

THE FUTURE OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGES OR THE EMANCIPATION OF THE BACHELOR'S

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Never ask an old warrior to look back at what used to be his battlefield: what you're likely to get is a bunch of distorted memories, juicy anecdotes or old man's frustrations about what hasn't yet been realized. The memories of someone who has been actively involved in the battles that were fought some time ago, are inevitably one-sided, partial and biased. And as to anecdotes: anecdotes shouldn't be communicated in a serious conference like this, and besides, most people who would figure in my anecdotes are still alive and I don't want to imply them in something they may have second thoughts about. Frustrations? I am most certainly not frustrated. Just look around and see what you have accomplished over the last twenty years. You managed to breach the walls of mono-disciplinarity and many of your graduates have made it to the better master- and Ph.D. programs of the academic world and got impressive jobs in the real world.

But there is, of course, more to wish for. In the case of the Dutch Mix – another word for University College or the combination of a LAS program and a collegiate setting – and the emancipation of the bachelor stage in university education, the battle hasn't been won yet. My final conclusion at the end of my presentation will be that what has been accomplished over the last twenty years represents a halfway station, *and that it is up to you to bring it further to its intended destination*. That destination or the original intention was: improving undergraduate education *across the board*, and not only for a small group of students. My original hope that Liberal Arts and Sciences and the University Colleges in particular – as in a David and Goliath metaphor – could change the main course of our big universities; that hope has been partly realized, or better: has *only* partly been realized. In fact, the rusty Greenpeace boats we began with two decades ago have now been absorbed by the mighty ships we call universities. Many of them have found home in the more luxurious suites of their absorbers. The question I ask myself is whether this is a good or a not so good development. Is it a thorough recognition of the academic and educational value of our UC's, or does it represent another example of what we used to call in the sixties, in the footsteps of Marcuse, 'repressive tolerance'?

It is this question that I'd like to address this afternoon. But again, my main interest is not so much in the past; I'd like to give more thought to where we go from here, from this halfway station to the final destination. I therefore formulate, at the end of my contribution, a couple of policy measures that may bring us there. I also suggest a few research topics the results of which may help to keep University Colleges in the forefront of undergraduate education.

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The cognitive element is only one aspect of academic formation. Typical for this philosophy is the connection between cognitive and moral competencies. Liberal Arts and Sciences stands for 'education' in the true sense of the word, i.e. combining knowledge with moral alertness.

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The good thing is, of course, that we exist. In this country, we now have about ten University Colleges, all of them more or less based on a Liberal Arts & Sciences profile. And in many other European and Asian countries as well, Liberal Arts initiatives have come to the fore. Our own ECOLAS organization enjoys the membership of many universities and departments throughout Europe. We also have BLASTER and we have you, a group of dedicated Liberal Arts supporters. And next to UC's and other Liberal

Arts initiatives we do see a growing interest in undergraduate education and it is certainly no hubris on our part to assume that your work has been instrumental in this positive development.

But still, I had hoped for at least 30 Liberal Arts UC's in the Netherlands by now. I had hoped that our main universities would at least *consider* the idea of a 'collegiate' organization for the entire bachelor stage instead of the bamboo-system of traditional fixed programs or 'studierichtingen'. I had hoped that the LAS-approach that was introduced in the mid-90's had convinced faculty and university boards that such an environment is beneficial for students in that it gives them the chance to gradually zoom in on what they think is most interesting. I had hoped that by introducing the LAS format the typically Dutch pillarized system of 400-plus fixed programs had become completely superfluous.

As a sociologist and as a student of social change I should have known better: changes in Higher Education take time, much time, even a Creuzfeldt-Jakob incubation period of twenty years or more, as for the mad-cows disease. And, more importantly, let us not forget that even in our allegedly egalitarian country, structural changes won't happen unless they manage to get a certain elitist ring about them. Unless there is something very special about them, even well designed changes won't stick and will eventually be buried in the cemetery of well meant but utterly naïve ideals. University Colleges in this country have in fact managed to acquire this elitist, top-of-the-bill reputation, which is okay of course. But it's now time to make the idea behind the UC's 'sink' into all the corners of undergraduate education. And that again will take time; I give it another 20 years...

Let me first give you an idea as to how it all started. In 1995, I was responsible for a 'Report to the Government' on Higher Education published by the Dutch Council for Government Policy, the WRR. The report (no. 47) was called *Higher Education in Stages* and anticipated a differentiation of the bachelor and master stage. At that moment in time this was new as the university's educational programs were undifferentiated and led directly to the master's or *doctorandus* title. The idea of a differentiation of bachelor and master was to be adopted by the European Ministers of Education in the so-called Bologna (or BaMa-) Agreement a few years later (in June 1999).

The Council's report made clear that our universities had shockingly low graduation results: no more than 22% of all students graduated in the official program time. It also made clear that the low graduation rate could partly be explained by the fact that the three main objectives or goals of university education (Bildung, preparing students for a research career or preparing students for a variety of professions) were kept in a nasty mutual competition. Faculty who were more in favor of just one of these three goals found themselves in constant conflict with supporters of the other two objectives.

We all know that during the 80's and 90's the research-orientation became ever more dominant, the professional orientation was at most a second best for students who weren't good enough for a research career, and the Bildung orientation came in last, as a sad remnant of a romantic past in academia. In the years that followed, beginning with the Bologna agreement, much has changed for the better, but even then: if you ask individual faculty today what they really think important in universities, we all know what they'll answer, or are supposed to answer: "research, of course".

The solution that was proposed in our report was simple: give the three main objectives of university education (Bildung, Research and Profession) their own and relatively distinct stage. Under full recognition of the importance of all three objectives in all stages, the bachelor stage may then focus on Bildung, on academic formation, with a view to either a research- or professional specialization in the master stage. Such a differentiation in stages or phases could settle down the tensions between the three objectives and their 'professorial' supporters, tensions that are inevitable and inherent in an undifferentiated set-up (as I have felt personally in the many years that I served as Vice Rector and Dean of the Social Sciences Department of Utrecht University).

Nevertheless, the suggested solution didn't meet with much approval. Whereas the reception by political parties and the cabinet was relatively positive, the universities didn't like it at all. As the main author of the report I was summoned by my own university board to distance myself from the report's main conclusions and recommendations. The report itself was to be buried in the lowest drawer of the university's administration building, and nothing would ever happen with it. Problem solved, attack neutralized.

But, strangely enough, less than a year later, in 1996, the same university board asked me to look into the possibility of a University College, along the lines that were drawn in this 'damned' Report to the Government. We then managed to buy the military barracks at the Kromhout area in Utrecht and had them renovated so as to make it suitable for what then became UCU, the first University College in the country. It was the minister of education himself who officially opened UCU in 1998. On top of that, and again: completely unexpected, this Minister of Education took the Council's report to Bologna where it played its part in the bachelor/master decision made by the European ministers of education in June 1999. The BaMa agreement created the space for the suggested differentiation of the university's main objectives and, even more importantly, for the Liberal Arts & Sciences model to become the backbone of the bachelor stage. This was an important first step in what I consider as 'the emancipation of the bachelor stage'.

The LAS-model was particularly interesting for universities and students alike in that it could solve the problem of the wrong program choices by students, one of the main dropout factors. Around the year 2000 there were approximately 485 different and distinct (university) bachelor programs out of which the student was supposed to pick only one. The result was, of course, a high percentage of wrong choices, and consequently a great loss of time, money and motivation. For students at the age of 17 choosing one specific program out of so many possibilities is more than just a challenge: it is almost impossible. No surprise, of course, that the dropout rate in the first year of study skyrocketed towards a dramatic 35%.

As our universities were under the spell of the fixed program or studierichtingen-model, they simply settled for this dramatic result. They knew at the same time that such bad numbers couldn't be sold to the general public and found a way to keep up their public

image: they changed the way in which graduation rate were calculated. They didn't count the first year of study in their statistics, didn't start to count until the second year so as to include just the students who had survived their first year, and granted them an additional year in order to reach a more acceptable graduation rate of around 45%...

Back to the LAS-model. Whereas a LAS-model may indeed solve one of the more serious problems of the university educational system, it's not enough to finally emancipate the bachelor stage. This is where the concept of University College becomes important. A University College is a 'Dutch' mix of a liberal arts and sciences profile on the one hand and a 'collegiate' size of around 600 students on the other. Therefore, in the term University College we actually combine a predominantly American LAS profile and an Oxbridge college setting. The idea behind this combination is that the cognitive, moral and ethical promises of the LAS philosophy cannot be fulfilled unless the teaching and learning are done within a limited, small-scale setting. For both cognitive and moral growth students need to get to know each other – and their teachers. If not, they'll run into the same problems as many LAS-institutions in the USA, where students find themselves all too often in lecture halls with 200 or 300 colleagues. Luckily, in our countries that risk is relatively small, as most LAS-initiatives are still at the fringes of our institutions and haven't attracted thousands of students yet. But we certainly should keep in mind that unless LAS gets embedded in a small-scale setting, e.g. of some kind of 'colleges', it won't be able to fulfill its promises.

The ten University Colleges in this country have done their share in emancipating undergraduate education in our universities. What was described in the WRR-report of 1995 as a rather lamentable situation has in many respects improved, certainly within the UC's themselves but also in the 'regular' bachelor programs. Teaching and educating students have gradually become more important again in our universities. And wasn't that one of the main goals of what we wanted to happen?

But let's not indulge in too much contentment. As a sociologist and certainly one who has a special interest in the unintended consequences of well-meant policies, I must admit that the adoration of UC's isn't only an unintended but also in certain respects an unwelcome consequence. For the main intention behind the UC-concept was twofold: introducing on the one hand the LAS-format as an efficient replacement of the 400-plus fixed and narrowly defined study programs or 'studierichtingen', and on the other hand promoting the collegiate setting as a means for making the LAS-promises come true, *not only for the bright and beautiful, but for every student with the required entrance diploma.*

This is why I believe that we are now at an important juncture in the ongoing emancipation of undergraduate education. UC's have managed to get a positive academic reputation and are being seen as the preferred suppliers of master and Ph.D. candidates. *The question now is: do we settle for a situation in which only a small group of students enjoy the educational and productive power of the UC-concept, or do we take a next step in spreading the word that this combination of LAS and College is beneficial for all students who take their life seriously?* Do we settle for the elitist role UC's play in the world of Dutch undergraduate education, or do we actively look into the possibilities for this concept to sink into all the corners of the bachelor stage?

In the remainder of my presentation I'll give you my suggestions as to how the bachelor stage at universities can stand the test of time. I have five of such suggestions and try to combine them with research projects that can be done in your colleges.

Adopt the LAS-format across the board. My first recommendation is to adopt the LAS-format as quickly as possible. It would mean that universities recognize that LAS is not just one of the 400-plus fixed programs, not just another ‘studierichting’ (as it is now treated by many universities), but the umbrella under which individual students walk their own study paths. A LAS program may contain all the (bachelor) courses that are on offer by the current 400-plus programs, but without the strict borders between them. What I am saying is – in the vernacular of our HE-bureaucracy – that just one CROHO-number for the bachelor stage would suffice. What I am saying is that students, how sure or unsure they may be about the direction they want to study in, that they simply come to ‘college’ and that they get time, as they proceed, to either reconfirm whatever choices they may have made in advance or decide to go in a different direction. Wouldn’t it be a good idea for UC-students and faculty to design an undergraduate research project in which the pros and cons for students, for faculty and for universities at large are being described and discussed? It would give the discussion about LAS in undergraduate a more empirical base and bring it to a level that exceeds the level of assumptions and beliefs.

Undergraduates should acquire an ample store of knowledge, both in depth, by concentrating in a particular field, and in breadth, by devoting attention to several different disciplines. They should gain an ability to communicate with precision and style, a basic competence in quantitative skills, a familiarity with at least one foreign language, and a capacity to think clearly and critically. Students should also become acquainted with the important methods of inquiry and thought by which we acquire knowledge and understanding of nature, society, and ourselves.

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Adopt the collegiate structure for LAS. My second recommendation connects LAS to the collegiate structure of a UC. The promises and ambitions of LAS, cognitively as well as morally, need a context in which students and teachers form a kind of academic community, residential or semi-residential. Without such a small-scale setting students are likely to get the same alienating experience as they have in traditionally popular and heavily populated programs like psychology and law. As I said already, because most LAS-initiatives in Europe are still located at the fringes of the university’s mainstream, the danger of reducing students to mere numbers is here relatively small, at least for the time being. But when LAS becomes the mainstream of undergraduate education, like it is in most American universities, the danger of anonymity, the main factor in the loss of drive and motivation, looms up again. That is why there is so much criticism about LAS in the USA and why many American HE-specialists are surprised to find out that it is coming up in Europe and Asia. Okay, LAS without a collegiate setting does solve the important problem of students having to pick a program at a too early stage and losing their drive as they proceed, but it may still run the risk of turning students into numbers. As the LAS-philosophy entails the promise of *Bildung*, of academic formation, personal growth and responsible citizenship, it does need a context that is recognizable for both students and teachers. The promises of LAS cannot be fulfilled in an anonymous context. Mutual recognition of students and teachers is a *conditio sine qua non*.

But, one would say, isn’t this introduction of a collegiate system extremely expensive? My claim is that it isn’t and I know of a few university rectors who support me in this claim. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating: isn’t this a great research topic for our UC students? Personally, I can’t figure why having 40 or 50 different fixed programs or

‘studierichtingen’ in undergraduate for, say, 18.000 students like in Utrecht or Amsterdam, would be less expensive than having 30 ‘colleges’ for the same number of students. It would certainly make a great undergraduate research project for your students and I can’t wait for the results.

Redefine the mantra of teaching and research. My third recommendation gets to the heart of the mantra of teaching and research. We all know that the hallmark of university education is that it is connected to research and research experience. Teaching and learning can’t do without research. In the – German – words of Wilhelm von Humboldt: “Diese in intellektueller Arbeit vereinte Gemeinschaft der Lehrenden und Lernenden definiert die Universität.” Well, in the last couple of decades this hallmark of university life has gotten a very specific meaning, one which most certainly would make Von Humboldt turn around in his grave. The mantra now means something like: ‘students should be educated by teachers who also have research experience and are actively doing research’. However true and valuable this statement may be, it is less than half of what was originally meant. *The original meaning points to the fact that teachers and learners are jointly doing research and that it is this form of jointly acquiring knowledge that defines university education.*

I am grateful to see that this is exactly what many of our UC’s have been doing (and also have reported about in this BLASTER program). The ideal way for students to learn is by being actively engaged in research projects, also in the bachelor stage. The naïve idea that the bachelor stage is for teaching and the master’s and Ph.D.-stage for research has made that for many teachers teaching has become a by-product of what their universities ask them to do, and that is: participating in research projects and collecting as many research grants as possible. No wonder that for many faculty teaching has become – or had to become – a side-job.

Undergraduate research should be part and parcel of the university’s bachelor program. Only then teaching and research are indispensably connected, in the way Von Humboldt talked about it. It would certainly be a good idea for organizations like NWO, our National Science Foundation, to also make grants available for undergraduate research and for undergraduate teachers to fine-tune that kind of research.

There is more. For let’s be honest: most university teachers do understand that their most effective contribution to society and humankind can be found in their teaching, much more than in the many papers they may have written during their careers. Ask university teachers how many of their papers have gotten memorable status, and from their honest answers one may conclude that their effectiveness as teacher and tutor is unmistakably more impressive. Good university teachers are aware of the fact that the chance that one of their students will win the Nobel Prize is much greater than that they themselves will receive that honor. I bet that the social or societal ‘impact’ of good teaching, including jointly conducted undergraduate research, is much greater than 9 out of 10 peer reviewed papers in highly ranked journals. Some of such papers may have high impact scores within the scientific community itself, but how do we compare them with the social, societal and personal impact scores of good teaching, of teachers whose pride is in the career of their students? I’d love to see a project in which such questions are being asked.

Invest in a teaching and learning center. The fourth recommendation for bringing the promise of the Dutch Mix a step further is for universities to invest in *T&L centers for the bachelor stage*. Next to the ordinary study skills, these T&L centers should focus on two

main points: the incorporation of digitalization and forms of blended learning in undergraduate activities, and the way in which undergraduate research can become the backbone of teaching and learning in the bachelor stage. The rapid development of digital instruments and facilities that can be used in teaching and learning ask for a concerted effort in bringing new and old teachers up to date. A UC 3.0 should make maximum use of these new developments, certainly at a time that the digital skills of incoming students often surpass the experience of their teachers. New developments with respect to the mixed classroom, the international classroom, the virtual exchange between classes and courses in all parts of the world and the accessibility of information sources require UC's and their teachers to be as 'digiwise' as possible.

Make a career plan for undergraduate teachers. My final recommendation is a direct consequence of turning the bachelor stage into a relatively independent part of university education. As in the better colleges in the USA (e.g. Amherst, Smith, Swarthmore etc.) it requires a reevaluation of the position of undergraduate faculty in its own right. That position should no longer be a derivative of what before BaMa used to be the traditional university teacher: it should be geared to the objectives of this stage in university education. And as the specific qualities needed for undergraduate research, for blended learning and other modern innovations in teaching and research cannot be adequately mastered and taught in short term appointments, a serious 'tenure'- or career-plan is needed. Such a plan should meet the need for teachers to either make the step toward a research or professional career after an undergraduate teaching career of, say, 5 years, or to further develop their undergraduate teaching passion, possibly combined with a small role in graduate programs in research or professionalism. And last but not least: appoint a Rector or Dean for the bachelor stage.

I know: my recommendations aren't likely to get easily accepted by the main universities and their related organizations like NWO and VSNU. I also know, and fear, that for these recommendations to become reality another 20 years is needed, after the twenty years that has brought us to the point where we are now. But with your help, the help of the Deans of UC's in our country, the help of our growing army of alumni and the continued success of all of your activities, it will happen, eventually.

Our society needs citizens who can rapidly adapt to the changing needs of the growth and technological development of the economy, who also have an unprecedented degree of specialized knowledge; yet those young people will be best served by an education sufficiently liberal and unspecialized that they are primarily trained to be broadly knowledgeable and to think clearly and creatively. Postindustrial economies place little value on the retention of specialized knowledge but instead emphasize basic numeracy and literacy (including computer literacy). This situation strikes me as a tremendous opportunity for the humanist to claim more space and time in the undergraduate curriculum...

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