

Social impact @ sciences: the end of the ivory tower?

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Is it necessary to discuss why science matters? To most of us science obviously matters from a historic perspective. If we go back to the enlightenment, or even before that, we see that science has brought a lot to society in terms of new and important ideas. Science helped a lot in the development of society and even of civilisation. So why is the question “does science matter” so often asked nowadays?

Science is in transition. Science today appears to be in a crisis. From the massive media attention for matters of scientific integrity in recent years, one might be inclined to think that trust in science is crumbling. In addition to these factors, since the outbreak of the economic crisis, the Dutch government has tended to look at science primarily as a means to support economic growth in the short term. This threatens the existence of fundamental science. Some even go as far as to say that the Dutch policy aimed at stimulating

economic priority industries (*topsectoren-beleid*) reflects this particular point of view.

Many challenges for Science do exist, but not all is doom and gloom. The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in its 2013 report on trust in science clearly shows that science is still a strong brand and that the Dutch people still have a relatively high level of trust in science. Moreover, scientists should not be afraid of criticism and a degree of scepticism. These are, after all, important drivers which stimulate scientists to be productive and creative. The Royal Academy also argues that clear changes in the societal landscape, the autonomy of science and its objective position need a response from the scientific community in order to sustain high levels of public trust and impact in the future.

We simply have to become much more transparent and explain to society what we



are doing and what we contribute to society. This not only implies much more attention to communication and reputation, but also requires a critical look at our scientific system and the way it incentivises scientific behaviour.

Perhaps there is some truth in the metaphor of the ivory tower, and maybe even in that of the Tower of Babel, in which scientists have become so specialised that they do not even understand each other anymore. It may thus be necessary to leave our ivory tower. Science and scientists occasionally remain too much within their own mono-disciplinary comfort zones, and do not try to connect and bring together different fields of knowledge. In the end, we all know that inter- and multidisciplinary research is necessary to solve societal problems.

In early April 2014, we launched the strategy of our university for the period up

to 2018. The strategy is entitled “impact and relevance”. To me these two terms are intertwined. In the long run the impact of our research will be much stronger if we succeed in making it relevant for society. Impact goes much further than counting citations and other bibliometric analyses. Impact is not about the number of papers produced, but rather about the quality and the societal relevance of those papers.

Erasmus University has ample opportunity to combine impact and relevance. We have a lot of potential for increasing our societal relevance, it is in our genes so to speak. (This holds particularly true for ISS.) We have a no-nonsense attitude and most of our medical and social sciences have an applied nature. Our university is close to one of the world’s largest harbours and to the centre of government.

Erasmus University is in the proximity of two other internationally renowned universities: Delft and Leiden. Instead of

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being competitors we are actually complementary, offering scope for cooperation. Moreover, our alumni are very happy with the training they received at Erasmus University: they have better chances in the labour market and they are better prepared for the world of work than some of their peers. Our alumni work in strategic and influential positions in society. New initiatives in life-long learning are being developed. EUR has a relatively large 3rd stream of income, with a sizeable amount of education for professionals, offering good opportunities for Life Long Learning.

All in all, Erasmus University is well positioned to sustain and develop success in terms of valorisation and to bring the knowledge we create to society. Indeed, that will help us to succeed in what we want to create: science for society.

