"BE CURIOUS, DEMANDING AND DARE TO FAIL"

Opening Academic Year 2012 Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam
Prince Constantijn of Orange-Nassau
Guest Lecture

My first day in University the dean or some other important person of the university asked everyone to look at their neighbours, knowing that only 1 in 3 students would graduate. These neighbours were thus likely to fail. I wasn’t too keen on statistics, but remember that I decided it was not going to be me. However, I never really asked what happened to my neighbours.

Looking back they may have been far more successful than me, even though I got my law degree. They may have started their own businesses, left for another prestigious scientific institution abroad, or indeed - as was implicitly suggested - struggled to find an appropriate job after dropping out.

I was invited today to speak to you about the internationalisation of academic education and research. I have some insights from my work at the EU Commission in the area of ICT policy, where I also deal with a part of the research and innovation budget in this domain. I will of course do what I have been told – I am a good civil servant – but I would also like to talk to you about your choices in life and the role university plays in this.

Changes

Since the time I entered Leiden University, 24 years ago, a lot has changed: Bachelors and Masters, classes in English, merging and collaborating universities, new and alternative career paths, elite University Colleges. I witnessed the end of life long loyalty to a company, but when I left university most graduates would still seek employment with the big banks, law firms and corporates like Unilever, Shell, Heineken. Few went into government, or a scientific career and even fewer started their own business or NGO. You may say this was typical for Leiden, not known for its entrepreneurial tradition, but I believe it was more or less true for graduates across the country.

The world at large has also changed considerably these last 25 years. We are in a transition, which makes this a very interesting time, especially being a student. Demography, the Web, globalisation, technology and the general economic outlook are all influencing the world in which you will study and later seek a job. Opportunities are far greater now than they have ever been to develop your talents. You have more information at your disposal than ever. You can connect with people and institutions across the globe. In many ways your possibilities are limitless.
However, at the same time the world out there is moving at a very high pace. It is proving much harder to find a good job now. You may find that your university degree hasn’t adapted fast enough to labour demands. That your formal skills are not adequate. That the structures and procedures of large employers are not aligned with your way of working and information sharing. Many eager highly qualified young people from all over the world will be competing for your job.

You chose an academic institution in Europe – in the Netherlands to be precise. Maybe by default, maybe deliberately, maybe by mistake. Not many people are betting on the strength of Europe these days. With Asia on the rise and the US still having the hegemony in world class academic institutions, these seem to be the places to go. Who doesn’t want to be part of the dynamism of China, or embellish his CV with Harvard or MIT?

Instead you are in Rotterdam; at the mouth of a shrinking continent. Shrinking in economic and political importance, in academic prowess, in industrial output and innovation capacity, and soon in population numbers. At least this is what we hear most of the time.

Instead, I would like to plead for your intelligence. I think you are much smarter than meets the eye. You have spotted that Rotterdam is a place of continuous reinvention. It is never content with the steady state. It is always rebuilding itself. The Tweede Maaslakte is an example, but also its city planning and social innovation have continued to explore boundaries and set new examples.

**A vital Europe**

Europe is also far more vital than people imagine. In the top 10 of most competitive nations, of most connected regions, and most innovative states, European countries dominate. Europe’s scientific institutions are still among the best in the world, think of CERN, Cambridge Human Genome Project, IMEC micro and nano-electronics in Leuven. Some Dutch sectors also compete on the global scale like Delft materials and water engineering, the biotech valley connecting Rotterdam, Leiden and Delft; food and agricultural sciences in Wageningen, just to name a few.

In the doom and gloom we – and especially our politicians – overlook how much cool stuff is actually going on in Europe. Most of which is much closer to you and your generation than to those who are in government and leading our large corporate institutions. Let me give you a few examples of major multidisciplinary research projects that the EU is funding. They all have the potential for life changing discovery:

- Sensing and feeling Humanoid Robotics: www.robotcompanions.eu
- The human brain project; simulating the working of the brain: www.humanbrainproject.eu
- Future of ICT based on the unique qualities of the Nobel prize winning material graphene: www.graphene-flagship.eu/GF
- Energy harvesting autonomous systems: www.ga-project.eu
- Future of medicine through large scale data harvesting and modelling: www.itfom.eu/project
- Modelling and simulating complex, global, socially interactive systems: www.futurict.eu
The complexity of this kind of research requires the best brains to collaborate, and to pool resources. Very few universities have the means and reputations to draw in the private funds to invest in large scale research infrastructures. In Europe maybe Cambridge stands out. But jointly a lot can be achieved. Look for instance at the region Leuven, Eindhoven, Cologne. Here we find world leading centres in photonic research and micro and nano-electronics that can muster the necessary scale to compete globally.

Global standards of excellence

It pays to be outward looking as an academic institution. Not only to attract more EU funding, but to become a recognised centre of excellence among peers, attracting academic talent and top students from across the globe. Take for example the Lofar telescope, in the northern Netherlands and Germany putting Enschede on the international map. Neurophysics and computing expertise has drawn the world to Zurich. The work in Rotterdam in genomics or virology also has similar potential. With such a scientific reputation opportunities also grow for knowledge transfer and commercialisation of research outputs into innovative enterprises.

Academic and scientific institutions have long traditions in competing with pet rivals at the national and regional level. Rotterdam and Groningen for economics; Leiden and Utrecht for Law (sorry Rotterdam), and many compete in bio-medical research. It is good to stay sharp and forward looking, but there is a risk of aiming too low, as the real competition that is setting the global standards of excellence, may be in Japan, US, Italy Sweden or the UK.

The ambition for research universities should be to connect with these centres or become one; or (and this may be a very reasonable alternative) to choose a different model, focused on education. Whatever the ambition, focus is the key word. Few universities have the luxury these days to offer everything to everyone at high quality. A drive towards internationalisation should not be one of financial opportunism, but a deliberate strategic choice.

The EU is doubling its research budget to 80Bn for the period 2014-2020. This sounds like a pretty good reason to aim for Europe, but it is not. The money flows where excellence is. Excellence will draw Europe and its funds to Rotterdam, not the other way round.

Rotterdam is well positioned to benefit from EU funding given its focus on societal challenges like health sciences, urban planning, econometrics and finance. In the new Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme one third of the budget will be dedicated to addressing major societal challenges, like: the ageing society, resource efficiency, reinventing mobility, feeding the world, etc. It will also allocate more funds through the European Research Council to the best scientists, research teams, and consortia independent of where these are.

If you are interested in a career in science there are masses of opportunities here, and you'll get to collaborate with a rich variety of the brightest colleagues across the continent and globally.
Having said that, I am aware that most of you will not choose a scientific career, and are more attracted to becoming a doctor, lawyer, international business man, or banker. You may also consider taking a riskier route. The way of the entrepreneur, following an idea and turning it into a business. I would suggest that at least you have to give this a try – if only for your personal development.

Entrepreneurship

Notwithstanding the economic downturn, all across Europe start-up hotspots are emerging, such as Amsterdam for apps and games; northern Italy and Denmark for smart health applications, London for finance. I just returned from Berlin, where a group of Spaniards organised the European Campus Party for 10000 young programmers, scientists and entrepreneurs to sit and camp together developing applications, new business models and services, testing technologies, building and designing new machines.

I acknowledge that I am a bit of a hypocrite to suggest that you become entrepreneurs. I was an independent consultant and helped others setting up businesses but I never started an enterprise myself; and I now find myself in the risk free world of the civil service. Still the few years of independence taught me to self-organise, to take nothing for granted, to focus on delivering for clients, and I also value time much more than I did before.

The real reason why I’d like you to consider this career is because I see so many inspiring examples around of young people developing and building real things, instead of pushing papers in large offices. Europe needs your ideas to flow to the markets; and new firms to emerge and grow into global players. We need it for our competitiveness; we need it for generating the jobs of tomorrow.

Responsibility for your own destiny

I started out by underlining how much has changed since my days in university. Still some things have remained the same. Most importantly: the responsibility that you have for your own destiny. You are all here for a reason. You chose this university. You are the lucky ones to be in the best place to explore, experiment, and learn from mistakes. You should realise what fantastic options you have to develop yourselves, build friendships and networks with a diverse group of talented people. Use this freedom and opportunity well! Study hard, play hard, keep your eyes and minds open and make sure you move around to explore what the world has to offer.

To paraphrase the statement of my dean 24 years ago: Look at your neighbours and imagine what great things they will be doing in 10 years’ time. All you can regret is that you didn’t go for it. Failure is a good lesson for a next step. If you fail, at least you tried. Not making mistakes because you never dared to step out of line is a sin (except for a civil servant for whom it is a virtue). The only real failure is mediocrity, failing to grab the opportunities that student life has to offer.
The challenge for the university is to support you as nascent scientist, entrepreneur, or whatever career choice you make. To create an open world that allows you to be challenged by the classes, the professors and your peers. That enables you to visit other universities and meet excellent minds across Europe and beyond. The challenge for the University is to combine scale with enough attention for the individual; giving you the right tools in terms of skills, knowledge, resources, infrastructure, as well as personal coaching.

If I compare my university experience with the MBA I did a few years later at INSEAD there is one big difference: at INSEAD I was a demanding client in search of excellence to improve my career chances; instead of a pupil following a fixed curriculum happy to scrape by with average scores. Looking back I shouldn’t have taken my university so lightly.

So, don’t forget what you are here for. As long as you deliver, don’t be shy to demand your Alma Mater to take care of you. In the end it is your future that is at stake.

I wish you a very rewarding time here at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam!