

## “Is Humboldt dead?”

Speech Opening Academic Year 2013/2014

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Maastricht, 2 September 2013

Ladies and Gentlemen, Honoured Guests,

My question for today: Is Humboldt dead? The answer undoubtedly is yes: Wilhelm von Humboldt died in 1835, after a long and distinguished career. Together with his brother, the explorer Alexander von Humboldt, he had great influence in many fields such as philosophy, research, and not least policy advice in Prussia and beyond. But I am asking this question not rhetorically with a focus on Wilhelm von Humboldt's life and times, but to address the current threats to the traditional universities that are still building on the so-called Humboldt principles

It is surprising that he left only three notes outlining the Humboldtian principles that still today are the basis of the self-definition of universities all over the world. To summarize, these are:

- University autonomy from the state
- A broad knowledge level ("Bildung") of the students entering the university
- The specific role of universities in linking (fundamental) research in all aspects of the educational process
- And the spirit of academic freedom as a principle.

It is just these pillars of the academic tradition of universities that have been questioned in recent years in recent years and have come under pressure. The underlying challenges for universities are neatly summarized in the recent publication "An avalanche is coming" published by the Institute for Public Policy Research in the UK. This essay compares universities to snow-covered mountains that appear solid from the outside but where dramatic changes occur under the surface that will cause an avalanche and ultimately a catastrophic event.

What are these changes that are threatening our universities?

1. The change of the global economy. Without doubt there is a shift of economic powerhouses to the east. China, India and Russia are and will become even greater economic players in the future. This will increase the need for a highly educated skilled workforce in these countries that can provide the knowledge basis for these countries. The question is whether traditional universities in Europe and the US can cope with these changes of supply and demand as well as providing the graduates needed for the economic growth of these emerging markets.
2. The ongoing economic crisis of the western world. Youth unemployment is rising dramatically in some European countries which raises the question whether a university education is still an optimal basis for finding an adequate job. At the same time many countries deinvest in research and education and are far away from reaching the 3% margin of the GNP that was agreed on in the Lisbon agenda.
3. Increasing costs of education. In many places governments ask more financial contributions from students and their families. Recent developments in the US with undergraduate tuition fees of around 50,000 Dollars per year and the UK which increased the tuition fee level to 9,000 pounds, which has led to English

students choosing increasingly to study in other countries. Our influx of UK students is a good indicator of this. Also in the Netherlands, studying is becoming more expensive with the introduction of the *social leenstelsel*.

4. The decreasing value of a university degree. In many countries, having a university degree is by no means a guarantee for employment anymore and it becomes increasingly important what portfolio you have built up next to your studies. And at the same time the number of graduates from emerging economies is growing exponentially. In 2020 (thus in 7 years!) China alone will account for almost 30 % of all the university graduates in the world aged 25-34. This means that in 2020 there will be as many Chinese graduates in that age group as in the entire US labour force!
5. The ubiquity of content. Google has recently provided information that every two days we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization until 2003. And somebody has calculated that if we printed out all the information on Wikipedia in the format of Encyclopedia Britannica, this would create almost 2000 volumes of books. In our days students do not have to listen to lectures or read textbooks to get access to this knowledge. Therefore, the monopoly of universities and their market share as information providers appears to be dwindling.
6. New providers: There is a movement that you do not have to have a degree to get a job and websites like [www.notgoingtouni.co.uk](http://www.notgoingtouni.co.uk) provide access to apprenticeships without degrees. Well, I looked at this website and many of the jobs offered are in the British army or in a café – so maybe this is not yet completion to the universities but certainly something to watch. More challenging are the recent rise of digital learning environments and the so-called revolution of MOOCs standing for Massive Open Online Courses. A revolution indeed if you look at the numbers of courses offered by online platforms where teachers from international top universities lecture to ten thousands of online students in a truly global lecture hall. Will these MOOCs even replace classical university teaching as has been predicted by many including our good friend Robbert Dijkgraaf in a recent column?

All in all these perceived threats are sizable. According to the authors of "An avalanche is coming", traditional and Humboldtian universities not only face these dramatic changes but also make the wrong choices to be sustainable.

- One of the dangers is complacency, and the inability to respond rapidly to the changes to come. For example, by investing mostly in real estate and buildings universities could be stuck with an infrastructure (and its costs) that is not targeted to the changing student needs. If indeed a differentiation of learning formats occur and the digital revolution will have an impact, lecture halls may become superfluous as more differentiated learning styles become prominent.
- Secondly, universities that are ONLY focusing on the best ranking positions will not differentiate sufficiently. One reason for this is that most rankings are modelled on the leading research universities such as Harvard, Stanford and MIT. These rankings are heavily influenced by research output and neglect the other core element of the university: education and learning. If they want to perform well in these rankings, institutions will have to shift budgets from education to

research, because this influences the ranking position positively. It is interesting to note that even educational performances in some rankings are based on research such as the so-called Shanghai ranking where educational quality is based on how many Nobel laureates a university has on the staff or as alumni.

- Furthermore, questions arise whether the traditional universities are producing graduates that are adequate and fit for the challenges of a new labour market. And however ambitious the goal to produce Nobel laureates may be – what is the quality of the other 99.99 % of graduates, if universities become only research institutes without sufficient funding, structure and attention for innovative education?
- Lastly there is the danger of splendid isolation, by misunderstanding the benefits of university autonomy by turning your back on your direct environment.

What is the position of Maastricht University in the context of these challenges? Are we threatened by this avalanche?

First of all: What type of university do we want to be? Our colleagues at the Institute for Public Policy Research predict that there will be 5 types of universities surviving, after the avalanche has hit us:

- Elite universities
- Mass universities
- Niche Universities
- Regional universities
- Lifelong learning universities

And here they make their first mistake: Categorization, putting everything into a drawer. Maastricht University cannot be put into any of these drawers; because we have elements of all these university types. We are elitist in our focused research fields where we define areas where we really belong to the top of the world. We are also a broad university with large educational programmes. If you like, we are also a niche university, because our unique approach combining problem-based learning and the international classroom is a distinctive feature as has been lauded last year after our institutional accreditation. And we clearly are a university with a regional and local outlook. We take the responsibility with our partners in our immediate surroundings to first and foremost build on the knowledge economy in Limburg and the so-called Brainport 2020 area. And last but not least we pay attention to life-long learning structures at the heart of our educational agenda.

Now let us look specifically how we address the challenges to come.

#### 1. The international network university

With becoming a partner in the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) we have joined a strong group of universities that are similar to us, that share a philosophy of being excellent in research AND education as well as regional engagement. By having achieved the quality label “International University” by the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) we are positioning ourselves in the unique position to provide an education for Dutch students to make them fit for the European and Global Labour markets and we are attractive to bring the best international brains to the Netherlands. An increasing percentage of these international students will stay as knowledge workers in our region,

others will go back as ambassadors of Maastricht, Limburg and the Netherlands.

I think, by the way, that all Dutch Universities are well equipped to master the challenges to come. We have chosen for differentiation, not for a system of one size fits all and the recent performance agreements show explicitly the various approaches throughout our country. And we can see the effect! As rankings should be more considered the result and not the goal of a higher education policy, all Dutch Universities are ranked in the top 200 universities worldwide and expanding their position. The strength of our system is not only distinctiveness and differentiation but also a strong basis on education and research with different money streams that are protected, thereby ensuring the quality of both central tasks of universities. This balance is our common strength that we should preserve in the coming competition.

## 2. Science for society

Universities are often accused of standing at a distance from the true challenges of society locking themselves up in a tower. Research without obvious relevance appears to be eminent. Today universities have to position themselves on the basis of academic freedom of research and the demands of society at the same time. If I look at our university, we have achieved a good balance between the two. And please stop with the senseless discussions of the need for basic versus applied research. Let us look at the so-called Frascati definition set out by the OECD a few years ago. Their definition of applied research as targeted towards a specific practical aim fits our research approach very well. And much more important than talking about different research categories is the translation of research to the market and putting it in the service of the needs of our surroundings. Our recent interdisciplinary initiatives EAT Well and MACIMIDE (Maastricht Centre for Citizenship, Migration and Development) are excellent examples that bring basic and applied research on important societal questions together across the faculties. We also are taking a unique path by linking education, research and development in our region. This joint approach has successfully materialized in the recently published programme of the Limburg Knowledge Axis. In connection with educational innovations and developments in infrastructures, it brings research issues closer to the market by joint ventures that help to valorize and in the end commercialize research results to the benefits of society. In the knowledge axis projects we are using together with our partners the MUMC and Zuyd Hogeschool our own resources and put them to the service of regional development. Over 10 years the university alone will invest more than 100 million Euros into this endeavour and we are grateful that the province of Limburg will match this initiative. The central development of the four main campus locations of this axis will be a motor for whole Limburg and the benefit of this initiative will be felt throughout the whole of Limburg, from Horst an der Maas to Eijsden. It will also finally bring substance to develop a common Euregional perspective with our partners in Aachen, Hasselt, Liege and many others. I am pleased to report that our minister of higher education, Jet Bussemakers, has recently named this programme as an example for addressing the issues of the development of the Dutch knowledge society in an exemplary way, and I would like to thank all of our partners for their continued support.

### 3. Leading in learning?

How do we respond to the educational challenge? What about these MOOCs? Are they going to replace the university structure as we know it? Are they even threatening universities in their mere existence? Clearly the mere numbers of students attending MOOCs are impressive. It is also interesting to note that it is precisely universities that are on top of the international research rankings that seem to engage actively in this technology. MOOCs appear to be attractive for many: Universities could save money for infrastructure and even make money on providing this access. (MOOCs are free now most of the time for students, but the massive investment of venture capitalists in these platforms tells me that they are considered money-making scheme in the future.) They are attractive to the students because they can listen to lectures from famous professors of leading universities at their own pace and in the privacy of their home. And they can be attractive for policy makers as a fantastic approach to save money in university funding. Why have universities in the Netherlands if we could all go to MIT? Before we all get too excited, let's look at the numbers. How successful are these MOOCs by applying the standards that all Dutch universities had to subscribe too in the so-called performance agreements. To summarize: at the moment their ultimate success in terms of graduation are meagre, and their value is not yet accepted by employers. But as with all global movements, we should respond to this development. Maastricht University is really very much at the other end of the spectrum of the current "MOOC-mania". We will stay dedicated to our brand of Maastricht problem-based learning, to small tutoring groups, to building and releasing the capabilities and the individual power of the students; our focus is on learning rather than on teaching and we will keep investing into this process. Why is that? Because we believe that educating academic professionals encompasses more than just achieving knowledge, it requires a complex process leading to a differentiated end result of the learning process. Look for example, at the 7 characteristics that should be the result of medical studies. Doctors that we educate should of course be academics but also have achieved proficiency in many other qualities. Empathy and compassion are not very well learned from a flat screen, but need the human approach.

At the same time, we need to respond to the changing times of digitalization. How do we include new technologies in our learning process? How are we dealing with applicants providing MOOC diplomas? And are we experimenting with MOOC technology ourselves by implementing blended learning techniques into our curriculum? Will they play a role in the part-time student market and in lifelong learning? I sincerely believe so and maybe there will be a brand where MOOCs can also mean Maastricht Open Online Courses!

### 4. Employability is key

As I said earlier, the production of as many Nobel laureates as possible is not the primary goal of our university. We rather ask the question if we can provide graduates that are fit for the national and international labour market. This is a parameter that I miss in all of the rankings. Isn't that ridiculous that this important university task (being responsible for providing the professionals of the future) appears to be neglected? We are at Maastricht University in the fortunate

position to be able to assess this through our institute on research on the labor market (ROA). And the ROA numbers give a quite good view on our excellent performance. In the recent survey 2012 ROA investigated Maastricht University cohorts from academic years 2000-2001, 2005–2006 and 2009 -2010. This study showed that only 2 to 3 % of Maastricht graduates are out of the labour force in the long run. Also, more than 80 % work in their own or a related field of study and more than 85 % work at university level or even higher in their current job. Contrary to common belief, the majority of our graduates work in the Netherlands, although we see a (slow) increase of graduates working abroad reflecting not only the growing percentage of our international students but also the globalization of the labour market. And last but not least the large majority of our former students would again choose for a study at Maastricht University. All in all, these figures are excellent, and it will be interesting to watch whether digital courses can achieve similarly outstanding values.

5. Afspraak is afspraak

At the end, let me address the delicate issue of university autonomy, one of the central features of Humboldt's university design. It has been clearly shown that autonomy is a key factor to the success of a university. But I strongly believe that in our days autonomous universities also have to be held accountable to their society and should not be afraid of it. Today it is more appropriate to speak of a "license to operate" that we should obtain as a basis for autonomy, and I believe the Dutch performance agreements are a good measure to keep this balance. We as universities are committed to fill in these agreements but let us remind ourselves that it is a two-way road and the agreement needs also the Dutch government to fulfill its part of the deal. Een afspraak is een afspraak!

To conclude, we definitely live in challenging times. Universities, as societies, need to cope with dramatic changes, economically, demographically, and being run with new technologies: they need to cope with redefining their mission, their research approach and educational philosophy. Do we have to be scared about this coming avalanche? Let's not forget that universities are a resilient breed – out of the 50 organizations in the western world that are older than 500 years, 45 are universities. They have survived wars, the plague, political and industrial revolutions and many other threats. Maastricht University is young and we certainly should not be scared but aware of the constantly changing environment. For our university I am certainly more optimistic than the authors of the avalanche report that we will cope with the change to come. The key for our university is to be distinctive, to be a research university built on a true balance between learning and research, oriented and being alert to changes and its surroundings with focused research that is carried out in an interdisciplinary way and with a continuous engagement for problem-based learning and its focus on the student. As this is our translation of science for society, since we are providing the professionals that form the basis of the knowledge society in our region and beyond.

And I do not like the picture of the university being a mountain. This university is not a piece of rock covered with snow. We are flexible and transparent. If I were to choose a picture for what we are and where we want to go, it would be that of a ship moving in the sea and exploring the horizon. There may be rough seas ahead but we will keep floating and exploring new frontiers. In the end we may even be a university that

embraces the spirit of Humboldt in a modern way, by keeping a healthy balance between research and learning. So let's be ready for the things to come.

And we can do this by following Humboldt's advice who said:

"I am more and more convinced that our happiness or our unhappiness depends far more on the way we meet the events of life than on the nature of those events themselves."

Thank you very much for your attention.