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The UAS multiplier effect: pathway to innovation

It is a great pleasure for me, as the Chairman of the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, to take part in this conference and to exchange ideas with you on the role and development of applied sciences in Europe. A better understanding of the arrangements and best practices in our distinctive countries concerning applied research, should enable us to identify opportunities for sustainable cooperation and improvement of innovation processes.

Therefore I was very pleased to accept the invitation for your annual congress from my good friend Henrik Wolff, who is an important partner to us in our European Network for UAS, the UASNET. And – as I understand – Henrik has recently formalized his efforts by taking on officially the portfolio of internationalisation within ARENE. For that reason I am confident that this conference will provide both you and me with the stepping stone for further prosperous contacts and teamwork between our Universities of Applied Sciences, and stakeholders from the world of work, throughout Europe.

What will I do, the coming 30 to 45 minutes? With my speech I would like to focus on the role Universities of Applied Sciences play in fostering innovation. We all know innovation is the most important recognised factor for the preservation and generation of wealth, both on a regional and global scale. I will argue that higher education has a central role in fostering innovation: it is the linking pin in the knowledge triangle of education, research and innovation. Our institutions can ensure more and better research-based knowledge, innovation and entrepreneurship. More and more local, national and European actors are starting to realize that. But if we truly want to operate in the heart of the national and European agenda's of becoming a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy, - delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion - then we also have some work to do.

By the way: on the 22nd of April we had our own annual congress in the Netherlands, with many interesting and inspiring guest speakers. I feel obliged to share with you one particular idea of one of our guest speakers on the use of Powerpoint presentations. He made the following important observation: 'Powerpoint is a vehicle for vocally handicapped people'. So now you will surely understand why I will use only very few slides during my speech - representing the knowledge triangle and our UASNET partners.

Let me start by stating, that finding ways for good teamwork on applied sciences as a stable factor for innovation is no luxury, especially in these times of fast changing economic circumstances – and volcanic eruptions. We are confronted with the fact that nothing is certain: stock markets are collapsing, the banking system proves to be unstable and sometimes even has to depend on state help, loans for investments are being postponed, and consumers' trust is decreasing in an ever faster way. Who would have thought? These are all things we did not see coming. And we can ask ourselves the question whether we are really well prepared to cope with these changes.

It is clear that in today's global society we should be adequately equipped to face the challenges of a globally intertwined economy and corresponding effects. That is why we should reflect on ways to bring about innovations that are in line with the developments in modern society.

And that is precisely where the UAS come in. In the past, much attention has already been given to an intensification of research & development and innovation. Policy makers believed a focus on R&D *as such* was what we needed to realise a competitive knowledge-based economy. But there is now a growing consensus that a focus *solely* on R&D is no longer enough. Higher education is moving towards the centre of this agenda, and thus towards the centre of the knowledge triangle. A few examples of how important European actors put this: [dia 2]

- the Ministers at the Leuven conference: “Higher education should be *based at all levels* on state of the art research and development thus fostering innovation and creativity in society. We recognise the potential of higher education programmes, including those based on *applied science*, to foster innovation”.
- Also the Swedish EU presidency stated: “The current debate about the knowledge triangle tends primarily to focus on the relationship between research and innovation. We will focus on the *central role of higher education in the knowledge triangle* and for European competitiveness”.
- And last but not least our own Dutch SER (Social and Economic Council) which proposes: ”to involve more explicitly (higher) education concerning the development of the European Knowledge Area”.

These opinions show that higher education is increasingly seen as the linking pin in the knowledge triangle of education, research and innovation. And that should not come as a surprise to us, since we know from the workforce at our institutes that higher education can ensure more and better research-based knowledge, innovation and entrepreneurship. Therefore, higher education is now receiving its *rightful place*, namely at the top of the well-known knowledge triangle.

[dia 3]

For us as Universities of Applied Sciences, this implicates a privilege, as well as an important social duty.

And I am confident that we as UAS can live up to this important social task. For Universities of Applied Sciences are indeed that linking pin in the knowledge triangle. To name but a few of the results we as UAS sector achieve: [dia 4]

- Our sector delivers professionals which are directly employable on the labor market.
- We ensure the growth of the number of people with a degree in higher education.
- We have a strong external orientation within the regions, working with small and medium enterprises, with business, municipalities and hospitals.
- Our applied research, knowledge transfer and staff from diverse professional fields, are the ingredients for bringing about innovation in education and professional practice.

It is very interesting to see that nowadays more and more people are starting to realize this. As a consequence, the public debate is shifting. Shifting towards the added value UAS bring to broader society. We see this shifting attitude also in the Netherlands, where we are experiencing exiting times at the moment. Not only because we have the national elections coming up in June – and you can imagine it is a huge challenge to advocate investments in higher education and research in a time of huge cuts in spending. But next to the elections, times are also exiting for us because a long awaited report on the Future Sustainability of Dutch Higher Education was recently issued. And you will be pleased to hear, that this ‘Veerman report’ was the first report in a long time, that really grasped the whole spectrum of higher education, and came forward with implications for both the institutes and the government. So, there is still hope when committees are installed. Normally we tend not to expect the best outcomes, but the Veerman report was truly a relief. It states clearly and straight-forward what has to be done, not shying away to affront some vested interests.

What is this Veerman Report about? [dia 5] It is about sustainable innovation, a first condition to be in the top 5 of knowledge based economies in the world. The Dutch ministry of Education had asked the Veerman Committee to investigate what improvements are needed in our system of higher education, when we truly want to realize the ambition of the Dutch government to be in the top five of knowledge based economies in the world. The recommendations should be considered as building stones for a reform of the Dutch education system.

And it may come as a shock to you - since the Netherlands in general have a good international reputation - but the Veerman Committee was very clear about one thing: if we continue down this path, we won't make it anywhere near the top five. If we are sincerely prepared to work towards this goal, we have to improve our education system and we have to do it fast. Let me share some devastating conclusions with you: [dia 6]

- The number of dropouts is unacceptable,
- the quality of the teaching leaves a lot to be desired,
- the level of research is dropping,
- the degree of international orientation is inadequate,
- our system is not flexible enough to meet the rapidly changing demands of students and employer.

So something must be done, and soon. Veerman's advice in short: 'higher education gets a grade of 6.5 at the moment, and that must change into a 9.' More quality and more diversity are needed.

Interestingly, this is exactly what we as the national lobby organization for UAS – like your ARENE - have stated in our own strategic agenda 'Dedicated to Quality.' This is a document we have been working on for quite some time. And it might be interesting to you, to hear how we came to formulating our strategic topics. First, we issued a discussion document in the form of a Green Paper as a first step towards a new agenda for our association. Relevant trends were analyzed and assessed with regard to their significance to universities of applied sciences. During this process we identified important challenges and contrasted them to the current situation in our sector. Over a period of several months, we held many discussions on the Green Paper with interested parties inside and outside our sector.

The Green Paper elicited a considerable number of responses. In general, the responses were positive. There was one golden thread which ran through the discussions and responses, namely, that *quality* should be monitored and promoted. [dia 7] Reference was made to:

- the quality of and alignment with preparatory secondary education,
- the quality of student supervision,
- the quality of student programmes,
- the quality of employees and
- the quality of organization.

After March 2009, we started incorporating the responses into a policy document which sets out the priorities of universities of applied sciences for the coming years. This has resulted in the present document, in which the Dutch universities of applied sciences accept 'Dedicated to

Quality' as a framework which will serve as a guideline for the sector's policy in the coming years.

In this sense, the Veerman recommendations came at the right moment: directly following our own exercise of formulating our homework, and knowing that we can count on the support of the social partners for this agenda.

Now let me get back to the report of the Veerman Committee. I will point out three of Veerman's recommendations that are relevant to the ambitions we have formulated in our own strategic agenda 'Dedicated to Quality': [dia 8]

- 1) Institutions should specialize, they should choose a profile.

The profile should be based on proven or desired strengths in teaching and research, along the lines of the European classification model. This will make clear to students and the world of work, for what speciality they should go to which institute. Complementary collaboration will increase, and the competition for students will be arranged along other lines.

- 2) Put education on top as the core business of higher education institutes.

Pay more attention to education, adapt to the needs and talents of students from different backgrounds and talents, and be more flexible in learning paths, is the advice. Veerman asks institutions and students to work on this *together*.

- 3) Invest in the quality of teachers.

Quality of education directly depends on the quality of the teaching and research staff and their appreciation. The advice is to give room for further professionalization and coherent career planning on both teaching and research.

It is important to conclude that the Veerman Committee believes there is a clear task for the Dutch government: these ambitions cannot be realized in a context of cutbacks. Substantial investments are absolutely necessary in order to hold and improve the position of the Netherlands in an international context. Only with investments we can make sure that the Netherlands doesn't get out of touch with the best in higher education internationally.

It is now a challenge to try to work the recommendations of the Veerman Committee into the election programmes and the agenda of a future government. Of course, all political parties say they believe education is a key issue. But what they actually want to do, and how much money

they are willing to invest, usually remains unclear. Although I must say, there are some signals that our politicians would want to invest up to 2,5 billion euro's extra each year.

One remarkable topic in Veerman's advice, is to hold on to our binary system of two types of study programmes: research-oriented programmes, provided by the traditional research universities, and profession-oriented programmes: provided by universities of applied sciences. But the Committee does advocate some adjustments:

- Work towards small, research-intensive universities. These universities should select their students, which until now was a taboo in the Netherlands.
- Next to these smaller, research-intensive universities with strong selection, there should be a broad supply of higher education institutions that each have a clear profile. Education at these institutions should be based on state of the art research. This means, that investments in applied research are needed and the number of funded Master's programmes in the applied sciences should be expanded.

In short, this is the recognition of the role of Universities of Applied Sciences in a sustainable and competitive knowledge based economy I spoke about. Our dream is coming true, so to speak. We now are facing a window of opportunity to unleash the hidden potential of the Universities of Applied Sciences. With the right investments from our government and not to forget the right actions from institutions and students, our future is looking brighter than ever.

By the way: I have some comforting news for those of you who are concerned about all this money that should be invested in education and research. We have asked the Top Institute for Evidence Based Education Research (TIER) to do a cost benefit analysis of the extra investments in Universities of Applied Sciences. Just to make this clear: TIER is an independent institute run by researchers of traditional, research-intensive universities. They concluded that investing in Universities of Applied Sciences is highly profitable. Every one euro invested in UAS results in three euro's for society; so clearly the smartest way to prosperity and economic growth. I'm an optimistic man, but also an optimist can sometimes be pleasantly surprised. Let's call it the UAS multiplier effect.

Finally, I would like to have a look toward Brussels. I have spoken a lot about developments in the Netherlands, chances that are opening up there for Universities of Applied Sciences and the many challenges we face. I have spoken about one of the most important recommendations of the Veerman Committee: the need for institutions to choose a clear profile, to specialize, and thus the need for more transparency.

We all know that this discussion cannot be a national discussion. In a European Higher Education Area, both institutions and students and both governments and businesses will profit from more transparency on the profiles of institutions. The European Commission has taken the initiative to work on a European classification and a new, multi-dimensional global ranking. Unlike more traditional instruments of transparency, these are to be instruments based on the diversity we as higher education institutions have to offer, a diversity that will probably increase. Unlike in the traditional rankings, institutions will not only be ranked based on reputation and traditional research outcomes, but also based on knowledge exchange, interaction with society and regional engagement. I see this as another example that shows that also on the European level, people start to think differently about research at higher education institutions.

[dia 9]

I would like to conclude by making the following appeal to you. Times are changing. We as Universities of Applied Sciences are a sector to be reckoned with. Our contribution to innovation is more than ever recognized on the local, the national and the European level. Now it's up to us to do what we need to do. We can be proud of what we do, and we must be honest about what we should improve.

I sincerely believe that if we continue to work together and learn from each other in the UAS Network, a bright future is ahead of us.