1950's. Morse and Weiss (1955) already wrote about work being more than just simply a means of making money or earning a living. Their study shows that, even when people do not have to worry about their financial position, they still would want to keep their job. Working gave the respondents "*a feeling of being tied into the larger society, of having something to do, of having a purpose in life*" (Morse & Weiss, 1955, p. 191). A number of respondents even answered that having a job keeps one healthy, that it is good for you. Years later, in work from Steger, Dik and Duffy (2012), one can find a similar outcome. They say that people who feel their work is meaningful report greater well-being, view their work as more central and important, place higher value on work and report greater job satisfaction and work unit cohesion. On the other hand, meaningless work is frequently linked to burnout, apathy, and detachment from one's work (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). So the type or amount of work meaning very much influences a worker's work motivation, work engagement, job satisfaction, absenteeism, empowerment, stress, career development, individual performance, personal fulfilment and, with that, also identification (Rosso et al., 2010).

Social Identity Theory explains that, besides identification on a personal level, people also tend to classify themselves based upon the perception of oneness or belongingness to a social group or groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This could be e.g. family, organisations, work groups, sports teams, religious affiliation, gender, their career or political preferences (Ashforth & Mael; 1989, Randolph-Seng et al., 2012). Rosso et al. (2010) describe belongingness as one of the mechanisms to explain how work becomes meaningful. Belonging to or identifying with a social group through work, such as a department, work group or the organisation as a whole, may enhance the perceived work meaningfulness, because of feelings of shared identities or beliefs (Homans, 1958; White 1959). Workers feel they belong to something special which therefore enhances meaningfulness. Organisational identification is especially strong when a person feels he or she is of great value to his or her work group (Homans, 1958; White, 1959). Christ et al. (2003) explain that identification with an organisation or work group represents a group level of identification. Besides, there are also personal levels of identification, for instance, identification with one's profession or occupation. Teachers, for instance, are known to identify strongly with their profession. Accordingly one can find substantive literature on this topic. The professional identification of teachers should be viewed as a process in which teacher constantly develop themselves (Beijaard et al. 2004). Wrezesniewski (2003), amongst others, says that the job of teaching is often chosen by people who believe it is their 'calling'. Work is a calling when it is "*associated with the belief that work contributes to the greater good and makes the world a better place,*" (p. 309). Bunderson and Thompson (2009) state that people, who perceive their profession as their calling have the strongest organisational or professional identification there is.

In the last two decades, a lot has been changing in the profession of teaching. Not only due to social and technological changes, but also due to economic changes which predicate stricter demands from the Ministry of Education. Nowadays, the educational programmes must keep innovating, also to meet the requirements from the demand side (the students). These educational reforms affect the identification of teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Day, 2002; Nias, 1989; Vähäsantanen, 2014), since they have to be able to do so much more than just simply teach. They have to keep track of trends and developments within society to keep classes up-to-date and appealing, they have to be coaches or counsellors to supervise students and they are needed in the development

of (new) educational programmes. In short, teachers have to keep educating themselves as well. Beijaard et al. (2004) explain that, due to these changes, the personal part of teachers' professional identity should always be considered as they may interfere with teachers' personal needs and what they experience as good. This could lead to conflicts between their personal identity and professional identity. Educational reforms also affect the organisational side, causing organisational structures or job tasks to change for instance. Consequently, educational reforms may influence organisational identification and perceptions of how teachers view their work or derive meaning from it. Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) conducted a study about organisational disidentification by means of public attitudes towards the National Rifle Association. Their study shows that defining who you are is often also realised by defining who you are not. The primary identity of a group may be defined by exclusion from another group or category. They argue that organisational disidentification occurs based on four perceptions: 1) perceptions of conflicts between personal and the organisational values, (2) perceptions that a personal reputation may be harmed by the organisation's reputation, (3) perceptions of all organisational members being similar in their values and beliefs (stereotyping), and (4) perceptions of the organisation based on limited personal experience with its members (p. 399).

This study investigates how teachers identify themselves with their profession and within their organisations today and how they define their work meaning. However, the notion of identity is quite complex and to fully understand its aspects may be a challenge (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Identity is very much seen as a dynamic: a teacher's identity changes over time due to both internal and external influences. Also the topic has been addressed from a number of different angles. These include images of the self, the different roles teachers have and different developmental stages teachers go through (e.g. Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Besides, as stated before, belongingness to a work group may enhance the perceived work meaningfulness. Yet, little is known about how identification with groups of varying sizes, within and outside the organisation, could influence perceptions of meaningfulness. Suggestions are made to elaborate on this topic (Rosso, et al., 2010). The purpose of this paper is to make contributions in that direction by addressing to three following research questions:

- 1) "How do teachers in higher education express their professional and organisational identity?"
- 2) "How do teachers in higher education define their work meaning?"
- 3) "What are the important groups in their work environment and why?"

By means of the method of 'identity-claim analysis' (e.g. Dobusch & Schoeneborg, 2015; Glynn, 2000; Ran & Duimering, 2007; Vaast et al., 2013), this study will show how teachers establish the meaningfulness of their work and their identity through identity claims. An identity claim is a statement made by an individual, organisation, spokesperson or stakeholder to define one's identity (Dobusch & Schoeneborg, 2015; Ran & Duimering, 2007). Groups related to organisational identity and professional identity will also be presented. Besides, a connection will be made to the meaningfulness of work. With that, this study will also put forth new information complementing the extensive literature on the professional identification of teachers.

## **WORK MEANING AND IDENTIFICATION EXPLAINED**

### **Work meaning**

To give a definition of work meaning is not easy, because both 'work' and 'meaning' have strikingly different meanings to different people. Steger, Dik and Duffy (2012) employ a definition that quite covers the concept: "*The degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile*" (p. 325). Besides, a distinction can be made between 'meaning' and 'meaningfulness'. Rosso et al. (2010) explain that 'meaning' refers to the beliefs about the role of work in one's life, such as 'I work to pay the bills' or 'my work is a calling'. "*Meaning is the output of*

*having made sense of something*" (p. 94). They also say that, although determined on an individual level, meaning can be influenced by the environment or social context. 'Meaningfulness' is related to the extent to which something is perceived as important or meaningful to someone. Hence, meaningfulness can vary greatly between individuals. Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) also say that meaningfulness very much represents the value a person attaches to a work goal or purpose. Therefore it may help to answer the question 'Why am I here?'

Rosso et al. (2010) argue that the meaning or meaningfulness employees experience in their work can be affected by four sources: the self, other persons, the work context and spiritual life. Other persons include co-workers, family, leaders, groups and communities. The work context includes design of job tasks, organisational mission, financial circumstances, non-work domains, and the national culture in which the work is conducted. If anything were to change in the work context, this could have major consequences for one's work meaning. The spiritual life can influence work meaning as people often turn to religion to find meaning and purpose in their lives. The self-concept is *"the totality of a [person's] thoughts and feelings that have reference to himself as an object"* (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 95/96). A person's self-concept is flexible to adapt to changing self-perceptions and feelings in response to various experiences and work contexts. The self-concept includes values, motivations and beliefs about work (the 'meaning' of work). These beliefs about work include three types of work orientation that explain how people see their work: as a job orientation, career orientation or calling orientation. Employees with a job orientation mostly focus on their life outside of work. The money they earn is therefore important, so they can enjoy their time away from work. Meaningfulness and fulfilment are less important outcomes. A career orientation basically speaks for itself. Employees with this type of orientation find work the most important aspect of life. They mostly focus on increased pay, prestige and status linked to promotion. This enhances their self-esteem, power and social status. People who believe their job is their 'calling', make their choice based upon a motivation that comes from within with the belief their work will lead to positive changes in the world (Davidson & Caddell, 1994; Lips-Wiersma, 2002; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Work is considered a moral duty, which enhances the meaningfulness and people allow themselves to make sacrifices (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Financial rewards or personal time, for instance, are not as important as fulfilment that comes with doing the work. Bunderson and Thompson also claim that having a sense of calling leads to the "strongest", most "extreme" or "deepest" route to truly meaningful work. A person with a calling identifies fully with the course of action of his/her work, because of a sense of clarity of purpose, direction, meaning and personal mission (Elangovan et al., 2009). Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) state that people with a sense of calling reported the highest life and job satisfaction and had the lowest absenteeism, compared to people with other orientations (job orientation and career orientation). So the meaning of work is different to every person. A job may not only provide a secure financial position and sympathetic social relations, people also would like jobs where they can achieve personal growth. Meaningful work should therefore be considered to be both an economical and an ethical issue (Michaelson, 2005).

As described in the introduction, the type or amount of work meaning very much influences several work outcomes, such as work motivation, job satisfaction and work engagement. For a long time it is known that teachers are very engaged in their work, because of (meaningful) interactions with students and supporting students in their achievements. Teachers have the natural intrinsic motivation to take care of others and to help students in their development. Besides they desire social contribution and personal growth and fulfilment (Runhaar et al., 2013; Woods, 1999).

### **Social identity theory and self-categorisation theory**

According to Social Identity Theory (SIT) an individual's identity consists of two parts: a personal identity and a social identity or identities (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Personal identity is "the

individuated self“: those characteristics that distinguish one person from another (Brewer, 1991). It gives an answer to the question “Who am I?” However, identification not only takes place based upon personal characteristics. SIT explains that people also tend to classify themselves based upon the perception of oneness or belongingness to a group or groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). A social identity “*the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership*” (Tajfel, 1972, p. 292). It gives an answer to the question “Who are we?”. Ashforth et al. (2008) explain that a person first needs to have a sense of who he/she is, and who or what the other categories are, before associations can be made. That is why they, amongst others, call identification a ‘roots construct’.

SIT was formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970's and 1980's, as they wished to understand social discrimination, aggression and group conflicts (Ellemers, 2012). It explains that people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as family, organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, their career or profession or political preferences (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Randolph-Seng et al., 2012). Prototypical or stereotypical characteristics, derived from the group members, form the basis of the categories. Tajfel (1971) states that stereotyping is a basic cognitive function, because people have the tendency to group things together. It is the human brain's natural way of making sense of a situation or understanding what is going on. Because social identification is based upon cognitive processes and social conditions (and not upon any specific behaviours), Ellemers (2012) says that SIT helps us to both understand and predict when and why people will act as group members or when they will act as single individuals. Brewer (1991, 2003) argues that people get involved in ongoing struggles between personal and social identities, as the demands of the social identities interfere with the uniqueness of the personal identity. That is why, according to Kreiner et al. (2006), identification is not just a state where the individual feels overlap between his/her own identity and the social group's identity, but also a process, where situational factors influence identification.

SIT leads to a distinction between ingroups (categories to which one belongs) and out-groups (categories to which one does not belong). People have a need for inclusion and they identify with groups that satisfy that need. Yet, these groups are distinct enough from other groups, hence they serve a meaningful identity function. This is also known as “optimal distinctiveness theory” (Brewer, 1991). Therefore it is logic that a relevant outgroup is always presents when identifications with any given in-group are made. An outgroup serves a critical reference point to determine the in-group and separate it from other groups. When differentiating from other groups, Ellemers (2012) argues that people mostly look at the competences, sociability and morality of their group: is my group capable to achieve certain goals, do we approach others in a friendly manner and do we rely on important values? When groups form impressions of outsiders or out-groups, they first look for moral information to decide on the honesty, reliability and trustworthy of the group. By means of an identity claim, people can make expressions of their identification. Ran and Duimering (2015) say that identity claims do not just simply classify groups of any kind, but “*establish an idiosyncratic system of value-laden categories*” (p. 157). Someone or something could be positively or negatively positioned within these categories. Besides, past, present and future identities are created based upon identity claims. In an organisational context, official and unofficial statements made by various stakeholders, such as employees or customers, are seen as identity claims (Ran & Duimering, 2015).

SIT was originally used to explain intergroup behaviour and outgroup discrimination (e.g. Van Dick, 2001). Tajfel (1982) uses a definition from Sherif (1966) to explain intergroup behaviour: “*Whenever individuals belonging to one group interact, collectively or individually, with another group or its members in terms of their group identification, we have an instance of intergroup behaviour*” (p. 1,2). Intergroup discrimination (also known as in-group bias or in-group favouritism) is the more positive

rating of one's own group than others and it takes place when people are perceived to be in the same in-group (Brewer, 1979; Hennessy & West, 1999). This does not mean outgroups are always rated as more negative than the own group. However, in general, ingroups are being perceived as more positive (Tajfel, 1982). Intergroup discrimination does not necessarily occur only when a leader is present. Ashforth and Mael (1989) display evidence of studies that show that just the assignment of an individual to a group is enough to generate intergroup discrimination.

Self-categorisation theory is a matured version of SIT (Ran & Duimering, 2015) and it is believed that this shapes identity (Stets & Burke, 2000; Turner, 1991). Here, the self is considered and conceptualised in social intergroup contexts (Hogg & Terry, 2000). When individuals identify closely with a social group, they develop a 'depersonalisation of the self' (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). Based upon (social) categories to which people belong, people make distinctions between personal and social identities. Social comparisons are made, after which is determined whether others show differences or similarities to the self in a specific context, such as shared values, beliefs or interpretations (Oldmeadow et al., 2003; Ran & Duimering, 2015). Randolph-Seng et al. (2013) argue that according to SCT people tend to use identity dimensions *"to maximize the ratio of between-group differences to within-groups differences"* (p. 338). The classical views on categorisation say that within a category, all actors share specific attributes that are visible to outsiders. Because of the visibility of these attributes, people or groups get prototyped/stereotyped, which makes it is more easy to place an particular actor within in a category (Oldmeadow et al., 2003; Ran & Duimering, 2015). Besides, SCT helps us to understand when a specific group or identity becomes salient (Friesen & Besley, 2013). When a personal or a social identity becomes more relevant than another identity in a specific context, we speak of identity salience. Within a specific context, a person can have multiple identities, which also suggest one can shift between personal and group identities. Identity or group salience not only occurs within ingroups; outgroups can become salient as well. After all, a person's social identity can be determined by the presence of a relevant outgroup as well (Randolph-Seng et al., 2012). The role of motivations in intergroup behaviour also plays a central part in self-categorisation theory (Oldmeadow et al., 2003). Motivations of maintaining a distinctive and positive social identities are very much linked to implications that lie within 'the self' or 'the group self', such as self-esteem and intergroup discrimination (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Long & Spears, 1997; Long, Spears & Manstead, 1994; Oldmeadow et al., 2003). Motivations of reducing uncertainty are linked to social influence (McGarty et al., 1993; Turner, 1991; Turner & Oakes, 1989; Oldmeadow et al., 2003) and in respect of group identification and intergroup discrimination (Hogg, 2000, 2001; Hogg & Mullin, 1999; Oldmeadow et al., 2003).

### ***Professional identification***

The question 'Who am I?' can of course also be answered in terms of one's profession, because we spend the majority our lives at work (Janik & Rothmann, 2015). Professional or occupational identification is the degree to which one identifies with her/his profession (Witt, 1993). The topic has received much attention in scientific literature over the past two decades. Teachers, psychologist, soldiers, doctors, nurses and service/social workers for instance, are known to identify strongly with their profession. Canrinus et al. (2011) give the following definition of teacher's professional identity: *"Teachers' professional identity generally pertains to how teachers see themselves based on their interpretations of their continuing interaction with their context"* (p. 594). However, giving an exact definition of what professional identification contains, is not easy. Identity is very much seen as a dynamic and the teacher's identity changes over time due to both internal and external influences, such as emotions and job/life experiences. Furthermore, identity may shift throughout a teacher's career because of interactions or collaborations within schools and in broader society (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). So identity is not a constant factor and therefore difficult to measure. Canrinus et al. (2011) found job satisfaction, self-efficacy, occupational commitment and the level of change in

motivation to be relevant indicators of teachers' sense of their professional identity. These findings also show that both person and context affect professional identification, which was already suggested by Beijaard et al. (2004). They said that what surrounds a teacher, what others expect of a teacher and what the teacher allows to impact on him/her greatly very much affects his/her professional identity. The study from Beijaard et al. (2004) also explains that professional identification is an ongoing process in which teacher's development never stops. It is seen as a process of lifelong learning, where teachers often try to answer the question 'Who do I want to become?'. This is also described in a study on the professional identification of beginning teachers, that shows that the more a teacher gets experienced with the profession, the stronger the professional identification gets (Friesen & Besley, 2013). Ibarra found the same results in 1999 and speaks of "the evolvement of identity". The study from Beijaard et al. (2004) lead to four essential features of professional identification: 1) professional identity implies both person and context, 2) a teacher's professional identity involves sub-identities that more or less live together harmoniously, 3) agency (being active in de process of professional development ) is an important element of professional identity and 4) it can be argued that professional identity is not something teachers have, but something teachers use in order to make sense of themselves as teachers.

In work from Christ et al. (2003) one can read about the identification of school teachers, which can be differentiated into the three foci of identification: a career identification, a work unit/work group identification and an organisational identification. The first one represents a personal level of categorisation, the other two represent a group level of identification. All identification foci have positive effects on the teachers' behaviours, which consequently contribute to a better functioning of the school. In the 1980's, Kremer & Hofman and More & Hofman found out that the less teachers identify with their profession, the more likely they are to leave their job. Similar outcomes were found by Gumus et al. (2012), who argue that the organisational identification of teachers positively impacts their job satisfaction, diminishing the intention to take early retirement. One could conclude from this that a teacher's professional identity or organisational identity has a positive effect on work meaning, because one would not leave their job if they would perceive it as meaningful. Meaningful work increases an employee's work motivation and work motivation is an important aspect of employee satisfaction (Michealson, 2005). However, within literature, the importance of the organisation the teachers work for still remains somewhere in the middle. Is it more important to teachers they can be teachers or is it more important they work at a school or university of choice?

### ***Organisational identification***

Besides identifying with a group or groups, one can also identify with one's organisation. According to Ashforth and Johnson (2001), (multiple) organisational identities can manifest both horizontally and vertically throughout organisations. So one could identify with the entire organisation, but also with a specific department or team, a work groups, project members, a subunit et cetera. Ashforth and Mael (1989) explain that organisational identification is a specific form of social identification, with the organisation being the social category. They proclaim the following definition: *'The perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member'* (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p.104). Ashforth et al. (2008) say that organisational identification gives an answer to the question "who are we as an organisation?", which suggests it is something that is carried out widely through the organisation. Antecedents of organisational identification are, according to Dutton et al. (1994), the beliefs of what an organisational member thinks is distinctive, central and enduring about his/her organisation and the organisational member's beliefs of what the outside thinks about the organisation. This is also stated by Corley et al. (2006) and Frandsen (2012). They speak of the 'organisational image' as an influencer of organisational identification. Bartels et al. (2007) call it the 'perceived external appreciation'. Besides they mention the organisation's distinctive character, the intensity and length of

contacts within the organisation, and overlap between the employee's personal identity and the identity of the organisation. The more values, norms and interests of the organisation lie within the self-concept, the more individuals will identify with the organisation (Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Corley et al. (2006) also add strategic decision making and many crucial organisational variables at the individual level as antecedents of organisational identification. These organisational variables will often vary. Brickson (2005) argues that identification at the organisational level is mostly caused by the reciprocal relationships of employees. However, employees are more likely to find connections to work groups more meaningful than connections to other representatives from the organisation, because they have more regular contact with work group members. Many scholars provide us with evidence that the identification of employees is the strongest with their daily working group or the closest organisational entity (Bartels et al., 2007). In such cases we speak of identity salience (e.g. Bartels et al., 2007; Brewer, 1979; Chattopadhyay et al., 2004; Stets & Burke, 2000). The more closer an identity is, the more visible/noticeable it gets for the employee. In 1989, Ashforth and Mael described that organisational identification should be seen as a 'critical construct' of human behaviour in the organisation with implications to an individual's satisfaction and the organisation's effectiveness. Since then, many has been written about the outcomes of organisational identification on for both the individual and the organisation. Chattopadhyay et al. (2004) state that employees are unlikely to work hard and therefore will not benefit a group in any way, if they do not feel they belong to that group. As Brickson (2005) argued, identification at the organisational level is mostly caused by the reciprocal relationships of employees. Therefore identification is especially strong when a person feels he or she is of great value to his or her work group (Homans, 1958; White, 1959). Furthermore, Knippenberg and Sleebos (2006) proclaim that when the personal identity is attached to the organisational identity, people are more likely to stay employed at the organisation and therefore turnover decreases. Other positive firm outcomes, such as organisational commitment, less absenteeism, lower turnover intentions, innovation, performance, beliefs, workgroup relationships and organisation-based self-esteem are also positively related to organisational identification (Ashforth et al., 2008; Chattopadhyay et al., 2004; Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Pratt and Ashforth (2003) proclaim that the more an organisation creates a close-bonded family-like environment, the more meaningful employees will experience their work.

In scientific literature, much can be found about professional identity and organisational identity. However, giving exact definitions of both concepts is not easy, as they deal with norms, values, beliefs and feelings of what one finds important in life, wants to achieve in life or wants to be(come) in life. Besides, both concepts are processes which makes them dynamic rather than stable (e.g. Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijgaard et al., 2004; Friesen & Besley, 2013; Kreiner et al., 2006). That makes it difficult to explain why sometimes one group or person would be an in-group and another would be an outgroup. Internal and external factors influence identity, such as people inside and outside the workplace, but also job demands and work contexts, which can also impact the meaning of work. With regards to their work meaning, teachers find interactions with students and supporting students in their achievements very meaningful. This enhances their work engagement. Teachers have the natural intrinsic motivation to take care of others and to help students in their development. Besides they desire social contribution and personal growth and fulfilment (Runhaar et al., 2013; Woods, 1999). However, a lot has been changing in the profession of teaching. Today's teacher has to be able to do much more than just simply teach, which has implication on both their identity and work meaning (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijgaard et al., 2004; Day, 2002; Nias, 1989; Vähäsantanen, 2014). So how do teachers identify with their profession and organisation today? What does their work mean to them? To what extent are other groups in their work environment, besides students, also important? Why do they or why do they not matter?

## **METHOD**

For this study, a qualitative method was chosen, by means of in-depth interviews, to find out more about how professional and organisational identification and work meaning are expressed by teachers in higher education.

### **Organisation and participant selection**

For this research nineteen interviews were conducted with teachers from a faculty of a university of applied sciences in the Netherlands. This organisation was chosen for practical reasons, as the researcher is also employed here. The university is situated in eastern Netherlands with campuses in three different cities. Today, the university employs approximately 2,800 members of staff, divided over eleven faculties and service units, of which about 160 work with the faculty central in this study. It currently has about 26,000 students in fulltime and part-time Bachelor and Master programmes of which about 2,300 study with the faculty. The faculty offers three Dutch Bachelor programmes with fulltime and part-time tracks: Facility Management, Hotel Management and Tourism Management. Besides, Hotel Management and Tourism Management are also offered as English programmes, fulltime only. In addition, three Master programmes are offered. As these programmes are associated with the University of Greenwich, they are offered in English only. So the faculty holds quite a population of international students as well. One can choose from three Master programmes: Master Facility & Real Estate Management (fulltime and part-time), Master Business Administration (fulltime only) and Master in Management (fulltime only). About seventy students study in these three programmes.

The sample of this study consisted of nineteen teachers who have worked at the faculty for at least one year and with a maximum of five years. As described by Bartels et al. (2007) and Canrinus et al. (2011), contract size and the intensity and length of contacts within the organisation have effects on organisational identification, suggesting time employed is an important factor. Someone who has been working with the same organisation for over twenty years will identify differently with the organisation than someone who has worked there for just two years. The two are difficult to compare. Moreover, the faculty has quite an obvious and desired identity, which has been carried out broadly more and more over the past few years. The researcher wondered whether this would have played a role in the teachers' decision to choose this faculty. Therefore was decided to collect interviews with employed teachers who entered the organisation within the same time frame: one to five years ago. There was one year minimum, as the teachers should have worked long enough with the organisation to form an opinion about the organisation or to have an organisational identity. There was a five year maximum to create a homogeneous group of participants with regards to their identification, so comparisons could be made. To select the participants, a list of all the teachers, including their time of entry to the faculty, was requested with the business support unit. Based upon the criterion of one to five years employed, a group of twenty-one teachers automatically emerged. Subsequently, two of them were left-out of this selection as their contracts were discontinued. The nineteen remaining teachers all participated in this study. The sample contained fourteen women and five men, who all varied between the ages of 30 and 55 years. The average time employed was 3,2 years. During the interviews became clear that most of the interviewees were not a teacher before they started working at the university, they had different occupations. Only three interviewees started their teaching careers immediately after their graduation, the rest became a teacher later on in their professional careers.

### **Data collection**

To collect the data, all participants were asked if they wanted to partake in this study. For this purpose, it was necessary to inform them about the subject of the interview (identification and work meaning) as the participants wanted to know what they would be asked about. Next, appointments were made upon which the interviews could take place. During the interview, only the interviewer and the interviewee were present. The interviews were semi-structured: the researcher knew on what subjects she wanted

more information. Therefore, all questions were prepared in advance. All interviews started with the question 'If you look at what your work means to, what groups in your work environment are important then and why?'. After the respondents named their important groups, the interview continued with questions such as 'To what extent do you feel part of the organisation and why?', 'To what extent do you feel part of your team/work group and why?', 'Why did you become a teacher?' and 'What does your work mean to you?' The complete questionnaire can be found in appendix A. Most interviews lasted between fifty and sixty minutes; the shortest interview lasted 32 minutes, the longest seventy minutes. The interviews gave the researcher the basis needed to get more insights into the identification of teachers (with both profession and organisation) and their work meaning.

### **Data analysis**

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, leading to 240 transcript pages. To analyse the data, Atlas.ti software was used for tracking code creation. The analysis consisted of two rounds of coding. In the first round, a coding scheme and open-coding method were used to indicate the important work groups, the degree to which teachers felt a part of their work group and the organisation, the important work values, the work meaning of the teachers and role of the work groups and the organisation in their work meaning. The basis for the coding scheme was the questionnaire, of which the questions were turned into the main categories. As the researcher started coding the interviews through this coding scheme, subcategories were created based upon the answers of the interviewees. So here an open-coding method was used. The subcategories were mostly used to figure out the 'why' behind a specific answer. The coding scheme can be found in appendix B. In the second round of coding, the researcher analysed the concepts/categories found in round 1, by looking for identity claims made by the teachers. Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) describe that the method of 'identity-claim analysis' has gained popularity over the past few years as an approach to empirically study the creation of joint or organisational identity (e.g., Glynn, 2000; Ran & Duimering, 2007; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Attention was especially paid to those statements that concerned what teachers generally are or are not and do or do not do. In other words, the researcher distinguished claims that emphasised their identity within the organisation (e.g. "*I feel I am a member of the faculty*") and/or with their profession (e.g. "*My work is my identity*") and that emphasised the meaningfulness of their work (e.g. "*I feel I contribute to society*"). The respondents made numerous claims, which were not all used in this study. The researcher focussed on the most commonly made statements by all respondents. Subsequently, a distinction was made between positive ('I identify with...') and negative ('I do not identify with...') claims, comparable with work from Ran and Duimering (2007). They studied the mission statements of several organisations based upon a cognitive linguistic analysis. Their study lead to a framework of positive, negative and neutral claims to define organisational identity. In this current study, the identity claims were eventually categorised into groups of disidentification, identification and ideal groups of identification within the organisation and within broader society related to organisational and professional identification and also work meaning.

### **Researcher's position**

As mentioned before, the researcher is employed in the same organisation as the respondents and knew all respondents. Also, the interviewees were very open and sometimes excluded very personal information. If an outsider were to read the transcripts or if a second researcher would repeat this study, he/she will come across terminology specific for the university. Besides, the organisational structure has been undergoing some changes and in the past few years turnover increased in almost all management positions. The researcher has a certain prior knowledge an outsider would not have and understands everything that was discussed perfectly. This could bias data collection and data analysis. However, this has not been of any direct influence in this study. The data was handled with the utmost care, to maintain an objective view. Moreover, the questions asked were general questions related to identification and work meaning and did not pursue any specific events in the organisation (see

appendix A). Extra or personal information was mostly obtained when a respondent would very much elaborate on a certain topic. The respondents sometimes had the tendency to do this, as the interviewer also works in the organisation, which makes it easier to wander of the main subject. Yet, these elaborations lost the relevancy to the question asked.

## RESULTS

The results in this chapter will be presented as follows. At first will be described how the respondents view their work and derive meaning from it. Next, two models will be presented of organisational identification and professional identification, both including groups of identification and disidentification, which are important in the identification process. These two models will be described consecutively. Subsequently, the second model will also be linked to the teachers' work meaning.

### How teachers view their work

When asking about what their work means to them, all respondents replied they derive meaningfulness from being in direct contact with their students. The fact they get to help students in both their personal and professional development gives a lot of energy and is very satisfying. Especially the moment the penny drops and students really understand the theory gives a sort of ultimate satisfaction; as the teachers say *"That's what you do it for"*. That is why the students are the most important group in the teachers' work environment. "Students" was the first answer of all participants when asking them about the important groups in their work environment, colleagues came second. The students are inextricably linked to the teachers' professional identity and with that their work meaning, because a teacher is not a teacher without students. Their job would not even exist without the students. Another important aspect of the job of teaching is the social relevance, which the teachers find important to have in their lives; they derive meaning from it because they make a difference. Rosso et al. (2010) call this 'perceived impact', which is a self-efficacy mechanism that drives perceptions about the meaning of work. When individuals feel they have a positive impact on other entities beyond the self, they are expected to perceive more meaningfulness in their work.

*"I take care of the future of our nation."*

None of the respondents would therefore stop working if they would win the lottery, because the satisfaction and meaningfulness derived from working and the social relevance and involvement would disappear, causing major effects on their identity. Some of the interviewees even responded:

*"If you don't have a job anymore, where does that leave you? Who or what would you still be then? You can't just go sit around and do nothing, right?"*

Besides, the values gained from working would disappear. The most important work values named by the respondents were personal growth and fulfilment, appreciation and recognition from the organisation and colleagues, opportunities and challenging work and diversity in tasks. (Woods, 1999; Runhaar et al., 2013). None of the respondents would therefore be happy if they would only spend their time in front of the class room. That would hold back their personal growth.

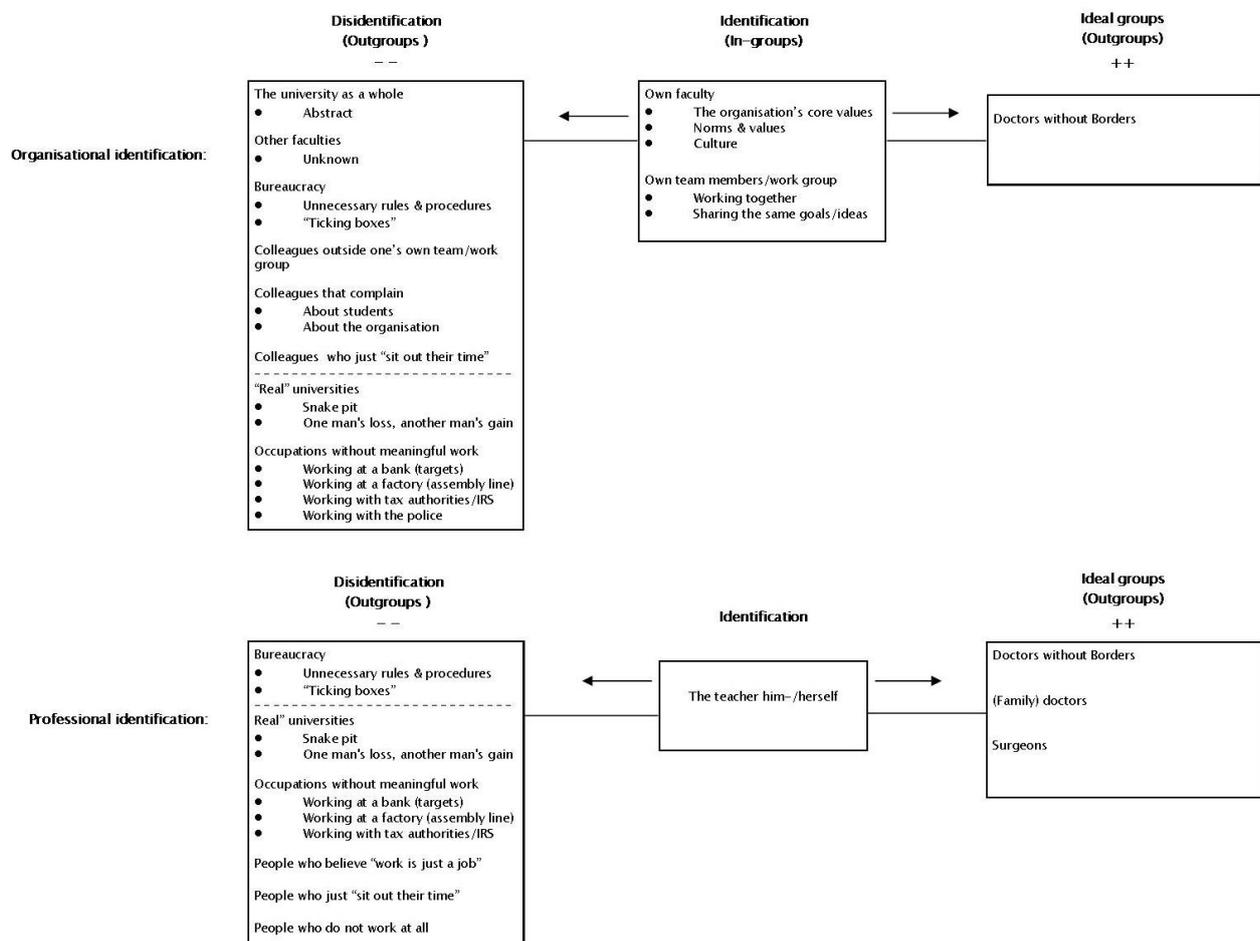
*"I find it terrible, I do not have a fun day when all I did was reciting. That's useless to me and it doesn't make me wiser."*

Teachers also want to develop new classes and educational programmes, would to like visit congresses sometimes and want to supervise students during internships or graduation phases. Several respondents therefore replied they do not really consider themselves teachers, but coaches.

“...so it's not like I'm not a teacher at all, but I'm more of a trainer than a teacher, [...] because I'm not an expert on the content. I'm much more into processes and that's what I notice now. So I'm much more a counsellor to the students. I'm constantly busy with what they want to achieve and what they are doing and what useful skills they would need to get there.”

The researcher found out that, when the respondents were asked what their work means to them or to what extent they felt a part of the organisation or their team, all respondents supported their answers by making identity claims. These claims also included, very specifically, groups they did identify with, (positive) ingroups, and groups they absolutely did not identify with or did not want to be associated with, the (negative) outgroups or groups of disidentification. The respondents were asked about their ingroups, however, they were not asked to name or define their outgroups. This disidentification occurred naturally when the respondents were asked about what groups they feel a part of and what their work means to them. By making identity claims, the teachers enhanced their own organisational or professional identity and in some cases also the meaningfulness of their work. Based upon these results, two models were created of organisational and professional identification. Their results are presented in figure 1 below. The models show the axes on which the groups of identification and disidentification are placed and how these relate to each other. This complements work from Christ et al. (2003). They argue that a career identification represents a personal level of categorisation and that a work unit/work group identification and an organisational identification represent a group level of identification. With organisational identification the teachers describe themselves in terms of groups they identify or do not identify with. With professional identification they describe how they see themselves as teachers and how this relates to other occupations in society. Some groups can be found on both axes as they enhance both organisational and professional identification.

**Figure 1: Organisational and professional identification and disidentification**



## Model 1: Organisational identification

### *Identification: ingroups*

The first question asked to the interviewees was “When you consider what your work means to you, what groups or parts of the your work environment are important to you?”. Besides the students, who were all named first, the teachers all answered “my colleagues” and “my faculty”. Not all colleagues are equally important. A very clear distinction is made based upon collaboration (Who do I need in my courses?) and content (the work itself and tasks). Colleagues in the ingroup are those people one collaborates with in a work group or team. The connection is derived from the content of the course(s) they teach, such as English (the English team), or the content of the project they work at. Together the teachers decide on the content of the courses, they serve as each other’s sounding boards and help each other if needed. In these teams, people really depend on each other and need each other to give good classes or to do their work properly, hence, to be good teachers. Regularly, these teams share the same goals and ideas, which even fosters the connection and eventually identification, as people know from one another they pursue the same things. So their team really feels as a group. These results seem to fit the definition of a group “Groups can be defined as a collection of two or more people who are engaged in a common activity or share a common identity or goals” (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 101).

In some cases, colleagues are placed in the ingroup based upon non-work related items. Of course, on a more personal level one can also identify with a colleague, because they have the same back ground or went to the same university or followed the same educational courses or they simply just click. In those cases the teachers also seek ‘collaboration’ and turn to each other for help when they face difficulties of any kind. Sharing experiences is of great value. However, in both cases ‘collaboration’ is the key word. A few examples of the respondents:

*“[...] and of course what I like from that team is that we are, we come from everywhere, literally and also figuratively, uhhh for content, for nationalities, for way of working, uhhh we get along extremely well and and we know we have very much the common goal and that’s something [...] in general what you need is a common goal.”*

*“The English team, because we have a lot of contact with each other. It’s not only something in general, but also something specific regarding tasks, way of teaching, regarding not only work but also private life, so we have a lot of contact, collaboration with each other. That is important.”*

All respondents identify with the faculty to some extent. “I really feel at home here” or “I feel I am a member of the faculty” or “This feels like a warm bath” are usually mentioned by the teachers. Half of the respondents claim they identify with the corporate values of the faculty, because these overlap with their personal values. Consistent with work from Knippenberg and Sleebos (2006), the more values, norms and interests of the organisation lie within the self-concept, the more individuals will identify with the organisation.

*“From where I come from, the norms and values of the faculty are my norms and values.”*

Other teachers mentioned the faculty’s vision on several aspects (such as education in general or corporate culture) as something they identify with. Something all respondents mentioned is the open character of the faculty: it has a very friendly working environment. Everybody is very much involved in both work and each other’s personal lives. The corporate culture and way the faculty treats her students make the organisation unique.

*“I find the dynamism of the faculty and the way colleagues treat each other and the way students are*

*being treated [...] that really speaks to me. I don't really see that with other faculties."*

Besides, the faculty encourages its employees to keep educating themselves as well and to keep acquiring knowledge. The employees get sufficient room for this. Therefore the respondents consider the organisation a facilitator which helps them to achieve their important work goals (values): personal growth and fulfilment, appreciation and recognition, opportunities and challenging work and diversity in tasks. The same goes for the work groups and teams. Within these groups people share their ambitions and set goals, which helps the teachers to grow personally and to keep the work challenging. Teachers get appreciated by their colleagues and subsequently recognised for what they do by the students. With that, the faculty and the work groups/team play a role in the work meaning of the teachers to some extent. Together, the faculty and the direct colleagues also play a big role in the organisational identification of teachers, because their organisational identity is derived from these two groups.

This section complements findings from Brickson (2005) who argues that employees are more likely to find connections to work group members more meaningful than connections to other representatives from the organisation and that identification at the organisational level is mostly caused by the reciprocal relationships of employees. Within the teams, the teachers know what they can expect from one another as they pursue the same goals

### ***Groups of disidentification***

#### Within the organisation

Colleagues one does not collaborate with and/or groups one does not have anything in common with content wise, are placed in the outgroup. These groups put a great emphasis on the organisational identification of teachers, because they are mechanisms of disidentification. Besides mentioning groups or teams one feels part of or one identifies with, all respondents also named groups or parts of the organisation they did not identify with. These were all considered somewhat negative by the teachers and they do not want to be associated with that. They named the university as a whole, other faculties within the university, the bureaucracy of the university, colleagues outside one's own group, colleagues that complain and colleagues 'who just sit out their time'.

*"[...] people who just sit out their time....I had that in a previous job and I only stayed there for a short period of time as I was deeply unhappy there. I really cannot stand that!"*

The university as a whole is not something that is considered negative by the teachers, however most of them do not feel a part of the university. Their work is concentrated within their own faculty and therefore they have nothing to do with the bigger organisation. That is why the university is considered somewhat abstract by some respondents. The same is applicable to other faculties. Most of the teachers do not know which other faculties exist within the university or what it is they actually do. Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) had similar findings in their study and proclaim that limited personal exposure to or experience with organizational members in an antecedent of organisational disidentification.

*"No, I don't really have a connection with the university. Not that it's not a nice organisation, well it is my employer. When I think of the university I always think of X" (a member of the Board of Directors)*

*"We really are an island, I know nothing about the other faculties. I don't know a single colleague from another faculty."*

*"...because you barely work across borders. I actually only work at my faculty, I hardly know the other*

*faculties and I have nothing to do with people from other faculties. I don't feel involved."*

Only when a teacher takes place in a university-wide project (outside the faculty), he/she identifies more with the university. They get to know other people within the bigger organisation and get to know more about the work other faculties or other departments do. These teachers know the bigger organisation better. One could state that unknown is unloved. However, when the teachers are asked about the work they do or where they work, all respondents would name the university as their employer. Although they do not all feel a part of the organisation, the brand name is known with most people and therefore gives an immediate idea of where they work.

The university's bureaucracy is also something the teachers do not identify with. They recognise some rules and regulations have to exist to maintain the university's legitimacy. However, most respondents feel the university is too much organised, which enhances feelings of bureaucracy and hierarchy. The teachers think the majority of the rules or procedures are unnecessary and feel they sometimes are just busy ticking boxes. This complements earlier findings from, amongst others, Mintzberg (1983) and Martin and Siehl (1983) who say that although an individual may identify with the organisation, they could still disagree with particular processes, strategies, systems of authority, et cetera.

*"We are so cramped because of all the rules. Education has not improved as far as I'm concerned by recording everything in all kinds of procedures and deadlines and manuals and guide lines and regulations [...] Sometimes it's like working in a factory, [...] keepings lists and ticking boxes hinders me from developing my knowledge."*

Within the faculty, teachers identify less or do not identify at all with colleagues from other teams. This also goes for sub-teams within bigger teams. The bigger teams are part of the organisational structure in which all teachers are placed. These bigger teams also consist of sub-teams. Content wise, the teachers have no relation with the other (sub-)teams and therefore do not feel a connection. In some cases this is caused by the place of those teams and sub-teams within the organisation or the curriculum. The language teams for instance are placed at the edge of the curriculum and are not as much intertwined within the educational programmes. The teachers in the educational teams (bigger teams) have nothing in common with the language teachers (sub-teams) content wise and therefore consider them less important. This also applies the other way around. Due to the place of the languages within the curriculum, the language teachers are automatically dependent on each other and therefore they consider their own team as the most important one in the work environment. They have nothing in common with the teachers in the educational programmes and therefore do not identify with them. Again, this also complement the findings from Brickson (2005).

*"I'm part of an educational team. Some colleagues, for instance, who teach languages who are also part of this team, you hardly or don't have anything in common with them. Of course you can have a nice cup of coffee with them, but you don't talk to each other about the content."*

The respondents also do not identify with colleagues who complain about students or the organisation. The respondents feel that one is responsible for his/her own actions and should therefore always try to figure out what is going on and try to do something about the situation. If they do not, they should probably go elsewhere. Besides, the teachers do not identify with colleagues who just sit out their time and wait for their retirement. The respondents like working with teachers who are also motivated and still ambitious to achieve something. If a colleague has a different attitude or different opinion about that or would like to stay in the comfort zone, no achievements can be made. Hence, these colleagues are not as desirable to work with.

### In broader society

With regards to organisational identification, other organisations were also mentioned, where the teachers rather not work. Organisations as banks, the police, factories and the IRS were mentioned. By mentioning these organisation, the teachers put an emphasis on the identification with their university of applied sciences. They believe their organisation is more valuable to society than the other organisations and the work that is been done in the other organisations will not be as fulfilling as their work.

*"I like working in a building where knowledge is important, where it is the core business and in which form, whether you are here to share it or just want to gain it or want to multiply or renew it, I don't know. I would be very unhappy working with the IRS."*

*"That's something I find really important... an informal work environment, diversity, independence, autonomy. If I would work with police I would go crazy."*

"Real" universities were also mentioned. The respondents make a clear distinction between their own university of applied sciences and "real" universities. They believe that at real universities, all people do is research. Besides, there is competition between teachers about doing research and publishing research. As on the of respondents said: *"At real universities...one man's loss is another man's gain."* Another respondent even named it a snake pit. According to Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001), "the perception that the organisations reputation may affect one's personal reputation" (p. 399) is one of the antecedents of organisational disidentification. With the participants in this study this also seems to be case as they view their own university as very distinct from a "real" university. They do not want to be associated with "real" universities. With universities of applied sciences there is more than just doing research, so there is no pressure to do research. The teachers believe their work is better balanced, as they get to teach, supervise students, develop new programmes and do research if they like.

*"...Why again that university? What is fun about the elbowing and the snake pit, temporary contracts, never certainties, what is the charm of that? And then I think 'no', not for me. If other people do feel good and happy about that, that's fine, but not for me."*

### **Ideal groups**

Some teachers also named Doctors without Borders as an "ideal" organisation that really changes the world. The teachers believe that the work they do with the university has contributions towards society, but it is not life changing. Doctors without Borders is an organisation that does even better and nobler work. As one of the respondents said:

*"I find people who for Doctors without Borders, yeah they really try to make a world a better place. I think that's not really what I do"*

The teachers recognise the importance of the university in its region and they also support the goal of the university wanting to become an internationally well-known university of applied sciences. However, there are other organisations that make contributions to society that are more meaningful than the contributions of the university. That is why these ideal organisations are outgroups, because they are placed at a different level and it is not something the teachers identify with. It is more of an aspired identity (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

## Model 2: Professional identification

### *Identification*

With regards to professional identification, the teacher him-/herself is placed in the middle of the axis. That is the place the teachers sees him-/herself in relation to the other two groups. The teachers are proud to be teachers as their work contributes to society. They also derive meaning from it as they are meaningful to others. Tickle (2000) already stated that professional identity not only refers to what society believes a teacher should be, but also *“to what teachers themselves find important in their professional work and lives based on both their experiences in practice and their personal background”* (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 108). A few participants said:

*“I am proud of the work I do, because I believe it is meaningful. You take people somewhere.”*

*“I am a teacher and I like telling people that. To me it feels like I am someone, I am teacher.”*

As stated before, many of the participant do not see themselves as teachers in the definition of someone who teaches and spends their time in front of the classroom. They also see themselves as student counsellors or coaches or researchers or educational developers as that is also a great part of the job. They became teachers to share their knowledge with students and to help students in their development. Some participants also replied they became teachers as they wanted to work in an organisation where knowledge is the central issue.

*“I do see myself as a teacher, but a teacher doesn’t necessarily always has to in front of the classroom. A teacher can also work with students in consultations on-to-one or with groups.”*

*“I came to notice recently that teachers are also often the senders, so one direction only. Then I think ‘ow no I don’t commit myself to that, that’s not for me.”*

When the participants talk to other people about their occupation, most of them say ‘I am a teacher’ or ‘I teach’. They do not use the words ‘counsellor’ or ‘coach’. “Teacher” gives a clear image of what it is they do and does not need any explanations. However, some of the respondents do use these words and say ‘I coach and I teach’, another respondents says ‘I work at a university of applied sciences and then continues to say she teaches. Besides, there are a few participants who elaborate more on the different aspects of the job. So apparently, teachers nowadays start explaining more about the different aspects of the job and the different roles they have as they do more than just teach.

*“Ohh well I say I teach, do research and that I am a student career counsellor or mentor. [...] So mentor, counselling students with their thesis, internships and as a research teacher, so to me it’s an ideal combination of teaching and individual counselling in conversations with students.”*

### ***Groups of disidentification***

#### Within the organisation

To put an emphasis on their professional identity and also their the meaningfulness of their work, the participants named aspects of their job they do not identify with. This is mostly caused by the bureaucracy of the organisation. Teachers get involved is certain processes or procedures of which they sometimes feel hinder from doing their primary tasks: teaching and coaching. The teachers describe these tasks as the ‘need to’s’.

*“The least satisfied I am about certain procedures, the Examination Board, checking students’ obtained study credits if they are allowed to start with their thesis [...] those really are the ‘need to’s’ and*

*sometimes you have to let students down because of a particular decision you made, but well that's also part of the job [...] but for me that could be left out."*

#### In broader society

Most teachers included other professions or other employers in their statements of which they believe have no meaning towards society, as they, as teachers, do have a meaning towards society or will not be as fulfilling as their work. They named working at a bank, working in a factory and working with the IRS. The teachers were not asked about this. This disidentification occurred naturally. Within this disidentification, stereotyping is the keyword, which is also suggested by Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001). The teachers view the members of the organisations they named as homogeneous groups. They all based their opinions upon the ideas of what the other work or employer would be like. Some statements in the answers were:

*"I've always wanted to contribute to society. I would not be able to work with a bank or something, or in an environment where financial stuff or targets are important and kpi's, I would be deeply deeply unhappy."*

*"If I would have a very superficial job, you know, that I would work in a logistic centre or something, just packing boxes in trucks all day long, [...] that would make me miserable."*

Also some respondents compared themselves and their university of applied sciences to "real" universities. They would not be able to work at a "real" university because of hearing stories about pressure to publish research, fighting mentalities and one man's loss is another man's gain. One respondent even named it a snake pit. They do not identify with that and are happy to work at a university of applied science, because of a better balance between teaching classes and doing research.

*"I don't know if I should work at a real university, if I have to believe the stories. The fighting mentality rules and there is pressure to publish. I don't know if I would feel as much at home there."*

Outside of the organisation teachers also do not identify with people who just sit out their time, for the same reasons as within the organisation. The teachers believe it is important to maintain a meaningful job and to keep on developing personally. Work is a means to do this and work offers them an identity, that of a teacher in this case. That is why work would never be just a job or just a way to make a living. Work means and offers so much than that. Some teachers find it difficult to understand some people might perceive their work this way.

*".....whereas I realise now that work can also be just work to some people. 'The thing I do between 9-17 to pay the bills and to do fun stuff elsewhere' and that's fine too. Although I find it hard to have that mentality within education. I cannot imagine that you would work at an assembly line and think 'this is what I do between 9-17, but I don't see the purpose.'"*

Besides naming other professions or organisations the teachers dis-identify with, most respondents also dis-identify with people who do not work at all. People who do not have a job have no meaning or contributions towards society. None of the respondents would therefore stop working if they would win the lottery, because the satisfaction and meaningfulness derived from working and the social relevance and involvement would disappear, causing major effects on their identity.

*"Just doing something and being able to say that you do something, it's also some kind of status. How does it sound when you say 'I just sit at home doing nothing'? Come on! You're young and you need to something!"*

*"It has to do with meaningfulness. I mean, you could stop working now, but as an individual I believe you should keep some significance in society. If you don't have that, I find that a little pathetic."*

### ***Ideal groups***

When the teachers were asked to define what their work means to them, all answered their work is meaningful because they get to help students with their personal and professional development and therefore they are involved in society. They believe it is important to be of social relevance in their lives. Being a teacher, helps them to achieve that. However, a few teachers answered their work is not as meaningful or important as that of doctors, surgeons or people who work for Doctors without Borders. A some of the teachers answered:

*"I find people who for Doctors without Borders, yeah they really try to make a world a better place. I think that's not really what I do. Maybe that's why I do voluntary work."*

*"With questions like that I always think, well, if I had become a heart surgeon, my life would have been more meaningful because of my work than it is now."*

With these statements, the teachers point out their work is important and meaningful to them. Being a teacher means something. However, there are other occupations that are considered "to be higher, better or nobler than the one they currently occupy" (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001, p. 356). These occupations can be seen as 'aspirational identities'. Markus and Nurius (1986) say that aspirational identities or 'future identities' are described as 'the ideal selves that we would very much like to become' (p. 954). With a few teachers this could be case. One of them even said she does voluntary work, which also gives her a feeling of contributing to a better world. Doctors or surgeons change people's lives and with that the personal life of the doctors would become more meaningful as well. These teachers do not believe their work really changes lives, nevertheless, they do contribute to society so some extent.

### **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

The aim of this study was of an exploratory nature to find out how teachers would identify with their profession and their organisation today and what their work means to them. The profession of teaching has changed much over the past few years and nowadays teachers have to be able to much more than just teach. To establish and emphasise their identity and also the meaningfulness of their work, all interviewees mentioned outgroups, i.e. groups they do not identify with. Therefore in the process of identification disidentification plays an important role. Disidentification should be seen as a mechanism of identification and identity work. As suggested by Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001), the primary identity of a group may be defined by exclusion from another group or category. With the teachers in this study this is also the case. By comparing themselves or their groups to other groups, the other groups get excluded in favour of their own group or themselves. By doing so, the teachers emphasised their own identity with the organisation and with the profession and also the meaningfulness of their work. Besides groups who are negatively rated, the teachers also mentioned groups that have an ideal, positive identity. These groups are more valuable to society as they dramatically change the lives of many people, which exceeds the work of the teachers. So outgroups are needed in order to be able to categorise one's own place within society. This is consistent with work from Brewer (1991) who says an outgroup serves a critical reference point to determine the in-group and separate it from other groups. Overall, this study shows how teachers see themselves in the organisation today and how they see themselves with regards to their profession.

Regarding their professional identification, there are several parts of the job the teachers do not identify with. This is caused by the bureaucracy of the university, which involves the teachers in

particular processes or procedures they have to go through or causing them to “tick boxes”, as some of the participants said. They also do not identify with professions of which they believe do not contribute to society or that do not have a fulfilling job, such as working with a bank or working in a factory at an assembly line. People who choose to not work at all were also mentioned. Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) already spoke about organisational disidentification, i.e. defining who you are by what you are not. Based upon the results of this study, the theory can be expanded by adding ‘professional disidentification’. The definition would be twofold: 1) those aspects of the job one does not identify with and 2) a distinction between one’s professional identity and the perception of an identity of another professional.

Scientific literature has written much about the identification with different roles teachers have in their profession and in their organisation, such as a teacher (who teaches) and a counsellor (e.g. Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Besides, they also have to perform tasks or roles that are part of the job and they do not like to do, but that the organisation demands of them. The teachers in this study also talk about the different roles they have and that they do not consider themselves as ‘teachers who only teach and spend their time in front of the classroom’. This suggests that the organisational and professional identification of teachers is somewhat flexible of which can be concluded that the place the teachers have on the axes of identification (in the centre) may also move to the left or to the right towards the outgroups, based upon the role the teacher would have at a particular moment. When a teacher would be busy ticking boxes, he/she would place him-/herself more towards the groups of disidentification as that task would be considered less meaningful or even meaningless. When the teacher is counselling students, he/she would place him-/herself more towards the ideal group as that task is considered meaningful. This complements findings from, amongst others, Beijaard et al. (2004) who explain that professional identification is an ongoing process. In this study, the teacher often makes considerations of who they are and who they are not. This suggests that individuals constantly evaluate and create possible selves.

In the case of organisational identification, the outgroups mentioned were mostly co-workers teachers do not have a work relationship with or do not collaborate with. Also the bigger organisation outside the faculty (the university itself) and other faculties were outgroups, because they are unknown. Some respondents even called the bigger organisation ‘abstract’. In the introduction it was stated that just the assignment of an individual to a group would be enough to generate intergroup discrimination (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This study shows that that is not always the case, since not all teachers identify with the bigger team they are placed in or even the bigger organisation. It is very important that people experience the same values and beliefs within their group. Based upon that categorisations are made. However, the teachers do not identify with the sub-team that is part of the bigger team as this is where they share values. Nevertheless, the bigger team and sub-team do not always have anything in common content wise and therefore there is no connection. Within the university or the faculty, the respondents do also not identify with the rules and procedures or the bureaucracy of the organisation. Most respondents feel that there are too many rules and many of them serve no purpose.

The meaningfulness of work was mostly emphasised when naming the outgroups related to professional identification. The participants explain that because they are teachers they are relevant to society, which is important and which is something the other occupations do not have. One can conclude from this that the meaningfulness teachers perceive from their work is mostly derived from their professional identification and not so much from organisational identification. Rosso et al. (2010) argue that belonging to or identifying with a social group through work may enhance the perceived work meaningfulness, because of feelings of shared identities or beliefs. To some extent this also applies to the participants in this study, as they view their organisation and also their work groups as facilitators, who help them to achieve their important work goals (values): personal growth and

fulfilment, appreciation and recognition, opportunities and challenging work and diversity in tasks. They need them to be able to do their work properly. However, the most important group in the teachers' work environment is the student, as the teachers say 'That's what you do it for'. The students are inextricably linked to the teachers' professional identity, because their job would not exist without the students. The meaningfulness of their work is therefore mostly derived from this group, as they get to help students in both their personal and professional development, which gives a lot of energy and is very satisfying. This is where they make contributions to society and that is where meaningful is derived. The participants say the organisation does not play a role in that. The organisation and colleagues are needed to achieve certain goals and to maintain job satisfaction. The meaningfulness of work is derived from working with students. Here, the teachers seem to underestimate the importance of their work groups, as they explained before that their work groups serve as sounding boards and that this is where the teachers help each other if needed. In these teams, people really depend on each other and need each other to give good classes or to do their work properly. One can conclude from this that teachers need their work groups to be good teachers. Without these groups they may not be able to their work as properly and therefore may not be able to be the good coaches for the students. Besides, these work groups would not exist without the organisation. With that, the organisation and work groups do seem to play a role in the meaningfulness perceived through work as suggested by Rosso et al. (2010).

In the case of professional identification, this study shows some aspects of the construct overlap with those of work meaning and vice versa. When asking the teachers about what their work means to them, all answered their work is very important to them because they help students in their (personal) development and therefore they are of great value not only to the students, but also to broader society, because eventually the students will enter the labour market after graduating. To emphasise the importance of their job and their identity, other employers or occupations were mentioned of which the teachers believed had less or no meaning towards society or are less fulfilling. With that, the teachers already stated themselves their identity is related to their work meaning to some extent. The aspect of overlap here is the social relevance: 'I am a teacher and therefore I am relevant to society' and 'my job is meaningful to me as I am relevant to society'. So the overlap lies in the values gained from working, i.e. the meaningfulness of work. Values of what one wants to achieve in life, for instance through working, touches the concept of identity, as that not only explains who you are, but also what you want to become in life. However, both concepts in principle remain distinct. Professional identification refers to the extent one identifies with his/her job, such as 'I am a teacher'. Basically, this does not say anything about how one views his job or what his beliefs are about the job. So one's work meaning cannot immediately be derived from this, such as 'my work is to pay the bills'.

Morse and Weiss (1955) already wrote about work being more than just simply a means of making money or earning a living. Their study shows that, even when people do not have to worry about their financial position, they still would want to keep their job. Working gave the respondents "*a feeling of being tied into the larger society, of having something to do, of having a purpose in life*" (Morse & Weiss, 1955, p. 191). Consistent with earlier notions from Davidson & Caddell (1994) and Wrzesniewski (2003), the profession of teaching is chosen based upon a motivation that comes from within and wanting to contribute to society. However, whether this profession can still be viewed as a calling today would be worth investigating. Most of the teachers in this study were quite new to the profession. They decided later on their careers they wanted to become a teacher. The social relevance of their job is very important to them. However, one could also state that being a teacher is a means to get this social relevance, thus this could also be obtained from other jobs. As the bureaucracy of the organisation was determined as an outgroup quite distinct, this could become intolerable on the long term, increasing the teachers intentions to leave (Ashforth et al., 2008; Chattopadhyay et al., 2004; Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006).

From this study can also be concluded that teachers in higher education do not mind the changing society or educational reforms that much, as they desire diversity in tasks and challenging work. This seems to place findings from Beijaard et al., (2004) in perspective. They argue that, due to these educational changes, the personal part of teachers' professional identity should always be considered as they may interfere with teachers' personal needs and what they experience as good. This could lead to conflicts between their personal identity and professional identity. However, changes such as innovating or developing new educational programmes are mostly considered good changes, as the teachers get challenged to come up with new programmes. So the impact of the change should be considered here, as for the teachers in this study, such a change does not dramatically alter their professional identity. Perhaps the findings from Beijaard et al. are more applicable to teachers who have been teachers for many years. They probably experienced more changes that could interfere with their personal needs, as there have been quite some changes in their job tasks in the past two decades. The teachers in this study have not been teachers for that long. Besides, people who would choose the profession of teaching nowadays do not want to spend their time just teaching. Work should also create personal fulfilment. Most satisfaction is derived from helping students achieving something. This not only happens in class, but also during supervision outside of the classroom. To help students in their development, teachers have to keep educating themselves as well. Personal fulfilment is therefore of great value to the teachers. They get this from diverse and challenging job responsibilities where their talents are being seen and employed. This is how they preserve job satisfaction.

One note should be placed in this chapter. As can be seen in appendix A, the questionnaire also contains questions regarding one's generation (baby boomers, generation X and generation Y). In the original design of this study, one of the aims was also to investigate to what extent one feels part of his/her generation and if generation would play a role in one's work meaning. After the first round of analysis, it appeared that generation did not play a role in the (work)lives of the participants. Most of the respondents did not even know what 'generation' meant, let alone, they were a part of their generation. Therefore, the generation part was eventually left out of this study.

### **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This research contributes to the extensive literature on the organisational and professional identification. This research shows how teachers see themselves today and that disidentification is an important aspect in the identification process. Also, professional disidentification was defined, which the teachers use to establish and emphasise their professional identities. Scientific research in this topic is quite new, where organisational disidentification has received more attention since the last decade (e.g. Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

The teachers described several roles they have as teachers and in the organisation. They perform roles they choose themselves, but also have to perform roles the organisation makes available to them or ask them to perform. Therefore, when hiring teachers, organisations should make sure the particular teacher mostly gets to perform roles and tasks he/she likes to do or is passionate about. Of course every job comes with certain tasks people do not like to do, but have to do as its part of the job. However, the work should be balanced out. The more roles or tasks a teacher has in the organisation, the bigger the chance they get involved in more bureaucratic procedures. As bureaucracy is an outgroup, it is important they do not constantly run into this, as this may increase intentions to leave (Ashforth et al., 2008; Chattopadhyay et al., 2004; Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006).

This research has also shown the importance of work groups/teams. Especially for beginning teachers it is very important they can consult their work groups or ask them or help if they need it. As the participants said themselves, they really need their colleagues to do their work properly. Organisations should therefore facilitate opportunities for teachers to get together with their colleagues, so they can

consult their colleagues, evaluate the classes they teach and discuss with each other what should be changed if necessary. Teachers find that very important as this helps them to grow personally and because they find appreciation and recognition with their colleagues.

## LIMITATIONS

This study has a few limitations. First of all, no second researcher was used to also code and analyse the data. A second coder may track other items as relevant, which were missed by the first researcher. Therefore it is not possible to perform a Cohen's Kappa to measure the agreement between two observers.

Second, from this research can be concluded that professional and organisational identification of teachers is flexible to some extent as teachers perform several roles as teachers and within their organisation. Whether the teachers also view their identities as flexible as well, was not part of the investigation. Future research could take this into consideration as well and try to find out to what extent the teachers themselves see their identities as flexible. Besides the two models leave room for investigating to what extent professional and organisational identification overlap. The disidentification aspects (i.e. the outgroups) overlap for the greater part. Could that also be case with the identification part? As the teachers said themselves, they perform several roles within the organisation. Could it be these roles could all be placed upon the same axis? That would shed new lights upon the concepts of professional and organisational identification.

Third, this study focussed on teachers that were quite new to the university and it turned out most of them were also quite new to the profession. Future research should therefore elaborate on the subject of identity claims, as the majority of the respondents were not teachers before they started working at the university. Would they have made the same claims in the past, before becoming teachers at a university of applied sciences? Or would they made the same claims if they had chosen another profession? Would working at a bank or with the IRS also be considered less meaningful or meaningless then?

Fourth, the mentioned outgroups were not part of the investigation. Future research could also research how they would identify themselves, how they view themselves in society, what their work means to them and what they consider as outgroups and why. And how they view the teacher. Next, one can investigate the comparisons and differences between the two studies and come up with a more integrated model including motives, values or beliefs for identification and disidentification. Another suggestion for future research is that the current research should be conducted again within a broader perspective, so the model can be tested in other universities as well. A next step then would be to test it and if necessary adjust it to other organisations and/or professions as well. The researcher wonders if the model presented could be applicable within others universities or organisations as well.

For future research it would also be worth investigating how teachers, who have been teachers for quite some years, look at their work and what they find important. The respondents answered that people 'who just sit out their time' form an outgroup. To maintain the effectiveness in organisations, it could help to find out what older generations seek in their work and think of their work. Next, comparisons can be made with teachers quite new to the job to spot any differences.

A final limitation in this study is that cultural differences were not considered, although several teachers from different cultural background participated. Future research should take cultural differences into consideration, because views on work and working could differ between countries. Studies about the effects of cultural differences on individuals behaviours and perceptions in the workplace have been performed extensively (e.g. Hofstede, 1980; Taras et al. 2010; Trompenaars,

1993). Rosso et al. (2010) for instance, describe research that shows how Japanese employees have much more positive views towards work than employees from other countries, as they work more hours per week and put work more central in their lives. Besides, personal benefits from doing work are considered less important as they focus on the collective benefits. Also more research should be done about the role of the organisation in the meaning of work. This was already stated by Rosso et al. (2010). The current research does contribute to that to some extent, since the respondents describe their organisation, and also their direct colleagues to some extent, as a facilitator who helps them to achieve certain goals, such as personal fulfilment and appreciation. However, future research should elaborate more on how memberships in different groups affect perceptions of meaningfulness, as it turns out, the work groups and also the organisation are more important than the teachers seem to realise.

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## APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE INTERVIEWS

1. When you consider what your work means to you, what groups or parts of the your work environment are important to you then and why?"
2. To what extent do you feel part of the groups you just mentioned and why?
3. Which group is most important group to you and why?

When the category work group/team, organisation and/or generation is not mentioned, ask the participant about this/these group(s).

4. You did not mention..... Why is that? To what extent do you feel part of that group?

➔ Continue with the questions below. It could be a question should be dropped, in case het participant already answered that question before.

### Identification with the organisation

5. Do you work for the university or your faculty? Could you explain your answer?
6. What kind of organisation is this? How would you describe it?
7. Why did you choose this organisation?
8. Does this organisation suit you? Why does it (not)?
9. To what extent do you feel part of the organisation? Why and could you give some examples?

### Identification with work group/team

10. Who or what is your work group/team?
11. What kind of team is that? How would you describe it?
12. To what extent do you feel part of your work group/team? Why and could you give some examples?

### Identification with generation

13. What characterises your generation of teachers? Why and could you give some examples?
14. To what extent do you feel part of your generation (baby boomers/generation X/generation Y)? Why and could you give some examples?

### Job satisfaction → work meaning

15. When you are at a part for instance, what do you say to other people about your work? If people ask you what it is that you do, what do you say?
16. How do people react?
17. Why did you become a teacher?
18. What make you the most satisfied about your work? And what makes you least satisfied? Why?
19. What does your work mean to you?
20. What makes your work important or meaningful?
21. Which work values are important to you and why? (a list with examples was present)
22. What role does the organisation play in this?
23. What role does your work group/team play in this?
24. *Depending on the answer to question 4:* What role does your generation play in this?
25. What do you think your colleagues from the other two generations find important? And how would they differ from one another?
26. Would you stop working if you would win the lottery? Why would you (not)?

Final question:

27. Would you say your life has become more meaningful because of the work you do? Why (not)?

## APPENDIX B: CODING SCHEME

|    | Question  | Code   |
|----|---|--|
| 1  | When you consider what your work means to you, what groups or parts of the your work environment are important to you then and why?". | Important teams/work groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Working together</li> <li>- Dependent on the content</li> </ul>   |
| 2  | To what extent do you feel part of the groups you just mentioned and why?   | Part of team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Part of Spanish team</li> <li>- Part of more teams</li> <li>- Part of English tem</li> <li>- Etc.</li> </ul>   |
| 3  | Which group is most important group to you and why?   | Most important team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Depending on individuals</li> <li>- Preference for particular people</li> <li>- Dependent on the content</li> </ul>   |
| 4  | Do you work for the university or your faculty? Could you explain your answer?  | Faculty = my organisation<br>X = employer<br>X = bigger organisation<br>X = abstract   |
| 5  | What kind of organisation is this? How would you describe it?   | Description organisation   |
| 6  | Why did you choose this organisation?   | Choice organisation/faculty  |
| 7  | Does this organisation suit you? Why does it (not)?   | Organisation suits me  |
| 8  | To what extent do you feel part of the organisation? Why and could you give some examples?  | Part of organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Organisational identification</li> <li>- Overlap personal values</li> </ul>  |
| 9  | Who or what is your work group/team?  | Most important team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Depending on individuals</li> <li>- Preference for particular people</li> <li>- Dependent on the content</li> </ul>   |
| 10 | What kind of team is that? How would you describe it?   | Description team/work group  |
| 11 | To what extent do you feel part of your work group/team? Why and could you give some examples?  | Part of team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Common goal/mission</li> <li>- Common theme</li> <li>- Commitment</li> <li>- Working together</li> </ul><br>Depending on individuals<br>Preference for particular people<br>Dependent on the content |
| 12 | To what extent do you feel part of your generation (baby boomers/generation X/generation Y)? Why and could you give some examples?    | No generational identification<br>No part of generation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Generation = life phase</li> <li>- Recognition generational members</li> </ul>  |
| 13 | What characterises your generation of teachers?   | Description generation   |

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|    | Why and could you give some examples?  |   |
| 14 | When you are at a part for instance, what do you say to other people about your work? If people ask you what it is that you do, what do you say? | I teach<br>I am a teacher<br>Recognition organisation (I work at X)   |
| 15 | How do people react?   | Positive reaction   |
| 16 | Why did you become a teacher?  | Reason of becoming a teacher  |
| 17 | What make you the most satisfied about your work? Why?   | Satisfied <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Terms of employment</li> <li>- Opportunities</li> <li>- Possibilities</li> </ul> |
|    | And what makes you least satisfied? Why?   | Unsatisfied<br>Unsatisfied about rules and procedures   |
| 18 | What does your work mean to you?   | Work meaning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Socially involved</li> <li>- Helping others in their development</li> </ul>   |
| 19 | What makes your work important or meaningful?  | Fulfilment  |
| 20 | Which work values are important to you and why?  | Important work values   |
| 21 | What role does the organisation play in this?  | Role organisation work meaning  |
| 22 | What role does your work group/team play in this?  | Role team/work group work meaning   |
| 23 | What do you think your colleagues from the other two generations find important? And how would they differ from one another?                     | Differences generations   |
| 24 | Would you stop working if you would win the lottery? Why would you (not)?  | Working less  |
| 25 | Would you say your life has become more meaningful because of the work you do? Why (not)?  | Work meaning = life meaning<br>Work meaning regarding society   |