

CHAPTER IO

Mass Universities and the Idea of an Elite Education in the Netherlands, 1945-2015

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Abstract

After the Second World War, the awareness was very strong that the Netherlands needed to industrialize in order to prosper. Therefore, the government started investing in higher education and in the sciences on a massive scale. New (technical) universities were founded, and the numbers of faculties, chairs and staff rose. Since the 1970s, higher education for many has become the word. The number of university students has risen from 11.250 in 1940 to 103.000 in 1970 and 250.000 now. But universities do not specialize. They all offer almost the same, however hard their boards sometimes try to raise their institution above the others or at least give the public the impression that they are better. Since Dutch universities are not allowed to select students, and because there are many restrictions to raise money from other sources than the government, it is almost impossible for universities to create a distinct profile for themselves. The only way out was the creation of new institutions. This was done by establishing liberal arts colleges with a strict admittance policy.

Key words: Netherlands; industrialization; higher education for many; mass universities; course duration; the idea of a university education.

In the nineteenth century, Dutch universities were elite institutions. They were meant for the learned class, the group in society that

could read Latin and Greek, and they prepared students for a life in this class. This was obvious, and was maintained by different types of secondary schools. The traditional Latin School or *gymnasium* gave access to the university, in which Latin was colloquial until the 1850s. A second, more modern type of school, with modern languages, math, chemistry and physics, was meant for the middle classes. It gave access to commercial colleges and to the Polytechnic School.

However, the purpose of the university changed. In a new law of 1876 this purpose was no longer *Bildung*, classical education, but scientific training. For this the new secondary schools for the middle class were much better equipped. And although for students Latin and Greek were still required, the social accessibility of the universities slowly broadened, due to the success of these modern secondary schools. However, this broadening was only gradual, and the effect for many decades was that the universities were still mainly elite institutions. Indeed, two new ‘private’ or special universities, the Free University in Amsterdam (1880) and the Catholic University in Nijmegen (1923) were established to create a Calvinist and a catholic elite. And the university students, in particular the traditional Corps, took it for granted that universities were elite institutions. They recruited their members from the learned class, and with their *mores* repelled *homines novi*.¹

This carefully upheld system started cracking in the 1920s and 1930s. A report in 1934 warned against the possibility of ‘academic overproduction’. For the first time students felt concerned about their future. Was it still obvious that they would fulfill executive functions? At the same time there was a trend towards a more democratic higher education. This view was held by professors who had been in the United States, where universities were not exclusively meant for scientific training as in the Netherlands.²

1. Knegtmans (1998), 26-44.

2. On the change in educational goals, see: Baggen (1998). On their accessibility, see: Jensma & De Vries (1997); Marchand (2015).

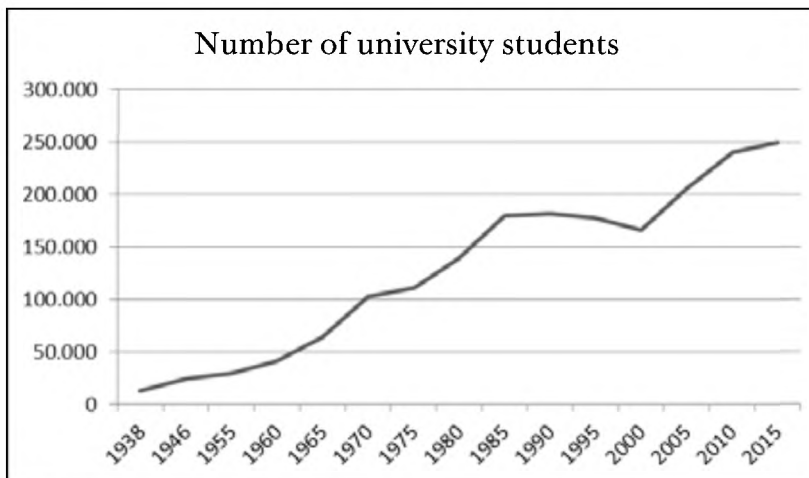


Table 1: these figures were published by the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek.

Table 2:

<i>General universities:</i>	
Leiden (1575)	Rotterdam (1973)
Groningen (1614)	Maastricht (1976)
Utrecht (1636)	Open Universiteit (1984)
Amsterdam (UvA, 1877)	Tilburg (1986)
Amsterdam ³ (VU, 1880)	Twente (1986)
Nijmegen (1922)	
<i>Categorial universities:</i>	
Delft (Technical, 1905)	Eindhoven (Technical, 1956)
Rotterdam (Economics, 1913-1973)	Twente (Technical, 1963-1986)
Wageningen (Agricultural, 1917)	
Tilburg (Economics, 1927-1986)	

3. Amsterdam UvA (University of Amsterdam) started in 1877 as a municipal university, and is now a state sponsored university. VU University (Free University) is a former Calvinist, special university. Nowadays the special universities are fully state sponsored as well.

New faculties and new universities

The development from elite universities to mass universities in the postwar years went through several stages (Table 1). In 1938, the last normal prewar year, the universities in the Netherlands had 12.500 students on a population of nine million people. In the first 'normal' postwar year, 1946, their number had doubled to 24.500. Nowadays the Netherlands have 250.000 university students on a population of 17 million.

This means that there are now roughly almost ten times as many students than in the prewar period, in the days of the genuine elite universities. Then, there were ten universities, now there are fourteen. Apart from this there are three very small theological universities meant for students who hope to take holy orders, and a small University of Humanistic Studies.

Apart from this, there are the so-called colleges for higher professional education. Nowadays they call themselves universities for applied sciences. These include the art and fashion academies, actors schools, teachers education, schools for chemical and other analysts, and many studies in communication, logistics and management. These schools hardly existed before the war, but now they have 400.000 students. This brings the amount of students in the universities and the colleges for higher professional education up to almost 40 per cent of 18 to 25 year olds.⁴ But this article deals with the universities only.

The then large number of students in the years immediately after the war was only partly due to a pent-up demand from students who had not been able to attend the university during the war. In the Second World War, the Netherlands had been occupied by Nazi-Germany, and from 1943 on, students had had to sign a declaration of allegiance to the Germans in order to continue their study. An overwhelming part of the students had refused to do this, and they

4. In the year 2010-2011 the total of 240.000 university students made up 15 per cent of the then 18 to 25 year olds: Chiang Meza (2012), 9. This brings the percentage of university and higher professional college students together on 40 per cent of the age group.

had been banned from the universities. Now, they were eager to catch up with their studies, whereas others entered the university for the first time. In the next few years they were followed by students who had not been able to finish their secondary schools during the occupation.

For the main part, however, the growth in the number of students was the result of an extension of the universities. Since the war, several universities had been extended with the social sciences: economics, psychology, sociology and political science. These studies seem to have been populated by new men and women, by students whose parents did not have a university education. This assumption has not yet been confirmed by historical research, but it might explain the increase in the number of students.

Apart from this, the two privately funded universities, the Calvinist Free University and the Catholic University, also opened faculties of medicine and of science in the 1950s. These universities did not yet have the legally required five faculties: divinity, law, medicine, science, and humanities. They had started with the relatively cheap faculties of divinity, law and humanities. However, they were obliged to open faculties of medicine and science in the near future, or otherwise they would lose their recognition by the government as a general university.⁵ To solve this problem, in 1948 an agreement was reached according to which the state was to fund these universities in such a way that they could open these prescribed faculties. For these universities, this was an important addition, because the faculties of medicine were very large then in the still rather small Dutch universities.

Table 1 shows that in the 1950s the number of students grew steadily. This was the result of several government actions such as a decrease of the tuition fees and the introduction of a generous system of scholarships in 1953. But the government did more than this. When the Dutchman Frits Zernike was honoured with the Nobel Prize for physics in 1953, some had come under the false impression

5. Because of the legal requirement of five faculties the categorial universities in table 2 were not allowed to call themselves universities until the law was changed in 1986. Until 1986, they were called Hogescholen (cf. the German Hochschule).



FIGURE 1: Most universities in the Netherlands have a mix of old and new buildings. This main building of the University of Groningen dates from 1909 (Wutsje, Wikimedia Commons).

that the Netherlands was still among the best in science. In fact, there was a strong awareness that the Netherlands had fallen behind during the war.⁶ Thus, in 1956 a second technical university was opened, in Eindhoven (see table 2). But this wasn't enough. A state commission was installed to advise the government how to catch up in the sciences. It recommended to invest in the faculties of science in order to promote research and technological innovation.⁷ Another state commission recommended the government to create a third technical university (which indeed was opened in 1963), and even a fourth and a fifth – that were never established. Furthermore it advised to combine fundamental and applied sciences in one or several of the general and technical universities, to establish one extra faculty of dentistry, and to extend several universities with new faculties of law and of social sciences.⁸

6. Van Berkel (2011), 309.

7. Ibidem, 309-311.

8. In this respect, the Netherlands distinguished themselves from other countries,

The idea of these new universities and faculties was that the country would have to industrialize to bring it on a higher level of prosperity. And in order to increase the industrial production and productivity, it would have to improve its competitive position. For this an increasing number of higher educated people was necessary, especially in science and technology. At the same time, a balance was needed between science and technology on the one hand, and the humanities, in which Western civilization had its roots, on the other hand. Apart from this, the growth of the service industries called for more graduates in the social sciences. But these extensions weren't to have consequences for the character of the universities. These would have to preserve their small scale. A department, electronics for instance, was not to have more than ten to twelve professors. This limited the number of students, because each graduating student was supposed to do his final project or thesis under the supervision of one of the professors. The implication was that the ideal technical university did not have more than 4000 or 5000 students. General universities could have more students, because they had more faculties and departments, but the idea of an elite education had not yet lost its value or strength in the 1950s.⁹

Years of transition

Although in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s there had been a firm belief in the extent to which society could be socially engineered, the sudden increase in the numbers of students in the 1960s came completely unexpected. The country had seen a postwar baby boom that had lasted from 1945 into the 1950s. This was common knowledge, and it was also known that more 12- and 13-year olds went to schools that prepared for higher education than before the war. Because of this, the government had reckoned with a growth of the number of university students to the amount of 55.000 to 65.000 in the 1970s. In fact, from 1963 on the numbers of students grew much faster (table 1).

where many new universities were established. See: Whyte (2015); Vanden Borre (2015), 15 and *passim*.

9. De spreiding (1959).

This had dramatic consequences in many ways. There was a lack of staff, of lecturing rooms, and of teaching laboratories, though not yet of money. The idea of an elite education for university students was not immediately given up, but the professors, the university boards, the students, and the politicians had to adapt themselves to this new situation. Within ten years, many new and young university teachers were hired. In the university towns new university quarters and large university hospitals were built. And the general universities were bestowed with all or most of the conceivable faculties and departments of that time, and with chairs for professors in almost all fields and specialties. In the University of Amsterdam for instance, the board created at least one new chair every month during the 1960s.

In the meantime, the students changed radically as a result of the world wide cultural revolution. Until then, students had lived on the assumption that they would fulfill executive functions. This was how they acted, how they presented themselves, and how they distinguished themselves from other young people. This did not completely come to an end in the 1960s and 1970s, but many did not want to present themselves in the way of the former aspiring students anymore. They rejected competition and ambition, they wanted to be young, use soft drugs, listen to music and contest and change the world with other young people. Although this did not lead to extreme violence as in Mexico, the United States or West-Germany, the most notable groups among the students demonstrated against all authorities, including the professors and the governors in the universities. They demonstrated for democracy within the university, against higher tuition fees (which were necessary to uphold the fast growing universities) and for better accessibility of the universities for students from all social ranks. The administrators of the universities (for whom this was an extra duty next to their main occupation) proved to be unequal to their task and to the tensions in the fast growing universities.

All this resulted in 1970 in a new law which gave the universities boards with professional administrators, and an elected university council consisting of professors, staff, students and representatives from society. This council controlled the board. In these universi-

ties the idea of an elite education has eroded slowly since the 1970s and 1980s. This had several causes.

In the first place many students in the humanities and the social sciences or in medicine did not see themselves as an elite anymore. It became obvious that not all students could fulfill executive functions in the future. However, law and economics remained very popular among students, because they were considered useful legs to executive functions.

In the second place the length of the studies came under pressure because of the large numbers of students. Since the end of the nineteenth century it had been the purpose of the universities in the Netherlands to educate students into scholars. On graduation, students were supposed to be able to conduct scientific investigation. This had for many decades already caused complaints from trade and industry. Here the idea was that society did not need highly specialized researchers; it needed people with a high level of general education. However, the 1970 law had only changed the administration of the universities.¹⁰ It had not affected the autonomy of the faculties to organize their education according to their own opinion. These faculties did not hold on so much to the idea of an elite education, but they did hold on to scientific training of the students. The problem was that with the increase of students more and more of them weren't interested in this scientific training anymore. They were mainly interested in an academic title. The second problem was that students in the Netherlands took their time to graduate. Six, seven, eight years of study before graduation were normal. The third problem was that so many students dropped out before graduation. Of the students who studied in the university, only 60 per cent graduated. This combination of large numbers, slow students and few graduates made the expenditures for education unaffordable in the economic crisis of the 1980s.

In 1982 a new law forced the universities to reduce the course duration for medicine to six years, the sciences to five and the other faculties to a 4-year program. In an explanatory statement the ministry of Education wrote that the universities had to adapt themselves

10. Foppen (1989).

in order to educate larger numbers of students in a shorter time, and with more success, that is less drop-outs. According to the ministry, this still could be called scientific training because of the scholarly character of the education taught by good scholars and scientists, and by the fact that the students became acquainted with scientific research and investigation, however modest this acquaintance might be. The idea of this statement was furthermore that the purposes of higher education could best be realized in analogy with the Anglo-American model with two stages; a 4-year general stage, and a more specialized second stage. The course reduction that the law of 1982 introduced, was meant to create this first, general 4-year stage.¹¹

With this interpretation, the ministry abandoned the idea of a scientific training of students in the traditional way, which was that every student had to do serious scholarly research for his or her final thesis. However, the universities did not share this view. They kept to scientific training. In most faculties the courses were indeed reduced to four years. Of these four years, the first year was used for a general introduction to the discipline, whereupon followed specialization in a 3-year course. So nothing came of an extended general course. The expectation was that the time students took to graduate, would come down from more than seven years to five years. The government tried to stimulate this reduction with setting a maximum number of years to student's grants, but this didn't help. Students still take slightly more than six years for a 4-year course.

Mass universities

In the meantime, in the 1980s the rapid increase in the number of students had petered out, due to demographic trends.¹² What had not disappeared, was the pursuit of the idea that everyone should have the *possibility* to go to a university. Indeed, this had turned into the ideology that everyone *should* go to the university.¹³ This is an

11. Hoger Onderwijs voor velen (1978). The second stage, a 2-year Mphil course, was never effectuated. Instead, a 4-year PhD course was realized.

12. Jaarboek 2011(2011), 12-13.

13. Fasseur (2000), 7-15, aldaar 11.

exaggeration, of course, but this ideology had settled in the ministry of Education, and had in the 1980s resulted in a new kind of student's grant: a grant for every kid of a certain age that went to school or university. The expenses of this system were extremely high, and had to be paid for at the expense of other amenities of the university, such as sufficient numbers of teachers. Moreover, after some time this grants system drew in more and more students. This brought the president of Leiden University in 1988 to suggest the possibility that Leiden change into a 'quality university', including a drastic increase of tuition fees.¹⁴

At that time, this Leiden president was a voice crying in the wilderness. As mentioned before, in the 1960s and 1970s all universities had been given all, or at least most of the faculties and departments. They did not specialize anymore, all of them offered more or less the same. And since the quality of their graduates and their research was generally good, there were no reasons to complain, nor to distinguish themselves from other universities. With the cutbacks in expenditure on the universities, all this changed. In the 1990s a reversal occurred in the way universities wanted to present themselves. On the one hand this had to do with their concern about the amount of students that came to their universities – in short their market share –, on the other hand with the quality of the research in universities.

Until then, research had never been under surveillance. But when in the 1980s cutbacks were necessary, the ministry and the politicians started looking into the effectivity of the large amounts of money that went to research. What was done with it and what were the outcomes of all this research? After several bureaucratic exercises this concern ultimately led to a withdrawal of a large part of the money meant for research from the universities. This sum was reduced, and the remaining part was transferred to the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), where research groups and individuals would have to compete for research grants. Gradually, the universities now had to distinct themselves from the others. They needed groups, departments and professors who were

14. *Ibidem*.



FIGURE 2: Main Hall of Delft University of Technology (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed).

better than their counterparts in other universities. Suddenly, they needed policies to encourage certain fields of research, and they wanted centers of excellence. Rankings became more and more important.

When the competition for research funds started in the 1980s, the competition for students did not yet exist. When in the late 1970s and the early 1980s the new Maastricht University started publicity campaigns aimed at new students, this was considered not done. Only a decade later, all universities advertised for their open days, for their new studies, and for their more or less peculiar educational system. This competition became fierce after the Bologna Declaration of 1999. This declaration aims at the adoption of comparable university degrees that enable students to move freely in the countries of the European Higher Education Area and be able to continue their studies elsewhere. Not long afterwards an agreement was reached according to which each country adopt a 3-year bach-

clor cycle, followed by a 1- or 2-year master course. This system was introduced in the Netherlands in 2003.

The introduction of bachelor and master courses in the universities brought drastic changes. Until then, an introductory 1-year course was followed by a 3-year specializing course. This had to be turned around into a 3-year introductory course, followed by only one year specialization. This could have been the occasion for departments and faculties to adopt broad bachelor courses, comparable to the American liberal arts colleges. In the beginning there have been some attempts in that direction, but soon the bachelor courses developed into broad disciplinary courses, after which students usually move on to the master stage. But the purpose of this education is not altogether clear. It may be clear for future doctors, dentists, and several other professionals. They always had a vocational and not a scientific training. In the sciences, the social sciences and the humanities a scientific training had been the purpose, but now it is called academic training. But there is not even the beginning of a conformity over what this academic training is or should be.

However this was not the only change for the universities. In 1997 a law was adopted that abolished the university council and the faculty councils, and made the universities hierarchic again.¹⁵ Since the introduction of this law, the boards want to govern the university, whereas they used to administer it.

The most important change however is a turn in government policy. Since World War II the improvement of the educational level of the population was seen as a responsibility of the government. The government took care of investments in education, in research, and in grants for students. Now the government is withdrawing. The responsibility for the level of education has been shifted to the citizens themselves. Students used to get grants in the form of interest-free loans. Now they have to borrow money to pay for their study. And universities can no longer rely on the government for all their research. Universities have to look for financial support from trade and industry. The idea of this is that in this way academic research will consider social demand.

15. 'Wet moderniserende universitaire bestuursorganisatie' (1997).

This shift in government policy is enhanced by a new way of subsidizing the universities. Thus far, they were paid mainly on the basis of the number of students they had, and only partly on the number of graduations. Now they are paid mainly on the basis of the number of graduations.¹⁶ Here the idea is that the government is only responsible for the functioning of the educational system, and no longer for the individual institutions. By having the money follow the students, the universities are stimulated to attract students and to keep them by improving their education. In actual practice, studies are made as attractive as possible, which is not always identical with as good as possible.

Mass education and the future elites

This is where the universities in the Netherlands are now. In the second half of the 1990s the rapid growth of numbers of students was resumed. This was partly the result of a demographic trend – the children of the children of the postwar baby boom went to the university. For another part it is the result of the emancipation of women. Since 2006 there are more female than male university students.¹⁷

Market share in the market for education has become a major concern for universities. All now have large publicity departments for the branding of the universities. But what do they have to brand with? The universities all offer almost the same. Therefore, rankings get all the more important. In drawing students, surveys among students are important. And since many students choose for certain cities, the universities emphasize the attractiveness of the city. But it is not enough to attract students. Since they get paid for the number of graduations, there is a perverse stimulus to graduate as many students as possible. The faculties and universities adopt all kinds of schemes to pull students through their tests and exams. And since universities have to accept all students with the appropriate

16. On the former policy, see: De spreiding (1959). On the actual policy, see: Kwijkers (2006), 12-31.

17. Jaarboek 2011 (2011), 13; Chiang Meza (2012), *passim*.

school certificates, they have to adapt the level of their education to the level of the students. This makes it almost impossible for universities to create a distinct profile for themselves regarding their education.

Utrecht University was in 1998 the first to find a way to distinguish itself with a new kind of institution: it established a liberal arts college. Since this institution is distinct from the university, it is allowed to select students for admittance, and indeed, this Utrecht University College has a strict allowance policy, and high tuition fees. In this way, the college was an institution for elite education, not for a social elite, but of an intellectual elite. Soon, other universities followed suit. Now there are University Colleges in Maastricht (2002), Middelburg (Roosevelt Academy, 2004), Amsterdam (2009) and The Hague (Leiden University College, 2010). In this small scale, elite education has found its way back to the universities. Apart from this, faculties and departments offer honor's courses for brilliant and ambitious students on an even smaller scale. But in general, university education for a large part has become an extension of the secondary schools.

At the same time, in research universities aspire excellence. This has serious consequences for the staff. Only staff members who succeed in getting research funds and grants, get tenure. And only a small percentage of staff succeed in winning these funds. In universities such as these, a special form of elite education is available for the rather small group of students who aspire an academic career. These research master and PhD students are given the supervision and the attention they need during an extended scientific training. In this way, the universities secure a sustained high level of research. This forces universities in two minds: mass education on the one hand, excellent, sometimes very specialized research on the other. The gap between these two seems to be getting wider by the year.

However, the objective of the university is still to teach on a scientific level; to do research; to give attention to the development of the personality of the students; and to promote their social responsibility. But what is to be expected of these last two aspects in a mass education? Do the universities nowadays challenge the students enough? The newest trend is that universities take this to heart and

become more restrictive in admitting students to master courses. This does not exactly turn the universities into elite institutions, but it might get them on the track of educating new elites. This seems to be the challenge of the universities: educating elites in an ever-faster changing world.

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