

THE DEBATE OVER DUTCH UNIVERSITIES: AN ANALYSIS OF STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

R. Bernabela, P. Bles, A. Bloecker, D. DeRock, M. van Es, M. Gerritse,
T. de Jongh, W. Lansing, M. Martinot, J. van de Wetering
Master Students Radboud University Nijmegen, Honors Academy

Abstract

A heated debate has been taking place concerning research and teaching at Dutch universities for the last few years. The ministry of science and education has published reports on its strategy to improve university curricula and position the Netherlands as a globally competitive knowledge economy. These reports have provoked an uproar of responses from think tanks, concerned academics, and the media. At the center of the debate is disagreement over who should determine the Dutch university curricula and how these curricula should look. Many stakeholders in the higher education system have voiced their opinion, and some have not been heard. The result is that the diversity of visions is ignored or taken for granted in the official reports.

Recognizing this gap in stakeholder analysis, the aim of this paper is to bring attention to the wide range of perspectives on who should be responsible for designing higher education curricula. Based on a previous analysis by the Rathenau Institute, we distinguish five different groups of stakeholders: government, business sector, university faculty and administration, students, and the societal sector. We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with representatives from each stakeholder group, and distributed quantitative questionnaires to people in the societal sector (i.e. people not directly affiliated with universities or graduates).

Preliminary data suggests that the stakeholders have different target points concerning the university curricula. Representatives from the governmental sector tend to place special emphasis on the link between research and education, while representatives from the business sector rather focus on greater opportunities for students to obtain practical experience in the job market. Responses from students reflect a belief that they should be able to influence the curriculum in order to compete with other students on the international job market. On the other hand, university faculty expresses concern that focusing on the labor market puts undue pressure on students and compromises the quality of education. Interestingly, the opinions of members of 'society' seem to be relatively unchanged by political and economic shifts.

Following a comprehensive analysis of the data, we believe that our results will make a significant contribution to the debate on university education in the Netherlands. These results should be regarded as a foundation for further research concerning the direction of Dutch higher education, for only if we take into account the different opinions and views of the various stakeholders can we decide which steps to take. Moreover, the Dutch experience offers lessons to other countries as well. As the internationalization of higher education is occurring faster than ever before, universities throughout Europe and globally are experiencing many of the same pressures.

Keywords: Dutch University curriculum, Higher Education, Participants' opinions