‘THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGIN‘…..’

Your excellencies,
Colleagues Rectores Magnifici,
Dear colleagues and students,
Ladies and gentlemen,

This is the tenth and last time that I stand here on this lectern. The first time was in October 2007 when I started my first term as rector and my introduction then was as follows:

_Ceci n’est pas une pomme_ is the title of one of the most well-known paintings of Magritte. At first sight spectators assume that the painting portrays an apple, until they read the title of the painting “This is not an apple.” An at first cast-iron certainty is suddenly undermined by the contradiction in picture and text. In this way Magritte succeeds in raising doubt about the accuracy of our observation. On further consideration we have to accept the fact that the painter is right. The apple we observe is not a real apple, but it is paint on canvas, a pictorial imitation of this fruit. We threatened to become victim of an optical illusion, but Magritte kept us from what he calls “The betrayal of images.”

Just like in 2007 you are in a situation that, in a way, is comparable to the one of the unsuspecting observer of Magritte’s surrealistic representation. You are listening to a speech of an academic, but for an academic it is not a speech in the traditional sense. For you are being addressed by an academic in the role of administrator. Today you are even listening to an administrator who is no longer an administrator.

Maybe I should have started today with Magritte’s painting _Attempting the impossible_. But let me give it a try.

**Change is the only constant**

Our educational institutions reflect the life styles and learning patterns of the times in which they were designed. One of the urgent reasons for finding new forms for higher education is that the 20th century model still in use mirrors a society that no longer exists. Global higher education underwent a period of remarkable change in the first 15 years of the 21st century. Since 2000, participation in higher education has increased significantly. UNESCO figures for enrolment in tertiary education show that globally participation rose from 19% to 32% in 2012. The number of students studying abroad more than doubled from 2.1 million in 2000 to 4.5 million. As the focus on the student experience has increased, so has the intensity of scrutiny on the quality of teaching. And since the turn of the millennium there has been an increasing expectation for research to bring a benefit for the society that funds it. We are, in

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short, in one of those periods of lag, in which an institution evolves more slowly than the society it serves.

**Massification of higher education**

Responding to this mass demand has driven many of the key transformations of the past decades. Parents and/or students are increasingly made responsible for tuition and other fees. The 2014 CNN documentary *Ivory Tower*³ highlighted this spiraling of tuition rates and student loan debts. It set in motion political protests⁴,⁵,⁶,⁷ around the world from globalization critiques to the Occupy Wall Street movement.

The expansion of student numbers has presented a major challenge for systems like ours where the tradition has been to provide access to free or highly subsidized tertiary education. In financial terms, this has become an unsustainable model. Take the Netherlands. In 2006 the committee Chang plead for an extra investment of 1 billion. The plea was repeated by the committee Veerman in 2010. The investments of the higher education and research review committee in 2012 came out of the universities’ own pockets. Recently, a new request for an extra 1 billion was made based on the Dutch national research agenda. So far the claims have failed to materialize. The conclusion that no government with an aging population and mounting pension and health care liabilities will be able to maintain and adequately fund the kind of higher education system we know today seems justified. While we all agree that additional money spent on higher education is money well spent, it would appear that universities will have to fundamentally rethink their educational practices. My purpose today is not only to criticize. The only way forward is to make daring proposals, if for no other reason than at least to instigate an in-depth discussion. So fasten your seat belts! I will address curriculum reform, the unity of research and teaching, selection at entry and technology respectively.

**Comprehensive curriculum reform**

Recently Elkana and Klöpper⁸ in their book *The university in the twenty-first century* presented an excellent analysis of the spectrum of challenges confronting the university, including possible solutions. Their thinking about higher education is rooted in a critical analysis of the Enlightenment. The creation of knowledge that was advanced by the Enlightenment was unprecedented. Never in the history of mankind had such a systematic collection of knowledge been based on the principles of a rational, universal, context-independent science, avoiding contradictions. In the last 100 or more years cracks in this wall have started to develop. And that is why the authors propose a contextual approach, that is, the realization that knowledge must be understood in the context of its historical emergence and also in its social and political context. This is what they call the new Enlightenment, not

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³ [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofuhlR4LAgQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofuhlR4LAgQ).
only to realize that the world is messy and complex – but that we also have to teach it as messy and complex.

Such a new set of values requires a comprehensive curriculum reform. The authors’ proposal rests on the following three pillars. From the first year on, seminars should be taught dealing with real-life situations parallel to rigorous introductory courses in specific disciplines. From the onset students should be ‘marinated’ in genuine interdisciplinarity, so as to give them a broad intellectual horizon. Right from the start elements of non-linear thinking should be introduced to students at the very beginning of their studies to adequately address the cognitive dimension of concerned citizenship. Such a concerned citizen must be conscious of the major problems that confront humanity today, must be aware of the limitations of our existing intellectual tools in coping with these problems and must develop some experience in thinking about what is needed in order to overcome these limitations. To have this knowledge is an absolute prerequisite in becoming active members of a democratic society.

The creation of a such new curriculum has to be spearheaded by a critical mass of academics. They will not only have to develop good ideas, but also be prepared to teach that which will become part of a new curriculum. In other words academics will have to give up their cherished privilege, which is often confused with academic freedom, that each academic can teach whatever he or she fancies. Academic freedom is not necessarily the freedom of individual academics to do as they please, but rather the freedom of the faculty to collectively make binding decisions on what should be done. Otherwise Hutchins⁹ is not completely wrong with his definition of the modern university as a series of buildings loosely connected through the central heating system.

Rethinking the unity of research and teaching

Another proposal is to rethink the unity of research and teaching. The academic profession is under stress as never before. The need to respond to the demands of massification has caused the average qualification for academics in many countries to decline.⁹ On many levels the Humboldtian ideals and guidelines have to be rethought. Those ideals and principles were meant for a very small number of students, in rich and elite research institutions with a very low faculty/student ratio.

So, why not break down the unity of teaching and research? To maintain a liveliness of spirit, teachers should be knowledgeable on the fundamentals of and the latest developments in their discipline. But do they have to be actively engaged in doing cutting-edge research themselves? There is no reason to think that cutting edge research prepares scholars for rethinking the epistemological foundations of their discipline. But it is exactly this rethinking that is of great importance in making for good teaching. Such a breakdown will only work, however, if teaching staff enjoys all the privileges and perks of the research faculty.

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Academics employed in institutions of higher education nominally receive their salary for teaching and research. But hiring criteria for faculty make it very clear where the priority lies from an institutional perspective. Teaching always was a matter of local value or appreciation and hardly contributed to building a scholar’s reputation. In hindsight it thus seems self-evident that publications should have become the most important means for the faculty to create his or her reputation and for becoming the standard in career advancement. What began as an unwanted and unplanned by-product of the Science Citation Index became a widespread practice and the ‘controlling variable’ in determining the promotion of scholars. Writing in the Chronicle of Higher education, Bauerlein and colleagues from different disciplinary backgrounds explained the problem based on empirical data: while the Citation Index is not the only measure, and arguably not even the best one, it is still meaningful that ‘only 45 percent of the articles published in the 4500 top scientific journals were cited within the first five years of publication.’ If a large portion of the time academics spend on producing these papers were to be dedicated to teaching, this would allow for an essential, and budget-neutral, improvement of teaching. To be clear, this is not about ‘usefulness’ of research in a shortsighted utilitarian sense, nor a plea for placing limits on certain types of research. History has shown time and again that the most esoteric ideas may turn out to be useful. But the idea of opportunity cost somehow has to be brought into this important public policy debate. And governments should use this type of reform first and foremost as an instrument to bring down class sizes and lower the faculty/student ratios to an acceptable level, instead of abusing such a move to impose another round of cost-cutting on higher education.

**Selection at entry**

Another possible solution would be to introduce student selection at entry. In the Netherlands this (controversial) topic is being debated since 1997. In our case the goal would be to put a restriction on the number of students. In Anglo-Saxon universities this has been common practice for many years, be it that selection there is for more or less uniform liberal arts programs and not for the many disciplinary programs being offered in Dutch universities. That makes selection more complicated. But suppose that the previously suggested comprehensive curriculum reform would become a reality. Then I think we should not hesitate to discuss selection at entry as another possible solution for the fact that universities as we know them are unable to provide the kind of higher education we envision with the funds at their disposal. One of the advantages of selection at entry would be that a breakdown of the unity of research and teaching as suggested before is not necessary.

**Technology in higher education**

And finally, the impact of the transformative potential of today’s technology in the field of higher education has been largely subliminal. While change is in the works, most of higher education is still experiencing the silence before the storm. New forms of instruction – fully online as well as blended – can help to increase current capacity in systems of higher

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education. So, they are far from a ‘nice to have’ but can help to solve urgent problems – even if these problems may be different in different contexts. Higher education today is very much supply driven\textsuperscript{12}. The courses available at an institution are a function of the knowledge and skills of the faculty on campus. Thanks to technology it may become more demand driven as people register interest for a given topic. New forms of learning (simulations, game-based learning environments) allow for wholly new forms of instruction and assessment. Complex analytics that evaluate learner interaction with teaching resources in real-time will make the interventions of educators much more targeted and thus effective. Moreover, improved ability to track student progress will allow for degree requirements to become more flexible. Once new forms of teaching are firmly established, the time resources freed-up by automated or digitally supported forms of instruction and assessment can be devoted to what technology advocates and skeptics alike deem to be most important: individual attention. Critics warning that digitalization may create a learning environment that is characterized by distance between educators and students should contemplate the words a student cites in an article that appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education: “If you want to encounter distance education ….. sit in the back of a 500-seat lecture”\textsuperscript{13}.

If we accept the fact that repeating the mantra-like call on governments to provide additional resources is in vain, these are a number of possible solutions. To accomplish all of this will not be easy. But not to try would be a tragedy. Therefore, Elkana and Klöpper’s book is a must read for all those interested in the future survival of universities. Slow, incremental change has become a relic of the past. Today’s shifts come fast and big\textsuperscript{14}. So, wait and see is not a feasible option.

**Knowledge more important than ever before**

Our societies have never deluged with so much information and never been in greater need of knowledge. In addition, there is much disorder in our democracies\textsuperscript{15}, the cultivation of suspicion towards foreigners, the manipulation of fear and the knowing disregard of truth. The one thing we must teach all our students, if our societies are to remain free, is to know what knowledge truly is. For without knowledge, without respect for research, science and reason, democracies cannot bring order to our daily life. Over time, after inconceivable effort, and many backward steps, we have made progress. The continent of certainty grows slowly larger. If we care about knowledge, if we truly care to winnow the grain of knowledge from the chaff of ideology, partisanship, rhetoric and lies, we will be doing the university’s part in bringing back our democracy in good shape.

We need to get our act together, for ‘The times they are a-changin ….’

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\textsuperscript{15} M. Ignatieff. Inauguration Address. Central European University, October 21, 2016.
Thank you for your attention.