

REINVENTING TRADITIONS. THREE QUESTIONS TO MIRKO NOORDEGRAAF

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Eva Cendon: Please give us a sense of what societal impact of universities entails. What do you mean by it? What are its core activities?

Mirko Noordegraaf: Societal impact is a key concept in the Netherlands; in Dutch universities; in my university, Utrecht University and especially in my faculty within the university, the Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance. We use it to make sure that we have a more contemporary understanding of how the university functions in relation to society. To be more precise, we use it as a key concept to link both academic education and research to society, to societal practices, partners, themes, issues, problems, etc. We do not say 'we have impacts which occur alongside our education and research'; no, we have education and research as the core of our university, but we explicitly want to relate this education and research to society.

We do this because it enriches academic work, and it makes education and research much more interesting. But we also do this to have more societal meaning as well as more societal impact. This, in turn, might contribute to the legitimacy of our university. It is very important to have strong connections between academic institutions and society. That has always been the case, but this is especially relevant nowadays. It is a legitimacy-seeking endeavour and we have related key concepts to characterise this transition. In Utrecht, we emphasize 'open science'. It is about opening up and not only bringing our knowledge to society, but also using knowledge from society for our academic practices. It is reciprocal.

In terms of activities, we – in our faculty – identify four core activities for creating impact. First of all, we link education, including both Bachelors and Masters level education to society, by what we call 'societal learning.' This means labour market perspectives for Bachelors and Masters students, alumni relations and bringing alumni back to classrooms to share their experiences. Continuing education is part of societal learning - we call it 'education for professionals'. This has linked us to society, to labour markets, to external organisations, etc. In addition, we have a core activity called 'societal advice' which refers to academic consultancy projects; we advise policymakers, politicians, organisations, executives and the

like. Next, we have a core activity called 'societal interactions,' which includes public engagement, outreach and public lectures. We also bring artworks to the city, to open up dialogues. Finally, we have the core activity of 'societal co-production'. We make deals with partners from the outside and co-produce. Academic questions for research do not only come from us, but they are also developed in co-production with societal partners, reciprocally.

Eva Cendon: If we look more closely at university continuing education, what forms of impact do you see?

Mirko Noordegraaf: We have already quite a history in terms of continuing education. Part of this is executive education, so formal executive master programmes, two-year programmes with formal university diplomas. In addition, we have more open programmes which are essentially non-formal education. These programmes do not directly lead to a university diploma, but to a certificate. And we have all kinds of in-company trajectories and more specific programmes for organisations. Sometimes, they are also linked to the consultancy projects we do, or the developmental programmes we have. It's not education in the literal sense, it's not classical teaching, but it is part of 'educating' or developing professionals.

In terms of impacts, first of all we work with professionals, professional workers. Via education, teaching modules and programmes, we have an influence on them. We strengthen them in terms of intellectual capabilities, in terms of knowledge and insight, in terms of skills, and we of course contribute to their careers and career progression. All of this has an impact on professionals and their position in the labour market as well as on their careers. That is first order impact.

Secondly, via working with these professionals and groups of professionals, we also have an impact on the functioning of organisations, policy processes, politics. As a Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance, and here, at the School of Governance, we work with managers from public and semi-public organisations such as hospitals and schools, and we work with with policymakers, governments, ministries and municipalities, and with politicians. We have an impact on the functioning of organisations and on policymaking through continuing education practices.

In addition to that, we have an impact via these professionals on ourselves because we can use their experiences, knowledge, insights and also their projects to enrich our own education and research. We keep in touch with developments 'out there'. We know the trends and we can use them. And we make use of them for example as guest lecturers and for internships in Bachelor's and Master's education to prepare our younger students for the labour market. So, this getting in touch and staying in touch and getting in tune is an important asset of these programmes.

Finally, we have a 'knowledge circulation' effect. We value the circulation of knowledge and experiences, and we link and connect fields of practices. That really adds something to all these various fields. It is not only a separate activity with instrumental value, it is a more circular phenomenon aimed at combining knowledge, linking theses to these practices, enriching practices via academic consultancy and turning consultancy projects into academic publications.

Eva Cendon: This leads me to the future: We live in disruptive times, and things are constantly changing. What are conditions for strengthening our actions and generating impact? What are the critical questions that universities need to pose themselves when they want to follow such a route?

Mirko Noordegraaf: I think it's important for universities to invest in continuing education, especially as times are changing. We in our faculty have a history in it, but it is not a widespread or very common phenomenon. Up until now, in most parts of the university, we think of education as Bachelor's degree, three years; Master's degree, one or two years ... and that's the end of it. After that, students work and they will never be students again. But I believe continuing education or lifelong learning will become much more natural. As a university, we must adapt to this changing world, and have a good feel for changing labour markets which will be characterised by flexible contracts and more unpredictable career steps, or indeed individuals changing professional fields entirely. It should be our role not only to set up programs and guarantee quality, but also to focus on appropriate knowledge and skills, and to make effective credentialing systems, including micro-credentials. In this way we can support and facilitate people within these changing labour markets.

In addition, we have to understand new trends and developments in society. We now see for example a huge emphasis on the digitalisation of society, and related developments such as artificial intelligence, also in terms of knowledge and research. We can link this to continuing education, to offer state of the art programs.

This brings us to conditions for organizing responsiveness and flexibility and perhaps, to some extent, improvisation. That is really difficult for universities, because universities are very big institutions, with bureaucratic features. In addition, we are a public institution, we must be very careful, so there is reluctance and there is a sensitivity to risks and accountability pressures. Changing this more traditional way of working calls for continuous education and also broader impact cultures and infrastructures.

Culturally, we try to have a more entrepreneurial mindset. We organize modules for our own colleagues, on how to organise continuing education. What does it mean in terms of getting to know markets? What does it require from us in terms of marketing? How about project control, etc.? This is internal training for continuing education.

In terms of infrastructure, we have new governance procedures, also quality concerns, quality procedures, new colleagues. In our faculty (and the humanities faculty), we have a director for continuing education, or education for professionals, as we call it. He is stimulating, activating and directing the development, together with (support) staff.

Finally, all of this needs to be connected to the primary processes, to the regular colleague, the regular researcher and teacher. In terms of ideas, this is quite simple, but it is a tough matter of connecting educational professionals' activities to performance assessment, task assignment, and career steps. We try to have more enriched task assignments, not only Bachelors and Masters courses, but also education for professionals, linked to research and/or consultancy and/or public engagement and related impact activities. When you make it transparent in task assignments, impact is not an 'add-on', it does not come 'on top of' existing tasks.

In the Netherlands, this is legitimated by a new emphasis on 'rewards and recognition', backed by models. We now move towards the TRIPLE model, that is Team spirit, Research, Impact, Professional performance, Leadership and Education. You can then start to combine, when it comes to individual people. For example, education might be education for professionals, but in combination with consultancy projects or public engagement. That then becomes part of the formal performance discussion, and also of career prospects. We try to

have more differentiated career lines, not only research related, but also education related and education for professionals and impact related.

This is happening on a small scale but we are trying to scale up. Nevertheless, a day-to-day focus on individual colleagues is crucial, so that our colleagues will have more certainty on how to engage in these new types of activities which are new in traditional and well-established university contexts. Let us reinvent these traditions.

Eva Cendon: Thank you very much.