

Jouke de Vries

The Dutch policy on higher education is short-sighted

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start this lecture with a poem, just like Martin Bosma, the chairman of the Dutch House of Representatives. It is a poem by Joost van den Vondel. Member of Parliament for the NSC party Rozanne Hertzberger stated that universities have gone too far in anglicization and that, as a result, students no longer learn about the work of Joost van den Vondel. So here we go:

The little stick

May my wish preserve you unrotten,
Oh, stick and stay that does not
Support a traitor but freedom
And supported Holland's Father on that cruel scaffold
When he had to kneel for the bloody sword
Condemned, like Seneca
By Nero's hate and disgrace
To the sorrow of the most honest souls.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Rarely have I seen such a U-turn in policy as the recent policy change in higher education. It must be a disappointment for former Minister Dijkgraaf that his achievement – a billion-euro investment in higher education to make up for lost ground – was immediately revoked in the framework coalition agreement negotiated by the Schoof cabinet.

During the formation of the Schoof cabinet there was a marked lack of interest in education. There was no interest in pre-school education, in primary education, in secondary education or in higher education.

Education was mentioned in the framework coalition agreement but only the financial side of it. A budget cut of more than a billion euros was announced.

Goodbye Robbert! “Oh, stick and stay of the policy on higher education!”

The framework coalition agreement barely includes any policy at all. It will be up to the new Minister for Education to develop a policy to implement this budget cut.

We know that this new Minister is Eppo Bruins, formerly a member of the ChristenUnie, now a member of the NSC. His appointment caused some relief in our sector. After all, as chairman of the Dutch Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (AWTI) he was one of us, sort of. So maybe it will not be that bad after all and everything will be alright. But we will have to wait and see. The Minister has signed the framework coalition agreement and will have to cut costs.

Looking at Vondel’s poem, Minister Eppo Bruins could make a positive difference, but he can also turn out to be Maurice of Orange.

Because Minister Bruins’ job will not be easy. He will have to take into account constricting political and financial-economic preconditions.

Political preconditions

Higher education is no longer merely defended by politics, it is also being criticized. A new political wind is blowing worldwide. Various political parties are increasingly criticizing universities for supposedly being ‘woke’.

Since the financial crisis of 2008 and the COVID pandemic of 2020, experts are increasingly criticized and this has also had a backlash on universities. Professors and their scientific models are no longer believed unconditionally. Politicians like JD Vance, Donald Trump’s running mate, are accusing universities of being leftist strongholds.

In 2021, Vance gave a lecture entitled “The Universities are the Enemy”. According to this lecture, academia is supposedly some sort of mass brainwashing scheme that aims to maintain the status quo. Members of the lower classes are told they absolutely must go to university to get a better life, says Vance. But all you get is lies and deceit! The universities strengthen and legitimize progressive politics. We are delivering our children up to the enemy!

You will probably say: this is typically American. It will not come to that in the Dutch multi-party system. The debate here may not be as polarized, but some statements from Members of Parliament of the NSC party and the PVV party have stood out. The interesting thing is that the criticism is aimed at the influx of international students, the anglicization of universities, the reintroduction of Dutch, and the fact that 'wokeism' is supposedly flourishing.

Aant Jelle Soepboer of the NSC party is pleased that the framework coalition agreement states that universities of applied sciences and universities are now forced to teach in Dutch again, instead of in English.

Rozanne Hertzberger of the NSC party is of the same opinion. If you only offer courses in English, it feels as if part of the knowledge about the Dutch society will get lost. Because if you follow an international programme, you will have an international curriculum. Our national history is no part of that. And you will not read any poems by Vondel.

Member of Parliament Reinder Blau is clear about this as well. Education is in decline. In the past, it focussed too often on unequal opportunities instead of on quality. The activist 'woke' culture has been dominant for too long in lecture halls and educational institutions.

Economic preconditions

While higher education has been pulled into political-ideological waters, economists show that, even though the Dutch economy has grown by 1% in the second quarter of 2024, productivity is lagging compared to other countries. Almost everyone is working, but the contribution per member of the population to the Gross National Product is decreasing. There are a lot of jobs with little economic added value and this also applies to some economic sectors that do not include negative external effects into their prices. According to economists, cutting costs on education in general and on higher education in particular is not a good idea, as this is where the added value is at its highest. Education and innovation contribute most to productivity. This occurs within innovation ecosystems. Due to its political composition, the Schoof cabinet seems to mainly protect existing sectors (agriculture, fishery, aviation) and cuts costs in innovative economic sectors, in which universities play a crucial role. Based on this political and economic analysis, I conclude that the

Schoof cabinet's policy on higher education – cutting costs by more than a billion euros – is short-sighted, both politically and economically. What would a sensible, long-term policy look like?

Solutions

For the long term, the solution is glocalization: a contraction of the words globalization and localization. This means that universities remain active internationally but also invest in their local region. Innovation takes place within innovation ecosystems, in which universities collaborate with companies and governments. Universities evolve into so-called fourth-generation universities. Examples are the Bio Science Park Leiden, Brainport Eindhoven, and the University of the North. The university remains international and English but also invests in Dutch language and culture. In addition, collaboration between universities, universities of applied sciences, and secondary education in the region is reinforced.

The NSC party and the BBB party claim to stand up for local regions, but the effect of this blow via the instrument of language will mainly be felt in these same local regions: in Twente, in Maastricht, and in Groningen. In the case of Groningen, this is remarkable in a time when everyone is talking about a debt of honour to the province of Groningen. The Hague has set aside money to support new economic developments. With this in mind, it is odd that the University of Groningen and the University Medical Center Groningen, the engines of the economy in the northern part of the Netherlands, will have to cut costs.

With regards to the question whether universities are too woke, we should note that some disciplines are more sensitive to new societal concepts than others. I do find that woke leads to anti-woke. For universities it has been and always will be important to keep their distance while analysing, and to focus on their main tasks.

We need to take the problem of Dutch language, Dutch history, and Dutch culture seriously. But this applies to the education sector as a whole. Teaching the Dutch language and Dutch literature is the task of primary and secondary education. Being able to speak various languages should not be the starting point at universities.

With more focus on the Dutch language and Dutch history, future students will discover that Vondel lived in the Republic of the United Netherlands, a very internationally oriented republic, which is now being criticized for that very reason, because of colonialism and slavery. But Vondel knew Dutch, French, and Latin. The latter was the global language at universities at the time, the way English is now. Let Vondel's multilingualism be the starting point for the university of the future, where international and national talents are essential and where there will always be a return on investment. Because this is about young people!

Thank you for your attention!

Notes

Michael Persson, "J.D. Vance: belichaming van de witte racune" [J.D. Vance: the embodiment of white rancour], *De Volkskrant*, Saturday, 20 July 2024, pp. 2-4.

Esther Lammers, Aant Jelle Soepboer, Interview, *Trouw*, Friday, 26 July 2024, pp. 4-5.

Janne Chaudron, Zomerinterview, Saturday, 3 August 2024, "We doen in Den Haag te veel Haagse beloftes" [We are making too many political promises in The Hague], *Trouw*, Zomertijd, pp. 4-9

Editorial board *Science Guide*, 11 June 2024, "PVV voorspelt einde aan activisme en 'woke' in hoger onderwijs" [PVV predicts end of activism and 'woke' in higher education]