

Keynote by Prof. Dr. René ten Bos – Onderwijsparade 2020 –

The idea of a university

The view of the illustrious Rathenau Institute in The Hague is that science is alive and well in the Netherlands. This institute published some compelling figures last year. I'll provide you with just a few examples. All our universities are in the top 100 of the most important rankings. It turns out that Dutch scholars are first-rate networkers, effortlessly linking up with the international academic community. Publications by Dutch academics abound; in an era when excellence matters, publications are what really matters.

It goes without saying that the Rathenau institute identifies a few problems as well. Funding is not adequately distributed and usually ends up in the hands of those researchers who are already benefiting most from the public purse. The institute also levels some criticism at universities in their capacity as employers. A pleasant work environment isn't always guaranteed. Academia is profoundly competitive, which not everyone finds enjoyable. In general, though, we can be pleased with what Dutch academics are achieving and have achieved.

In no way do I wish to detract from the Rathenau Institute's findings. Yet it strikes me that the upbeat tone of the report stands in stark contrast to the ubiquitous grumbling in universities. In recent years, some disconcerting publications have lamented the supposed demise of academic life. To take one example, the popular book *Genadezesjes* by Groningen-based historian Eelco Runia quashes the academic community.

I've also read a kind of self-help text on how to get through these hard times as a young academic. Even in academic circles themselves, there's no shortage of items on the way in which market forces and bureaucracy are conspiring to turn university life into a living hell. To take just a small selection of the problems highlighted: education managers are in charge rather than professors; students are too busy earning money on the side to study properly; the standard of English of a great many staff members as well as students leaves a lot to be desired; and the level of bureaucracy is dragging everything towards depressing mediocrity rather than genuine excellence.

So, ladies and gentlemen, that's broadly the state of affairs. That's what has become of the university. As I see it, we need to weigh up the satisfaction and dissatisfaction observed against an idealisation of the university. We could simply refer to this idealisation as an idea. To put it another way, the university is an idea and I'd like to discuss this idea with you. So, what is this idea of the university?

Philosophers have explored the idea extensively over the centuries. I'll cite the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in this respect. Some people might question this choice of philosopher. Although he's touted as a postmodern denier of truth, anyone familiar with his ideas about the university will reach very different conclusions. Derrida asserts that the university is a place where truth is the true calling. The university's performativity is giving expression to truth.

In order to serve that truth, which involves the professionalism of not only full professors but also associate professors and students, the university must be exempted from all manner of

prerequisites. Derrida speaks of *une université sans condition*. Such a university constitutes a forum where anything and everything can and must be said as long as it is in the service of truth. All problems need to be examined and discussed without presuppositions. As a result, academic staff must be able to say and write what they want without having to worry about the reaction of certain parties (for example politicians, the business community, a government body or a publication-hungry dean). The issue with this idea of the university will be self-evident: the university is put in direct competition with a plethora of other institutional powers in society. This aspect is also what constitutes its *universality*. The university doesn't serve any national interest, nor does it serve big business or religious institutions. It serves only science and, in its wake, education. Within the compass of its quest for truth, it transcends all interests, which must remain private – in contrast with its universalistic pretensions.

To this way of thinking, the university represents an impregnable but also somewhat ethereal bastion, in which people labour to discover and serve truth in absolute, unassailable peace of mind. This idea of the university refuses to countenance any political motivation on the part of its staff.

They must despise all forms of corporate sponsorship and never ever work for their own financial gain. The academic is but a pure tool deployed in the service of truth. For me, Derrida's idea of a university has always been reminiscent of the American political philosopher John Rawls with his famous veil of ignorance. Reflecting on a just world is something that needs to be done with people who have forgotten who they are, their identity, their origins, their gender, and so on. Once they've been stripped of all contingent characteristics, you'll see that they naturally tend towards a liberal-capitalist society. While Derrida was no fan of Rawls, his reflections on the university very much sound as though the professionals who work there have been deprived of all the non-academic characteristics that academics do nonetheless have. As he writes, the university is a place that's identical with itself, a place that can be anywhere and nowhere. It's precisely this independence of place that makes it possible for nothing – absolutely nothing – other than the generation of knowledge to occur there.

Rest assured, Derrida himself doesn't believe that these ideas have ever been or could ever be fulfilled. They cast the university as an impenetrable fortress of immunity—which it isn't and can't be either. I'd like to draw your attention to the etymology of the word immunity. Traditionally, *'munia'* are laws, duties, services that must be rendered. Immunity means that one is exempt from these obligations. Hence, it was originally a legal term intended to safeguard certain human liberties. However, those liberties aren't fully guaranteed *de facto*. Consider the problems affecting the university which I just highlighted. Today's academic is a vulnerable creature, a *homo servilis*, rather than a freethinker unfettered by reality. Nonetheless, this idealised impenetrability of the university paradoxically foregrounds the vulnerability of the university. If the critics are right, it's an institution that's helpless in the face of all those forces seeking to influence it: businesses paying some scientists to downplay certain matters that would not portray them in a favourable light; the government meddling in funding decisions; or – in my eyes the most embarrassing issue – students and scholars in thrall to certain political leaders who disregard scholarship.

Should that be the reality of the university, it calls into question Derrida's judgement in attaching value to his ideas of the university. I think that it is down to a long tradition in which his ideas are embedded. After all, in no way are Derrida's ideas particularly original. They are concordant with what others have said about the university. To put it in more concrete terms, I think that many of these ideas about the university belong in a particular humanistic tradition which has coloured

the idea of the university since around 1800. One pioneering figure in that respect is Wilhelm von Humboldt. He penned a text around 1810 entitled *Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin*, which would go on to become constitutive, certainly in terms of shaping the university that would take his name. From a modern perspective, his pretensions border on the unseemly. Von Humboldt conceives of the university as the apex of moral, national culture. Its remit is nothing short of the spiritual and moral edification (*Bildung*) of students and scientist. The ethereal element surfaces in Von Humboldt's philosophy as well; the way that he puts it, solitude and liberty are the fundamental principles onto which university life has been grafted. They alone will guarantee the immunity that I mentioned a moment ago. Von Humboldt himself preferred to talk of *Ungezwungenheit*. The focus of university life is on problems which are presumed not yet to have been solved. Every academic's desire nevertheless to solve these problems is infused with boundless optimism. Yet solving the problems will only be possible if the state or the government removes itself from the equation. Derrida calls this notion the university without condition. You can only solve problems if you emphatically refrain from fettering academic work to cheap principles of utility imposed on the university by other parties. The utilitarian instinct was entirely alien to the earliest academic humanists.

I could say plenty more about Von Humboldt's contemporaries. Without exception, these white males had names such as Schleiermacher, Schelling or Fichte and were hell-bent on seeing nothing short of total immunity guaranteed for academic life.

As I don't want to get bogged down in detail, the one thing which I wish for you to keep in mind is that the university has always been considered to be an exceedingly special place where exceedingly special things happen. The German philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) elaborated on this tradition during the twentieth century. I'd like to dwell on him for a moment, not only because he was the one who coined the phrase 'the idea of the university' (*die Idee der Universität*), but also because he wrestled with this idea throughout his career and wrote about it at length. I'll go so far as to suggest that nobody has reflected on the idea of the university as extensively as Jaspers.

At the start of the 1920s, when the Germany of the interwar period is a highly unstable nation, he endeavoured to concoct an ideal image of a university. Key to this image is the notion of an intellectual aristocracy, ein Geistesaristokratie. What Jaspers has in mind here isn't some kind of parochial elitism geared towards making the university the exclusive preserve of privileged cosmopolitans. No, anyone is welcome who is fired up by the 'pathos of objectivity' – a notion that he takes from Max Weber's famous essay on science as a vocation. Although aptitude is obviously a relevant factor to be tested, it shouldn't have anything to do in principle with one's origins, gender or suchlike.

I'm fully aware of the fact that we're all suspicious of such notions today. The socio-political problem of power lurks wherever selection criteria are to be found. Who's doing the selecting? Who selects the selectors? This issue is the Achilles heel of Jaspers' musings: politics is conspicuously absent from his idea of the university. Jaspers was an existential philosopher and psychiatrist. The man wished to know what it was that he was doing as a professor; or, rather, what it was that he'd like to do. This is why he tried to remove overly concrete political overtones from his idea of the university, nevertheless lending it an expressly existential-psychological charge: a university must be a place where people are free to work on themselves. The true goal is self-formation. This fact goes for both the students and the academics. They should all follow

the example of Socrates. The age-old *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, or the community of lecturers and students, is here construed as a community engaged in perpetual dialogue.

When Jaspers was reworking his original text on the idea of the university not long after the end of the Second World War, the crux of his idea grew increasingly clear. Scholarship must never cede ground to principles of utility, a notion that echoes Von Humboldt. Curiosity alone must be the yardstick, although curiosity alone is not enough. It might rather be regarded as a necessary but insufficient prerequisite. I quote: 'Curiosity is the desire to see the primitive in the alien, the unfamiliar, the desire to learn from experiences and results. But it touches things without grasping them. The stimulus of sensation soon wearies.'

This curiosity therefore has to be tempered with methodical yet personal discipline, as it were, such that it can become a veritable element of knowledge. The key concept with this regard is that scholarship is an end in itself: *Wissenschaft als Selbstzweck*. This goal requires a particular type of mentality, which Jaspers discusses in great detail. It's what interests him the most. While he stresses a special kind of solitude as well, this solitude fosters aptitude, links creativity to self-discipline and above all consists in a strong personality. Such a personality is underpinned by the realisation that you'll always belong to a minority. Self-formation necessarily results in a minority position. Within modern society, the academic should be nothing other than an exceptional figure. These words are no longer widely circulated in an age of mass-education or educational force-feeding (as Martha Nussbaum once called it). Although the institution or the bureaucracy is of course necessary, there's one aspect in Jaspers' view that should never be forgotten at a university: *it is headstrong, idiosyncratic personalities that bring an institution such as a university to life*. Without these personalities, nothing will become of science and education. At the same time, these personalities need to be capable of making themselves subordinate to science. This paradox is pivotal to Jaspers' idea of the university.

However, the core idea is as follows: *the university is and must remain its own world, one that must minimise the extent to which it is contaminated by other powers*.

Ladies and gentlemen, I've merely gathered a few ideas from a vast corpus of texts. Jaspers wrote many hundreds of pages on the university and it was a topic that would keep him occupied well into old age. The notion that the university has *individuality* was sacrosanct to him. What might this individuality signify for the universities of today? Just as Derrida, Jaspers was also well aware that those powers surrounding the university are hostile to such individuality. As he observed when he approached the age of 80, the university has become a place of senseless disquietude. There's nothing new in the modern criticism of universities as mediocre cookie factory. If Jaspers himself acknowledged that his idea of the university says so little about everyday reality, why shouldn't we just cast out this idea as a worthless fiction? Why should we cling to an idea that tells us nothing about reality? Should these questions be put to me, I'd be keen on highlighting another of Jaspers' ideas. He once wrote that the only thing of any real significance in us must be love. Without such an unrealistic idea of the university, without this fiction, we would lose all love for the university. This outcome is one that Jaspers, who after all spent his life wondering what he was in fact doing at the university, is eager to prevent. In short, ladies and gentlemen, let's continue to cherish the idea of the university – against all odds.