

Latent trust

by

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Latent trust

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before we listen to Professor Matthijs van Veelen's Dies speech, it's my privilege as Rector Magnificus to address you and to reflect on higher education. But you won't hear what you might be expecting. A speech about the Amsterdam Faculty of Science. Following the announcement by the representative advisory bodies just before Christmas, we are of course waiting for a letter with comments and suggestions before responding. We will then sit down together to discuss how we can continue to work towards a strong cluster of the exact sciences in Amsterdam.

But, given that I can't go into this further at the present time, I want to touch on something else that has been preoccupying the broader landscape of higher education – the call for change ...

Concerned representatives of the scientific community, such as the *Science in Transition* group and the *Platform for the Reform of Dutch Universities*, are crying out for greater recognition of the waning authority of universities.^{1,2} Rosanne Hertzberger summed it up nicely in her column for the Dutch daily *NRC Handelsblad*.³ Everything has to change. The university has become a publishing factory. There's a surplus of students and doctoral candidates. There's too much commercialism and too little public money. Too much time is spent on grant applications and too little on teaching. There's too much fraud and carelessness. There's a lack of social relevance. There's not enough space for unsexy scientists, or for daring research. And there's too much status. The general public has an excessively rosy image of scientists, who, after all, are just ordinary people. And that's why scientists need to be approached in a more critical way.

[...]

'Who can you trust these days?' is a commonly heard complaint. Mistrust on the part of 'citizens' is increasing. Opinion polls seem to confirm this: trust in institutions in particular is thought to have diminished in recent years.⁴

¹ H. Dijkstelbloem, F. Huisman, F. Miedema, & W. Mijnhardt. Position paper, Science in Transition, 2013.

² <http://www.scienceintransition.nl/nieuws/platform-hervorming-nederlandse-universiteiten-opgericht>.

³ R. Herzberger. 'Aanzien'. *NRC Handelsblad*, 9 November 2013.

⁴ Edelman Trust Barometer. *2013 Annual Global Study*.

European Commission. *Standard Eurobarometer 80*. Autumn 2013.

W. Tiemeijer & J. de Jong. *Hoeveel vertrouwen hebben Nederlanders in wetenschap?* WRR & Rathenau Institute, 2013.

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. *Public praises science: scientists fault public, media*. A survey conducted in collaboration with the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Washington, 2009.

I emphasise *thought to have*, because this research needs to be questioned. But that aside. Let's assume for now that this is the way it is, that people have less trust in the state, the judge, the doctor *and* the university. Because indeed, even if trust in scientists as a professional group remains *relatively* high, it too is coming under pressure.

Why is that? What do these two assertions – the critical views of *Science in Transition* on the one hand, and the decline of trust on the other – have in common? What role do the high expectations that we're seeing today with respect to the university play? ⁵ And how do we increase trust in the *one* institution that still has a relatively high degree of authority?

The answer to that so far has been: 'greater transparency and greater accountability'. That sounds wonderful; the more, the better.

Transparency is rapidly becoming the ultimate buzzword of the early 21st century. ⁶ It's the miracle solution for corruption, misguidance and inefficiency – because if you're being observed, you'll behave, or so they say. For many, transparency is therefore the best way to achieve legitimacy and trust.

The illusion of transparency

The explicit belief in transparency dates back to the 18th-century credence in the miraculous workings of visibility and transparency, and really went hand in hand with the Enlightenment and the emergence of modern science. Where previously God had been the ultimate authority, we were now left with nature. In our current information age, transparency is possible on a scale that people could once only have dreamt of. We can find all the information we want with a click of the mouse. But more *isn't* always better.

It's become clear by now that this also leads to a surge of *incorrect* information, which is more likely to create uncertainty than trust. And transparency can also be used for unjust purposes, or to manipulate public opinion. Unless we can trace information back to a source that we can check – which we can't always do when there's so much of it – it's difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff.

More really *isn't* always better.

Because this great enthusiasm for full openness and transparency appears to have done little to restore public confidence. ⁷ That shouldn't really be such a surprise either, when you consider that the technologies that so simply and efficiently disseminate information, turn out to be just as good at disseminating falsehoods. The real enemy of trust is deceit and the betrayal of trust. A little less emphasis on the idealised concept of transparency, and more emphasis on curtailing deceit would be better.

⁵ KNAW. *Vertrouwen in wetenschap*. May 2013.

⁶ L. Berger (2013). *Hoe 'transparantie' het antwoord op alles werd*. De Correspondent.

⁷ O. O'Neill. *A question of trust*. Reith Lecture: *Trust and transparency*, 2002.

Regulatory zeal

Ladies and gentlemen, more really *isn't* always better. And that applies to accountability too.⁸ We are asked to account for ourselves more than ever before. This has filtered down to every level. In the public sector in particular, new forms of accountability have reached the level of detailed monitoring. Central planning may have failed in the former Soviet Union, but it's alive and well in the Netherlands. It has gone too far, at too many levels, and is coming from too many organisations. Monitoring is increasingly replacing trust. This may generate more information, but it also fosters a culture of suspicion, low morale and, ultimately, professional cynicism.

Increasingly refined forms of accountability threaten to corner us in a position of defensive science and defensive politics. If we assess this abundance of accountability by our own standards – performance indicators, in other words! – we should at least be seeing signs of revival in public trust. But we aren't.

Don't get me wrong – I don't advocate a university where scientists while away their days in total isolation and without any accountability. Those days are far behind us. And of course we can have inspections of our teaching and research, but it could be a little less and a little less costly. And I'm absolutely not against openness and accountability. But it's not the solution to the problem we're observing.

Transparency and accountability have reached levels previously unseen, but without delivering the desired result. The aim was to restore confidence. What I see is quite the opposite. Doesn't this suggest that perhaps we're using the wrong kind of accountability, and that we ought to return to a culture where we trust each other?

Sustainable thinking

That's difficult, I admit, in the current era. We're living in historic times, a period of immense change that occurs only once every 200 or 300 years. It's visible in the shift of economic power to the East, ongoing technological progress, vastly increased global ties, and increasing pressure on resources. This all leads to uncertainty. And uncertainty, in turn, leads to calls for more accountability, more transparency and more monitoring – anything to counter that uncertainty. But aside from the fact that it doesn't work, it also has another negative side-effect: as a result of it civil society institutions are increasingly focusing on a limited number of objectives and short-term results, at the expense of long-term value creation.⁹

This results in a weakening of the links between institutions and society, which are so crucial to the wellbeing of both. The sociologist and historian Steven Shapin showed how even in the 17th century the problem of addressing the credibility of claims made by researchers was

⁸ O. O'Neill. *A question of trust*. Reith Lecture: *Called to account*, 2002.

⁹ D. Barton. *Capitalism for the long term*. Harvard Business Review, March, 2011.

resolved in the same way as it was in day-to-day life.¹⁰ Telling the truth and delivering on promises were elevated to a standard. In the absence of the trustworthy civil society organisations of today, you could only place your trust in the person himself. In our postmodern society, knowledge is increasingly divorced from those who discover it and authority is increasingly derived from the institutions that people belong to. The system therefore has to be strict and self-regulating. Karl Popper showed us how a scientific result held up as being true is a social construct that depends on a huge number of other earlier assumptions made by colleagues. That trust relies on the knowledge and skill of the researchers, acquired over many years of training.

Deconstructing the myth of the genius of the inspired scholar to reveal the highly educated ordinary person who, like anyone else, just wants to earn a decent living seems to suddenly make him less unique and trustworthy.¹¹

So what now, you ask yourself. What's the answer for our concerned scientists?

Confidence in good management focused on keeping you on track and providing both financial and substantive accountability is a precondition. But it's insufficient on its own. Curtailing deceit is important, because nothing destroys trust as effectively as wasting or betraying it. Thirdly, being willing to take on a challenge, not being afraid and considering alternatives – as is currently being done in new evaluation protocols for research, where the emphasis lies not on production or quality but on scientific quality.¹²

Because there too, ladies and gentlemen, it's true to say that publishing more isn't always better.

But something else is even more important – because it's about the question of *how* you organise this. How you ensure good management. How you prevent deceit. How you safeguard and deliver quality.

Let's just go back a bit. Earlier, I referred to the high expectations on the part of citizens and government with respect to science. Not just in terms of teaching and research, but also in terms of social service provision and innovation. Universities are supposed to score impressive points and to contribute to solutions for the major problems of our day. To generate status, earn money and provide answers – and that, preferably as quickly as possible.

¹⁰ S. Shapin. *The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation*. The University of Chicago Press, 2008.

¹¹ F. Miedema. 'Het geïnspireerde genie als modelgeleerde: De geloofwaardigheid van de hedendaagse wetenschapper'. *De Academische Boekengids* 75 (July 2009): 24-28.

¹² San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment: Putting science into the assessment of research. VSNU, KNAW, NWO. *Standard Evaluation Protocol (SEP)*: Protocol for research assessment in the Netherlands, under revision.

But, ladies and gentlemen, if we are to prevent universities and scientists from getting stuck in an impossible position, we need to rid ourselves of the ideal that everyone needs to be the best in everything. Scientists don't have to be perfect. Nobody can be the best in everything all at the same time. And nobody should want to do everything on their own.

Craig Calhoun, director of the London School of Economics, recently said the following in the Dutch daily *De Groene Amsterdammer*: the idea of the scientist working in total isolation on that major breakthrough is a myth.¹³ It's about the mix of having good colleagues around you and communicating with a wider circle around you. Science, according to Calhoun, is a collective process.

He's right. It is a collective process. It's about the research groups, about the teaching institutes. Nobody can be the best in everything all at the same time. But groups, departments and faculties can be.

Science, ladies and gentlemen, is always in transition. Science has demonstrated the ability to successfully adapt, without being influenced by the passing trends of excessive openness or control, but by managing quality assurance. *The* best way to do that, to prevent deceit and to safeguard quality is to understand that science happens – and must be organised – within groups. This enables us to have faith in collaborative research and sound leadership. Research shouldn't be an isolated pursuit. Research groups correct and inspire each other. Power and control are a function of the way that collaboration is organised. And where collaboration is concerned, more of that *is* always better.

Thank you for your attention.

¹³ Brave new world: Craig Calhoun. 'We hebben een mooie crisis verprutst'. *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 18 December 2013.