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What kind of university does Erasmus want to be in fifteen years' time?

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I'm sure that none of you will have failed to notice that for a year now Erasmus University has been talking about working closely together with the universities of Delft and Leiden. The talks on cooperation are part of the efforts of the Executive Board and the deans to find an appropriate answer to the question of the kind of university Erasmus want to be and can be in fifteen years' time.



People experience the present, the past and the future as a continuum. Living in the here and now we can't really grasp how very different our university was fifteen years ago. But it was. Fifteen years ago Erasmus University primarily had a reputation for being a place where students received a sound education to prepare themselves primarily for posts in business and industry and in public administration. We are still proud of the fact that the generations that were trained then now people the boardrooms of major companies or hold senior posts in government in The Hague! Erasmus University then was above all a teaching university (save for the attempts of the medical faculty to become a leading research institute). Much has changed in fifteen years. Through the foresight of a number of university governors and researchers, think for instance of the founding of the ERIM, the Erasmus Research Institute of Management by business administrators and economists, we became a real research-intensive university with a powerful international orientation. So the present is not an automatic corollary to the past nor can we expect that the future will unfold as a natural extrapolation of the present. We ourselves can make a difference to what we want to be. There are a number of options.

- Do we want to be a fairly narrowly-based university with the emphasis on a limited number of disciplines or do we want to be broadly-based?

- Do we in due course mainly want to focus on regional, that is to say Dutch problems, or are we looking for a further international orientation?

- Do we want to pay more attention to education, or do we want to continue to define ourselves in the future as well as a research-oriented university?

These questions have no obvious answers given the national and international developments that are directly affecting the universities today. Nationally we are seeing a trend in which the universities are increasingly being asked to differentiate themselves. Right now there is at least one university which promotes itself as a university where the teaching has priority, and another university that has merged with research institutes whose focus is agribusiness.

But by far the greatest force that will be affecting the universities of the future will be the tremendous internationalisation of the knowledge business. Only fifteen years ago it was actually not done to move from one university to the other in the Netherlands. If a researcher with his group, for example, moved from Maastricht to Rotterdam it was de rigueur for the Rotterdam chancellor/rector to phone the Maastricht chancellor/rector to offer his apologies. Nowadays,

leading Dutch researchers depart in droves without more ado for the UK or the USA and are admirably waved goodbye. The universities with the best reputation worldwide have an irresistible attraction which is driving this growing internationalisation. They draw the best scientists, the best students and the lion's share of research funding. And then something occurs that is referred to in the literature as the Matthew effect after Matthew 13 verse 12: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away". Or in contemporary parlance: 'Winner takes all'. What I think is going to happen as a result of this process of globalisation is that in fifteen years' time there will be about 100 universities left in the world where research is being done at the highest level. The other universities will primarily have a regional function and will be important in educating the future national elites of society; the function that Erasmus University had fifteen years ago.

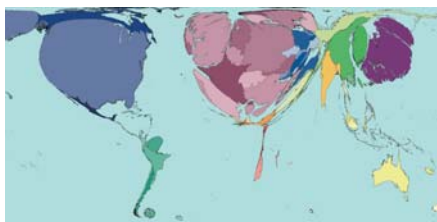
In the past month I have conducted a series of talks with senior professors in practically all the faculties. From those talks one thing became abundantly clear: the majority by far do not want to return to the past but are endeavouring to claim a place among the 100 top universities.

What do we need to do this?

Our point of departure is in some respects favourable and in some respects unfavourable. First a few comments on the downside. Erasmus University seems gradually to be losing market share when it comes to students. Five years ago more than 10% of all students came to Rotterdam, while now that is around 8%. Rotterdam is the youngest city of the Netherlands when it comes to age structure but these youngsters, often second and third generation Dutch people, are still not choosing to go to university. What's more, after 2020 there will be a demographic dip which means that the university will shrink. We can only accommodate this development by attracting international masters and PhD students, and in turn we can only do that successfully if by that time we rank among the top hundred universities. If we are to believe the various university rankings, we usually come between 150 and 200 worldwide. The Times Higher Education Ranking of World Universities, which has become one of the most reliable, placed us this year at number 158.

Now the good news. As it happens, the Dutch universities together do extraordinarily well. The Times Higher Education also publishes country rankings and in that table the Netherlands comes third after the USA and the UK, a performance that prompts the journal to comment

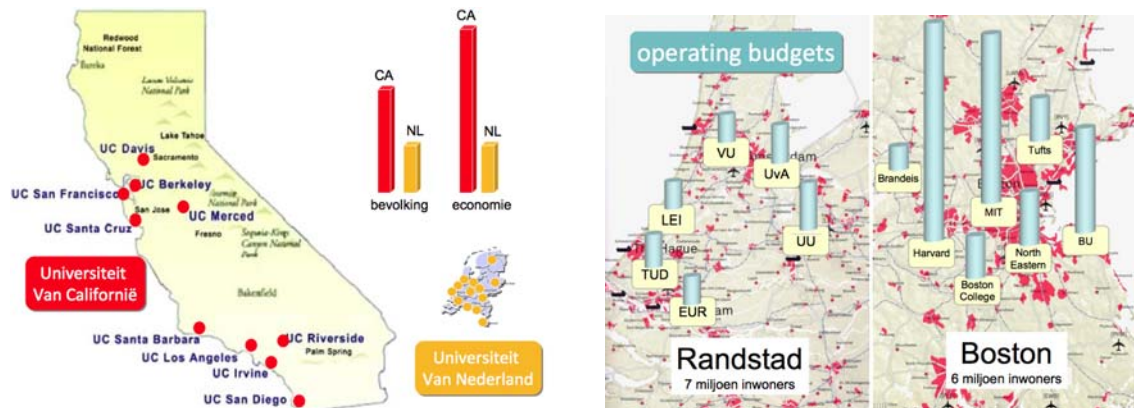
"The Netherlands is a standout national performer in this year's tables. With 12 institutions in the top 200, its performance is particularly impressive when country size is considered (p. 6)." *



Our university system produces 2% of all the research in the world and 3% of the citations. To put this in perspective: the Netherlands accounts for 1.3% of global economic production and has only 0.3% of the world's population. Even so, none of the Dutch universities is listed in the top fifty best universities! Why is that?

An instructive example is the Californian university system that has no less than seven universities in the top fifty. California has more than twice as many inhabitants as the Netherlands and is

economically almost four times as big. Even so it has no more research-intensive universities than the Netherlands. The obvious conclusion would seem to be that the Netherlands perhaps has too many research-intensive universities each of which is too small in itself to be among the best.** That conclusion is substantiated if one compares the budgets of the universities in the States with those of the Netherlands



Why is so much, in itself, first rate research being done in the Netherlands at a comparatively large number of universities, on a limited budget? I have said earlier from the same spot that research policy in the Netherlands is unusual in that to a large degree it is *student-driven*. The more students who are studying a particular subject, the more research that is being done in that discipline. That's why in the Netherlands quite a lot of research is carried out in disciplines like psychology, law, economics, and business administration. Not because that research in itself is better than research in other disciplines but because more students are taking these subjects. The state of affairs in the US, the UK and surrounding countries is very different. There, most research funding is divided competitively, the outcome being that the best universities get the most funds. Take Germany for instance. For some years now a scheme called the "Excellenzinitiative," was launched to give a limited number of universities a considerable additional research budget for five years. We don't need a crystal ball to tell us that in the future, too, the research budget in the Netherlands is going to be allocated with the focus on excellence. Perhaps not tomorrow, but certainly in the next fifteen years. The best thing we can do as a university is to prepare ourselves for this. One way is to enter into alliances with other universities, in order to strengthen our financial position. So it is no coincidence that apart from Rotterdam, Leiden and Delft, the Amsterdam Universities are also talking about collaborating.

<i>P=2004-2008, C=2004-2009 Largest EUR 100, by P</i>		CPP	MNCS2	C	P	CPP/ FC5m
UNIV OXFORD	UK	11.25	1.67	298531	26539	1.63
UNIV COLL LONDON	UK	10.85	1.48	285136	26286	1.46
UNIV CAMBRIDGE	UK	11.15	1.70	286150	25662	1.63
IMPERIAL COLL LONDON	UK	10.47	1.55	229935	21967	1.49
KATHOLIEKE UNIV LEUVEN	BE	8.23	1.35	161302	19603	1.38
UNIV PARIS VI P&M CURIE	FR	7.82	1.30	148537	18998	1.25
KOBENHAVNS UNIV	DK	9.00	1.39	164379	18274	1.34
UNIV MANCHESTER	UK	7.83	1.33	139861	17860	1.32
UNIV UTRECHT	NL	9.00	1.42	160107	17782	1.35
UNIV MILANO	IT	8.46	1.20	148242	17522	1.22

Just out of curiosity let's simulate the effects of an alliance of the LDE universities on the position of such a new configuration in the rankings. The list you see here comes from a survey carried out by the Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) at Leiden University. It indicates the universities that published most in the world's leading journals in the period 2004-2009. You can see: reputation correlates with productivity. Where would the Alliance of the LDE Universities be on this list?

P=2004-2009, C=2004-2009 Largest EUR 100, by P		CPP	MNCS2	C	P	CPP/ FCSm
ALLIANCE of LDE-UNIV			1.42		32503	
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1	THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
2	THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
3	ECOLE POLYTECHNIQUE FEDERALE DE LAUSANNE
4	Eidgenussische Technische Hochschule Zurich
5	IMPERIAL COLLEGE OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND MEDICINE
6	UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON
7	KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN
8	KAROLINSKA INSTITUTET
9	THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
10	THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

A second simulation is of the acquisition of funds for research from the European Union in Brussels. As you can see: the “usual suspects” raise the most money in Brussels. Reputation also correlates with fund-raising capacity. What would the position be of the Alliance of LDE universities?

1	ALLIANCE of LDE-UNIVERSITIES
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My own conclusion is that in looking for an answer to the question of what kind of university Erasmus wants to be in fifteen years' time it is certainly a good idea to continue talks with our fellow universities here in the region. You may of course profoundly disagree with me. Different opinions provide material for debate. It is that debate that is absolutely crucial for the future of our university.

* The World University Rankings 2011-2012, Supplement, 6 October 2011.

** California also has several dozen universities and colleges besides these that concentrate more on teaching. The research budgets mainly go to the research universities in open competitions.