

## Pamphlet: United for academic education

### Lecturers in a tight corner, academic education under pressure

The past few decades have seen increasing numbers of young people starting an academic education. This is positive for all those students wishing to quench their thirst for knowledge and improve their chances of success in society. It is also good news for the rest of society. Our complex modern society and globally competitive economy requires large numbers of highly qualified people. Universities are proud of the large numbers of students they have welcomed in recent years. And we are proud of our academic staff who have done an impressive job in educating all these people, because the funding universities receive from the government has been lagging far behind the rising student population.<sup>1</sup> This has resulted in significantly more students per lecturer and a sharp increase in work pressure.<sup>2</sup>

The quality of Dutch university education is excellent and of an international standard.<sup>3</sup> Yet this quality is coming under pressure following year after year of falling financing. It appears that a bottom has been reached. Our students, our staff, society, politicians, we as organisations: we yearn for more individual attention, greater depth, more innovation in education. Not only is this possible, it is necessary. But it will require some hard choices.

Universities cannot be expected to offer higher education to ever more students at higher standards of quality with ever diminishing resources. Our academic personnel, as both educators and researchers, are being required to do more and more in less time. The pressure to publish is enormous. This pressure is in part self-imposed and an issue we need to address. But the pressure to secure research funding is also unrelenting. The intense competition has reduced the likelihood of a fee, which is sometimes just 20%.<sup>4</sup> It is a waste of valuable time and energy. And researchers' expectations for valorising their knowledge keep rising. Then there is the administrative burden created by education and research evaluations, a burden that has only increased in the last few years.

As a result of the increased pressure of work, contact between lecturers and students has suffered. Yet a university is more than just a place of learning. It is a place where people meet and collaborate; a place where you participate in an academic community, where people know who you are. Academic education should challenge students to look further, question existing solutions and thus find new solutions for today's and tomorrow's problems. Academic education is more than transferring knowledge alone, but also participating in knowledge acquisition. In other words, education is embedded in research. It is the acquisition of skills that will stand you in good stead in a rapidly changing world: processing and analysing huge amounts of information in a short time, and clearly formulating and writing down your findings. To acquire these skills, students need individual feedback. Also with the increasing digitisation of education, interpersonal contact will remain vital.

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1 Whereas in 2000 the government grant per student was still €19,600, in 2014 this government grant was just €14,300 (both figures based on 2014 price levels). Source of government grant: letters from the Ministries of Education, Culture and Science and of Economic Affairs. Source of price indices: CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis/Macroeconomic Outlooks.

2 It is difficult to say exactly how the staff-student ratio has developed in the past few decades. A lot depends on which figures you use and for which period. It is clear, however, that there are more students per lecturer at universities in 2015 than was the case in the nineteen-nineties. In fact, student numbers have grown by 60% since the end of the 90s (Source: VSNU/Statistics Netherlands, 1cHO2014), while academic teaching staff increased their numbers by just 14% in the same period (Source: VSNU WOPI).

3 With respect to the quality of higher education, the Netherlands was third of the 144 countries surveyed for the 2014-2015 Global Competitiveness Index of the World Economic Forum.

4 NWO Strategie 2015-2018 Uitwerking, <http://www.nwo.nl/over-nwo/X+publicatie/nwo/strategienota-2015-2018-uitwerking.html>. De Goede, M., Belder, R. and De Jonge, J. (2013). Academic Careers in the Netherlands 2013. Facts & Figures 7. The Hague: Rathenau Institute

### **Additional resources present an opportunity**

From 2018, universities will gradually receive more funding with the introduction of the student loan system.<sup>5</sup> This funding will allow us to undertake some of the overdue maintenance in education caused by years of insufficient funding. It particularly presents an opportunity to reduce the lecturer workload. In fact, universities wish to use this money first and foremost to hire more lecturers so that class sizes can be reduced and the level of teaching intensified. Because teaching and research are closely intertwined, it is vital that these lecturers are also able spend a portion of their time on research.

We intend to raise the value attached to teaching responsibilities by emphasising them more highly in a lecturer's academic career. But this will only be possible by simultaneously easing the pressure on research performance. In addition, we intend to reduce the number of temporary contracts and have already included the necessary arrangements for accomplishing this in the collective labour agreement which was concluded in late 2014.<sup>6</sup> Over the next three years, the universities will draw on their reserves to already invest 200 million euros in education to ensure that all students can benefit from improved quality starting now. The universities are currently discussing the appropriate measures to be taken with their representative advisory bodies.

### **United for quality of education**

The quality of the education provided will in large measure be determined by the dedication and input of the students themselves. With the resources made available through the student loan system, universities want to create smaller classrooms where lectures have more time for individual contact with students. In return, the universities expect students to challenge themselves, each other and their lecturers to strive for their full potential.

In the period ahead, we will be debating these matters in the university community: what do we need to continue to offer the academic education we all believe in? What is clear is that we require more 'shoulders to the wheel'. If this condition is met, we will have more scope to make our education ready for the future. Online teaching methods, for instance, are now firmly established, but developments are moving at a rapid pace and require major investments and the efforts of staff and students alike.

This discussion between staff, students and administrators at each university must result in an individual education investment agenda that is used as a basis for allocating the funds brought in by the student loan system. This may well lead to a variety of priorities and choices since no two universities are the same.

Just as important for raising the quality of education is the further professional autonomy of lecturers. Lecturers must once again be in control of their disciplines and programmes. Visitations and accreditations have created a huge administrative burden and a culture of distrust. Too often university boards have translated external accountability obligations into burdensome monitoring mechanisms in their own organisations where this need not have been the case. We need to correct this.

Reinforcing ownership is an important subject of discussion, both from an internal perspective and in terms of the relationship with the government. We ask the government to accord the autonomy of universities greater respect. Partly with that in mind, we have been arguing for some time for accreditation at the institutional level, so that programme evaluations can again be optimally deployed as improvement tools and

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<sup>5</sup> University revenues generated by the Student Loan Act (*wet Studievoorschot*) will increase from 76 million euros in 2018 to 288 million euros in 2035, after which these revenues are set to fall gradually and stabilise at 236 million euros in 2065.

<sup>6</sup> Collective Labour Agreement Dutch Universities, 1 January 2015 to 1 July 2016

accountability regarding education quality becomes a matter dealt with at the institutional level.

### **Great ambitions**

Even with additional resources for education, we will still be faced with difficult choices. What is it worth to us to keep programmes going which only attract small numbers of students? How do we serve both the top student who is always seeking greater challenges and the hard worker who gets through the regular programme with difficulty? This requires us to formulate realistic goals, set priorities and collaborate where possible.

The universities are therefore jointly working on a future-looking education agenda, in which we explore our shared ambitions in terms of the increased flexibility and modularity of education, offering education to working people, the further internationalisation of education, the opportunities presented by digitisation, the alignment with the labour market, the retention of small programmes, etc. This agenda offers, among other things, more input for the strategic agenda for higher education and research which the minister will be sending to the House of Representatives this summer. But our higher priority now is: more air in the system for both student and teacher.