Places of Engagement

Heijnen, Armand, van der Vaart, Armand

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Heijnen, Armand and Armand van der Vaart. 
Amsterdam University Press, 2018. 
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76703.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76703

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2655015
A *Hooge School en Maatschappij* for our time! On the difficult relationship between two types of universities

*Leen Dorsman*

Universities are extremely self-reflective institutions. At the same time, it is rather rare for a professor or a vice-chancellor to publish extensively on the future of the university itself. Yet Utrecht University has had a tradition of doing exactly that. And recently Bert van der Zwaan has followed the example of his predecessors by publishing his book *Higher Education in 2040 — A Global Approach*. Already in 1831, the professor of history and classical languages Philip Willem van Heusde (1778-1839) wrote his highly successful and influential *Brieven over Hoger Onderwijs* (Letters on Higher Education), which advocated the university as the place where neoclassical *Bildung* should be the core curriculum (no surprise there). Also Gerrit Jan Mulder (1802-1880), one of the founders of modern chemistry in the Netherlands, was active in the debate on general education on the one hand and scientific training on the other. For philosopher and jurist Cornelis Opzoomer (1821-1892) and zoologist Pieter Harting (1812-1885), it was self-evident that they would be involved in discussions on higher education. In the twentieth century, it was the brochure *Hooge School en Maatschappij* (Higher Education and Society) by Hugo Kruyt (1882-1959), a professor of physical chemistry, that resonated for a long time in Dutch academic circles. Bert van der Zwaan is for the time being the last one in this remarkable series.

However interesting it may be to compare Bert van der Zwaan with his nineteenth-century predecessors — who are, as he writes, the pioneers of the research university of today, although
some arguments speak against that opinion — a comparison with a twentieth-century colleague, Hugo Kruyt, bears more fruit. The fourth chapter in the book by Van der Zwaan on increasing costs and the possibility (or impossibility) of selection ends with a section entitled ‘Why the United States should certainly not be followed’. The reason is that he sees a growing twofold divide in American higher education. On the one hand, there is an increasing gap between the relatively small group of privately financed Ivy League universities and the large group of mass universities dependent on public funding that is barely enough to survive. In the wake of this disastrous (in his eyes) development, he perceives a second, undesired divide: the one between students from lower social strata who have less and less access to higher education and those who have more financial capacities and can afford to study at elite universities. These American trends must indeed not be followed, but in the same paragraph Van der Zwaan asks another important question that perhaps does point us in the direction of American solutions. Considering all the students that enter our universities every year, how many of them are really suited for academic or scientific training? ‘At present, many students opt for university than higher vocational education for reasons of status and labour market prospects, rather than because they want a genuinely academic education’. And: ‘Why not encourage more students to enter higher vocational education (...)?’

This is not the first time this question has been asked in the context of Utrecht University. For the past twenty years, it has been the subject of many debates. It is a complex question because it is not only about how to ‘lead’ those students in this direction, it also pertains directly to the relationship between two different types of institutions. It is also a rather controversial question because in Utrecht in particular, the academic university and the universities of applied sciences have for decennia stood with their backs to each other.

This brings me back to Hugo Kruyt and a debate he was involved in in the early 1930s. In 1927, Kruyt visited the United States where he attended conferences and delivered guest lectures
at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. After returning, he lectured and published articles about his experiences. One lecture he delivered to an Amsterdam-based student society was published in 1931 as a brochure entitled *Hooge School en Maatschappij*. By ‘hooge school’ he meant university (which is rather confusing nowadays, because we understand ‘hogeschool’ as university of applied sciences). The structure of the brochure (36 pages only) resembles the structure of Bert van der Zwaan’s book. Kruyt also begins his argumentation with a historical analysis of the phenomenon of the university and, like Van der Zwaan, he diagnoses certain problems and shortcomings of his own university and offers some solutions. For Kruyt, the main problem was the inability of the administrators of Dutch universities to understand what the modern university needed. Both Kruyt and Van der Zwaan are conscious of the fact that universities operate in a changing world and therefore must change along with this world or otherwise perish. Both are aware of long-lasting historical developments, but neither idealizes the past. They are both realists.

Yet there is a big difference between *Hooge School en Maatschappij* and *Higher Education in 2040*. This difference has to do mainly with the role of the universities of applied sciences — comparable in many ways to the former polytechnics in the United Kingdom or the *Fachhochschulen* in Germany — or maybe not in their role, but in the position they have in the entirety of higher education. While travelling in the United States, Kruyt keenly observed the way higher education was organized. He noted that the American college system incorporated an endless variation of bachelor programmes ‘as a preparation and training for lower intellectual positions’. He called it ‘practical diversity’. Students could be trained to be school teachers, hospital nurses, or lab assistants, ‘in short: this is training for all positions in society for which a scientific preparation is necessary’. He also speaks of an ‘elementary scientific training’. This seemed to him the ideal system: two years of general education, after which followed two years of vocational training. He found out that for
80 per cent of the students, the bachelor's degree meant the end of
their stay at the university and that only 20 per cent of them went
on to the master's phase. In Kruyt's opinion, this system had three
advantages. First, 'the university has and keeps contact with the
sparkling life' and was in this way 'a link in the general societal
life'. Providing a good education for a broad array of students
would benefit the university, because society at large would have
a broad appreciation of the university. For Dutch universities in
the *interbellum* period, it was precisely this appreciation that
was lacking (and the same holds true for the current decade). A
second advantage was that it was fairly normal for the bachelor
diploma to mean the end of a student's studies. By contrast, in
the Netherlands, students with only a 'kandidaats' degree (at
that time the equivalent of a bachelor's degree) were seen as
university dropouts, while in the United States someone with a
bachelor's degree was considered successful. A third attractive
element of the American system was the fact that large numbers
of students came into contact with scientific ways of thinking
and with a general scientific environment.

Seventy years after Kruyt's observations, the Netherlands has
a bachelor's and master's system but we have yet to reach the
situation in which a substantial part of our students consider
the bachelor's degree as the end of studies. The situation Kruyt
described was also different from the Dutch system: American
students were — and still are — in general younger when they
arrive at university. This is why they offer four-year programmes.
I am not sure if the American college system is the solution for
the problems in our university system, but it is refreshing to
read the findings of a colleague who wrote almost a century
ago, a colleague who had a sharp eye for the shortcomings of his
own university. In his well-balanced book, Bert van der Zwaan
touches upon the same set of problems as Hugo Kruyt. I hope
that he will continue writing about higher education and one
day produce a fine, well-composed brochure on the complex
relationship between academic universities and universities of
applied sciences: a new *Hooge School en Maatschappij* for our time!
**Bibliography**


