

Level 5 Education: The Anchor of the Professional Column

Thank you for allowing me to speak at this conference. I have always been a supporter of the development of education at level 5 and I am proud that the university of applied sciences that I had the privilege of serving for 11 years as chairman of the Executive Board has developed a fully-fledged institute in which education at level 5 is offered with a growth from just under 100 students when I started, to about 3000 now. The University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam offers courses in a broad spectrum from economically oriented education to technology, from ICT to healthcare, from education to art. Also that the University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam was at the cradle, together with colleagues from Inholland University of Applied Sciences and Christian University of Applied Sciences Ede, of a completely new school for level 5 education in the city of Dordrecht.

What we have proven in Rotterdam – and other places in the Netherlands – is that a strategy of separating the level 5 programmes in a separate organisational unit, works. Universities of applied sciences are very much determined in their culture, working methods, expertise and procedures by the level 6 programmes, the bachelor programmes, for the simple reason that they are the bulk of the work. You get that unique biotope to successfully develop programmes at level 5 by organising them separately and involving secondary vocational education strategically, but also in the daily practice of teaching.

But enough about the here and now. Let's talk about the future of level 5 education in the Netherlands. In order to determine that future, it is good to first outline the context of it, namely the probable outcome of the debate that is taking place in the Netherlands about the development of higher education. My position is that level 5 education could be a very important pivot point and anchor in the way Dutch higher education is organised in the future.

There have been many reports recently about how Dutch higher education should develop. I myself had the privilege of chairing a committee, consisting of professors from several universities of applied sciences, which wrote an advisory report on the desirable development direction of higher professional education. A similar report has been published for the research universities, by a committee led by Groningen professor Elmer Sterken. The interesting thing about both reports is that they admittedly are written from a specific angle, but remarkably they largely come to the same conclusions. Let me mention the most important one: Dutch higher education is not future proof.

There is in the Netherlands a imbalanced growth in what I would call the interest in white-collar education versus blue-collar education. You can see that this movement is taking place in the Netherlands across the entire column of education. If people see the opportunity to opt for general education in secondary education instead of vocational education, then they will do so. If people see the opportunity to choose for the research university instead of the more professional oriented one, they will do so either. In other words, we see a strong trend in the Netherlands of people who want to end up 'as high as possible' in the educational pyramid and preferably end up with a master's degree from a research university. In Sterken's report, this is called the 'academic drift'. The current Minister of Education, Robbert Dijkgraaf, is trying to counteract this vertical movement in Dutch education, with a tendency towards white-collar education, and he has introduced the concept of the fan: universities, universities of applied sciences and vocational education not in a vertical relationship, but in horizontal, equal relationships with each other, deserving equal appreciation from society.

This strong vertical development has an effect on universities and universities of applied sciences themselves: universities fear the massiveness and loss of their research identity, universities of applied sciences fear an erosion of quality as a result of shrinkage. Just a number: for a long time, more than 60% of students in the Netherlands studied at universities of applied sciences. The trend is that in a period of about 20 years, this could be the other way around, namely that 60% study at a research university.

Is that a problem? Yes, that's a big deal. To begin with, for the institutions themselves. Dutch research universities are already groaning under the massiveness. But more importantly, it is increasingly a problem for the Netherlands itself and especially for its labour market. All predictions show that we are going to have dramatic shortages of people who have a background in professional education, both in higher professional education and in secondary vocational education. That is no less true for level 5. So we need to reverse this trend of professional education being seen as less attractive. As I said earlier, we have the Minister on our side, who does not fail to emphasise in particular the importance of secondary vocational education. Recently, he has suggested to all individual graduates from secondary education who are faced with the choice of what to study, including those who are pre-sorted to go to the research university, by writing them a letter, suggesting to think carefully about whether vocational education could not be something to opt for. But we need

to do more and, as I said before, there is a glimmer of consensus in higher education that only if we strengthen the universities of applied sciences, thus becoming an attractive alternative for the research universities.

But isn't that a threat for education at level 5? If we are looking for better positioned universities of applied sciences, we will need to strengthen research at these universities and ask for more room for manoeuvre at level 7 and 8... In my view, it would be a big mistake if attention for the levels 7 and 8 goes together with less attention for level 5. It would be a serious threat to the identity of these particular institutions.

To begin with, level 5 education as we know it today has proven not only to meet a need of the labor market, but also to tap successively into new emancipating groups of people, with which we have provided the entrance for large groups in Dutch society to higher education with an extra red carpet. So more universities of applied sciences should make level 5 education much more part of their strategy than they do now. And I am convinced they will do so, if not for the perspective of accessibility, than from the desire to keep the student numbers at the desirable level.

Historically, vocational or professional education (I use both concepts at the same time) has always been the place through which new groups have been able to reach higher education and becoming full members of our society. If cohesion in society is a goal that is dear to you, cherish your vocational education. Once upon a time, in the Netherlands higher professional education had the nickname: university of the poor. It is what we call in the Netherlands a Geuzennaam. The history of vocational education can be read as the socio-economic history of our country. New groups of people who knock on the door to participate fully in society often take that step through vocational education. We should always keep this in mind as we think about further emancipation of higher professional education. In that context, I always refer to level 5 education as our anchor. Level 5 keeps us grounded, where we belong.

Education at level 5 is the anchor of higher professional education with which, while the education at universities of applied sciences is developing into a fully-fledged alternative to education at the research universities, with all its attention to research and education at levels 7 and 8, universities of applied sciences will remain firmly linked to secondary vocational education. Level 5 will keep our roots strong in the professional column. Level 5 will be the guarantee of broad access to higher education. I have always been committed

to a way of working in which higher professional education, together with secondary vocational education, shapes education at level 5, thus programming unique education that should be counted as both higher education, but is deeply anchored in the professional column.

This function as an anchor, or perhaps better pivot point, will certainly prove to be of vital importance if the system debate is going to lead to results with a different institutional positioning of secondary vocational education. The Dutch Minister of Education has recently presented future scenarios, in which one of those scenarios could lead to a strengthened merger of higher and secondary professional or vocational education, and in particular what we could call the upper years of secondary vocational education. Institutions for tertiary vocational education will then emerge, with, once again, level 5 training as a pivot point between levels 3 and 4 on the one hand and levels 6, 7 and 8 on the other. While levels 1 and 2 will be more closely linked to secondary education, also institutionally.

An inspiring, but also exciting thought. And while this policy debate is ongoing, my advice to the people in the Netherlands who offer level 5 education is: be proud of yourself that in a period of about 15 years you have enriched Dutch higher education with this relatively new branch of the tribe for the Netherlands. The initiative has always been with us, the education sector itself and we have forced politicians to adapt legislation to this developing practice. Continue that pioneering spirit, make colleagues at other universities of applied sciences enthusiastic and be aware of the immense importance of your work.

It is for sure the case that we are facing new challenges that should also stimulate our pioneering spirit. For example, we are not yet sufficiently aware of the enormous potential of level 5 education for lifelong learning. We all think too classically about level 5 as a block in the one-sided vertically organized structure called education, from level 1 to level 8. While we can also see level 5 as a course that offers opportunities and deserves appreciation for people who benefit from that training at that time. This can indeed be the student who has received education at level 4 and who wants to continue studying. But it can also be the man or woman who has a university education at level 6, 7 or 8 and wants to make a career switch. Sometimes careers come to a dead end and then level 5 courses can pave the way to a new future, no matter what the education background of the student in question is. Think differently, free yourself from that vertical, hierarchical way of thinking. Perhaps it is time to

think about a different concept than the concept of 'level'. That's where all that verticality comes in.

The further development of education at level 5 also has another side: we need to look at research differently in the Netherlands. For too long, we have come to regard research as something that belongs in research universities or research institutes. But vocational or professional education in general also requires education to be imbued with research and research skills. This makes education attractive and meets a need now that we are dealing with a labour market that is less and less knowable and predictable. This will be the case more and more, also for level 5 education. So it also applies to level 5 education that if we cannot offer young people a secure future, we must give them the skills to create that future themselves... So we need to encourage their inquisitive attitude and give them the tools to fathom, understand and optimise professional situations. I was impressed by the work on research skills in education at level 5 that was developed some years ago in a collaboration between Stenden University of Applied Sciences and Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences

Dutch higher education is in danger of drifting and particularly Dutch Universities of Applied Sciences are on the edge of a great leap forward, but still in need for adequate anchoring in the professional column. We look for the necessary movement, but hinged from the professional identity. Level 5 education, which a strong place within the Universities of Applied Sciences of the future, will ensure this.

Thank you very much for listening to me.