Part 2

Reflections on core tasks
Bert van der Zwaan is no defender of the ivory tower. In his recent book, *Higher Education in 2040 — A Global Approach* (2017), he has shown that the university must convincingly demonstrate its value to society, should it wish to survive into the future. His book entails a rich range of observations and prescriptions but seems to centre around two sets of ideas. One is that the university abandon its isolation by developing partnerships outside of the university as well as innovative forms that transcend classic university models, whether in the realm of IT or interdisciplinarity. In so doing, new knowledge is created in the process. And the other is that the university must focus much of its efforts on solving the rising number of problems facing society. Citizens and politicians will have increasing impatience with — and a declining willingness to pay for — a university that continues to stand at some remove from life as they live it and from their real world problems.

Some of his vision can be found, naturally enough, in Utrecht University’s Strategic Plan of 2016-2020. It commits the university to educating students (and academicians) to take the lead in addressing current challenges and problems. Educationally, the university must equip students to become research-seasoned professionals. At the same time, they must be sufficiently broadly educated to comprehend the complexities of the challenges that society faces. The ability of university graduates to think out of disciplinary boxes, in this vision, not only strongly enhances their place on the job market but also enables them to serve society as innovative problem-solvers. In sum, Bert sympathetically champions the university as ‘the discoverer of the sorely needed knowledge that will play an essential role in keeping the society
of the future running effectively.’

His commitment to breaking down the divide between university and society and having the former better serve the latter is a laudable and, I hope, lasting achievement. The continuing social and political legitimacy of the university will depend on it.

One recurring question important to me — and of importance to the future of the university — is what kind of graduates we should wish to cultivate at the university. Is the innovative professional the best expression of a university education? Bert himself is certainly not at all unmindful of the need for the university to be mindful of a wider mission than the T-shaped professional. He speaks in his book of cultivating responsible citizenship through education and of stimulating ethical reflection. Indeed, as university campuses become the multifunctional social hubs of learning that he expects them to become, then they will — more than they do now — promote ‘more interaction, more culture and more conviviality’. In doing so, universities ‘will return to the formational task that used to characterize the university years back’.

But these wider themes remain relatively undeveloped in the book — how exactly can and should we find ways to reinvent its ‘formational task’? The question is critical. Daniel Coit Gilman, in founding Johns Hopkins University, the first American research-oriented university, articulated that the establishment of such an institution ‘means a wish for less misery among the poor, less ignorance in schools, less bigotry in the temple, less suffering in the hospital, less fraud in business, less folly in politics’. We could add, nearly a century and a half later, any number of new topics. The point is that identifying — let alone achieving — such aims clearly requires from graduates more than knowledge and know-how but a set of dispositions that make them heedful of such issues in the first place. As the educationalist Cynthia Wells has argued: ‘Without specialized knowledge, higher education

1 Van der Zwaan, p. 172.
2 Cited in Nelson, p. 75.
would not be able to fulfil its call to address the very pressing challenges facing our world today. Nevertheless, specialization without attentiveness to integrative questions of ethics and meaning would fail to faithfully address the technically complex but also fundamentally human dimensions of the world's deepest needs.

The topic of the ‘intent’ and ‘purpose’ (‘de bedoeling’ in Dutch) of our education now and into the future is something that a small, informal group of the community of Utrecht University has begun to explore since its first meeting in September of 2017. Calling itself the ‘Acoesticum Society’ after the site of its first meeting, this group, which includes not only the vice-deans of education but also graduate students and educational leaders, have met to encourage an extended conversation in the university community about the purposes of university education. No one in ‘society’ is of exactly the same mind about which policy prescriptions should be pursued at the university, and that is not the purpose. But there is a shared concern about several recurring themes that, with an eye toward the future, will be important for our institutions. The first theme focuses on the importance of embedding the role of the university graduates as ‘problem-solvers’ into a wider context of committed citizenship. It roughly parallels the sentiments of (the now retired) Harvard president Drew Gilpin Faust, who sees (in Bert’s words) ‘the role of the university…as an educator of responsible citizens who will make great contributions to the sustainable society of the future’. A university graduate’s responsibility toward society does not end when she goes home from work but expresses itself in a continued engagement with society. This can be reflected in a strong sense of commitment to the common good. Under Bert’s leadership, the ‘civic university’ and ‘civic engagement’ have received more traction, but this remains an underdeveloped theme. Yet it is important that responsible citizenship be cultivated to correct

3 Wells, p. 61.
not only solipsism (about which Faust is concerned) but also a narrowly technocratic approach to ‘fixing’ problems.\textsuperscript{4}

The second theme is that the science of the university should be committed to cultivating a broader set of academic dispositions than can be defined by disciplinary study alone. In some ways this fits into a new emphasis, promoted by Bert, on interdisciplinarity, with its promise of putting science together in new and surprising ways. It also goes further: it means developing an academic habitus among all students that, while committed to advancing the newest insights of science and scholarship, is interested in more than its practical effects alone. An alacrity of mind, an ability to discern the wheat from the chaff in public or academic debates, a patience for struggling through complex material, and a thoughtfulness about difficult challenges are all examples of the kind of academic and moral virtues to which the university must attend and which its teachers should attempt to model. No society will give science or the university a proper place if that society has become devoid of citizens who are committed, in the widest sense, to the life of the mind. Universities undermine their own future existence if they understand their educational vocation only in terms of the products produced and not in terms of the qualities of their graduates.

Last but not least, there is sensitivity to older educational visions that call for the university to be alert to the flourishing of their students as human beings. Here, too, Utrecht University has made significant strides in recent years in a landscape in which Dutch institutions are not doing poorly from an international perspective: more attention is being given to customized education, the importance of mentors and tutors is being recognized, and a supportive learning community is being developed further. And yet considerable problems remain in a bureaucratized educational system that has very little time, inclination, and capacity for bigger questions and wonderment, for encouraging risks and their accompanying failures, or for discerning the unique talents

\textsuperscript{4} Van der Zwaan, pp. 170-173.
of our students. Inattention to the lives of our students thus undermines the whole educational enterprise. These concerns, again, are not a departure from the core emphases that Bert van der Zwaan has admirably pushed in his tenure as rector. Rather, they are supporting elements for any university that seeks to root itself more deeply in, and to interact with, society and its needs. For precisely that reason, they demand more prominence in the coming years.

Bibliography

