

CHAPTER 3

Universities in the Netherlands

Leen Dorsman

Abstract

At the beginning of the nineteenth century universities in the Netherlands were meant to “prepare for a position in the learned class”. In the legislation of the newly constructed kingdom in 1815 almost nothing was to be found on the training of scientists: higher education mostly aimed at class reproduction. If we speak of Dutch universities as elite institutions it is only in this way: they served a social elite. In this contribution the development of the Dutch universities during the nineteenth century is explored. The conclusion is that in the first half of the century there was much dissatisfaction about the functioning of the universities. This is visible on three levels: in the public image students were seen as lazy and violent, the professors as incompetent and greedy and the state as unwilling or unable to act. It is only after the constitution of 1848 that politicians started to discuss a new higher education law. For internal political reasons it lasted until 1876 before this new law was implemented. In this law the definition of higher education read: “Higher education includes training and preparation to autonomous practicing of the sciences...”. This resulted in a system of admission rules and although the university for some time was still the place for the social elite to send their children to, there was also a tendency in the direction of a more meritocratic university, which in a certain way may be called ‘elitist’.

Key Words: Universities – Netherlands – Elites – Nineteenth Century – Professors – Students

“To prepare for a position in the learned class”
(Elite?) universities and public dissatisfaction in the
Netherlands in the 19th century

In 1845 a book trader in The Hague published a pamphlet, titled *Something about our Higher Education*. The anonymous author compared Dutch higher education to an ulcer that had to be cauterized by a heavy fire. The author was probably a student, because he had much inside knowledge, especially about the University of Leiden and its Faculty of Theology. Professors were appointed for life, young teaching staff was banned because they constituted a competitive threat. Old Testament studies were neglected and hermeneutics were not taught at Leiden university.¹ Everywhere in Europe in those tumultuous years, the anonymous author exclaimed, science was the only rock-solid phenomenon on which people could count. But not in the Netherlands.

One might think this was a complaint from a failing student who was trying to get even with his university. This seemed not the case. At the end of his diatribe he shifted his focus to the Dutch university system at large and accused it of indifference, of demoralizing students and of wasting public money. The image of the university was at a very low ebb: “Society does not see the pupils from our academies as youthful advocates of truth and virtue, but as frivolous squanderers seeking to ruin body and soul at the same time”.² And this student from Leiden was not the only one who in those years was criticising the university and its inhabitants the professors and the students.

In the Netherlands in the nineteenth and twentieth century there is no such thing as an ‘elite-university’. In the nineteenth century there was actually a dichotomy, originating from the early modern period between a university and a so-called Athenaeum Illustre or Illustrious School. In fact, those Illustrious Schools were universities without the right to graduate students: for that they had to go to a regular university. Four of them survived the Napoleonic age:

1. *Iets over ons Hooger Onderwijs* (Den Haag 1845).

2. *Iets over ons Hooger Onderwijs*, p. 25.

Franeker (one of the oldest universities of the Netherlands: 1585, but ‘degraded’ in 1815), Harderwijk (also a university during the *ancien régime*, and also degraded in 1815), Deventer and Amsterdam. Franeker, Harderwijk and Deventer did not survive the first half of the nineteenth century. The Amsterdam Athenaeum became a regular university in 1877, subject to the same law as the other universities, but financed by the city council. In a certain way therefore one might argue that there were elite universities in the Netherlands, but on the other hand there is also an argument to see those universities as the regular, “normal” universities.

There is another way to look at this question whether there were elite universities in the Netherlands or not. Essentially there were no big differences between the Dutch universities. It is true that there was one university that was considered different from the others: Leiden university for a long time had a special status. It was the oldest university (est. 1575) and closely linked to the rich and successful province of Holland and the house of Orange-Nassau, stadtholders during the *ancien régime* and elevated to monarchs in the nineteenth century. Leiden was the *primus inter pares* and was treated as such in the Royal Decree of 1815 (better known as the *Organiek Besluit*) that regulated higher education in the Netherlands. But giving Leiden the leading position by granting it more professors and some other privileges does not make it an elite university. Only in a certain way Leiden university can be seen as a university of that kind because the ruling elite of the Netherlands inclined to send their sons to Leiden. The other two Dutch universities of the nineteenth century until 1877, Utrecht and Groningen, had different areas of recruitment. Groningen was for the greater part the university for the northern provinces. Utrecht was a mixture of a university where students from non-elite classes were slightly dominant, because of the strong (orthodox) faculty of theology, but also the place for students from the landed aristocracy (Wingelaar 1989, Van Berkel 2014).

The first article of the Royal Decree mentioned above stated in its opening paragraph that “Under the name of Higher Education we understand such education that aims to prepare students after their primary and secondary education to a position in the learned



FIGURE 1: *Gradus academici* or *gradus ad parnassum*, depicting Leiden University. Litho by J.J. Mesker after V.J. de Stuers, 19th century (Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken).

classes of society”.³ In other words, higher education (i.e. universities) was meant for social reproduction and only a few newcomers (mostly by the way of the study of theology) had a chance to enter this system (Schalk 2016). So, there is an argument to see Dutch universities of the nineteenth century as elite institutions, not intellectually as the French *Grandes Écoles*, but socially. There are different ways to look at this. One way is to construct big prosopographical databases of students in which their social background is connected with their later career in society. But because the question if an institution is socially ‘elitist’ is also in the eye of the beholder, this contribution is about the image of universities in Dutch society in the first half of the nineteenth century. The question is if universities are perceived as elite institutions by society in a broader sense. And if so, how did the general public look at them: did they live up to their assumed status? To study this phenomenon from the angle of public aversion to the elitist character of the university I will look at three constituent bodies of the university: the students, the profes-

3. The exact term is: “geleerde stand”.

sors and the state. Important is public opinion as expressed in newspapers, magazines and pamphlets on students. The university was a popular theme in newspapers in the period between 1830 and 1850. In the digital database of newspapers of the Dutch Royal Library the word university gives 4,300 hits, universities more than 900 and “Hoogeschool”, which is a nineteenth century equivalent term for university, more than 11.000 hits.

Students

For the Low Countries the shift from the *ancien régime* to the post-Napoleonic world meant an enormous transformation. The Dutch Republic in the North became a kingdom and the Southern part, formerly belonging to the Austrian empire, became incorporated in the new Kingdom of the Netherlands under the Orange-Nassau dynasty. For higher education it meant that it became part of the new centralized system which was governed mostly from the Hague and partly from Brussels. It meant also that there came an end to the relative autonomy of the universities. There were also less institutions of higher education than in the *ancien régime*. As already indicated above, three universities were left in the North: Leiden, Groningen and Utrecht. In the South the University of Leuven was reopened in 1816 and in 1817 the universities of Ghent and Liège were established. The not so happy years of the union of North and South ended with the Belgian revolution in 1830 and one of the grievances in the South was about universities. Controversy rose, among other things, about the question how much influence the professors would have in the system as opposed to more restrictive ideas about their position by the government. Also the prescribed language (Latin) was part of the conflict. When also budget cuts seemed necessary the existing dissatisfaction accumulated. A state commission which was set up in 1828 didn't solve any of the problems: it was already too late for that. Two years later the United Kingdom collapsed (Dhondt 2011).

Because the union between North and South was so short-lived, the emphasis in this contribution lays on the Northern, the Dutch side. In respect to legislation nothing changed, it was still the Royal

Decree of 1815 that constituted Dutch higher education. The Belgian revolution did not have consequences to this system.

Although the opinion of the general public about students is often cliché-ridden and full of stereotypes it is nevertheless informative. The opinion was not always negative, because students were partly seen as victims of the university system, but there was at least one feature of student life that was felt as a real problem. Already from the end of the eighteenth century the growth of a new kind of student union can be observed. No longer the traditional *nationes* on geographical lines were the dominant way in which students organized themselves, but we see the growth of a kind of student union that is called the Studentencorps. One of the features of these corpora is the ragging or hazing of freshmen, in Dutch “ontgroening”, literally the de-greening of freshmen. The effect of this was that the student union was more and more fencing itself off from the rest of the citizens. The author of a pamphlet titled *Three discourses on higher education*, published in 1830, mentions this closing of the student body as one of the reasons of the growing separation between students and citizens.⁴ The public abhorred student rowdiness and student violence in general, but the ragging in particular was seen as an unwanted development. It emphasized the idea that the student body represented a social elite which was more and more turning its back to society. This was, according to the author of the pamphlet, confirmed by the judicial system that punished these students much less hard than youngsters of the same age doing the same things. The author of the *Three discourses* demanded punishment in such cases “without fear or favour”, without class justice.⁵ Especially in the years 1838 and 1839 a few cases of really violent ragging and hazing freshmen among students led to articles in newspapers and letters to the editor in which intervention by “higher governing bodies” was demanded.⁶

4. Drie verzoeken over het Hooger Ondewijs door eenen welmeenenden opmerker (Den Haag 1830). The author does have a solution: students should have more social contacts with “honourable men” (p. 38).

5. Drie verzoeken..., 48-49, 66.

6. Incl. De Avondbode, November 14th 1838; Algemeen Handelsblad, November 11th 1838.



FIGURE 2: Doctoral promotion *cum cappa*, a special ceremony for the last time performed in 1836, anonymous etching, 1836 (Het Utrechts Archief).

The tenor in these discussions was also the assumed judicial inequality between students on the one side and other young people on the other side. The rather progressive and liberal newspaper *Arnhemsche Courant* compared the universities to the military academy in the town of Breda.⁷ That was a place, according to the newspaper, parents could send their sons to without worrying about moral degradation. That was a different place from the universities, especially from the law faculties in which young people could spend a few years full of squander and debauchery and subsequently return to their parent's homes without having learned anything. Those students were, as stated by the newspaper, from "the most distinguished descent". Interestingly the commentator in this newspaper added that it didn't matter to these students if they learned something at the university or not: widespread nepotism was the reason that they would get jobs anyway. So there was a certain feeling that the universities in the Netherlands were elite institutions which perpetuated certain social relations.

This was also the main point in a discussion of 1845/1847. All over the country in several newspapers were discussions about admission exams in which the state designed the level of examination. There had never been such examinations. They were established in 1845 and for many discussants this was *the* only way to get rid of the would-be students and, as they were called, "intellectual nullities". Admission exams would also diminish the risk of moral decay of the student body.⁸ Some discussants were in general against state interference but welcomed the admission exams. They stressed that this should be only the beginning of an important reform: there still were no final exams.

All in all one can say that in a substantial amount of newspapers and pamphlets in the years between 1830 and 1850 the universities were in social respect contested elite institutions. In those years there were also fierce discussions about the glorious Dutch past of the 'golden' seventeenth century. Comparing contemporary situa-

7. *Arnhemsche Courant*, November 26th 1840.

8. R., 'Eenige denkbeelden over de tegenwoordige klagten omtrent het Hooger Onderwijs', in *De tijdgenoot* 5 (1845) 409-419, in particular 410.

tions with the seventeenth century was a popular pastime which always turned out in favour of the seventeenth century. This was also the case when people compared Dutch youth and especially Dutch students with the past. There was also much mention of the *Zeitgeist* of the nineteenth century. The laziness and the luxurious lifestyle of the students were contrasted with the vigour and soberness of the seventeenth century. Because this situation was part of the *Zeitgeist* the behaviour of the students was not always blamed on themselves: criticizing students was also social criticism at large.

Very influential on the public image of students was the publication of a series of written and illustrated literary portraits of Leiden students, named *Studentenschetsen* (Student's sketches). The student types as Kneppelhout described them were rather stereotype indeed, yet very recognizable to his readers and this much read, humorous series helped establishing a certain view on student life in the Netherlands: it was a merry life, with parties, drinking, fighting and an abundance of financial problems which were often solved by "papa".⁹

The professors

When students were criticized this was really meant to make a point by the authors of pamphlets or articles in newspapers, but there was always an undertone of understanding and sympathy, because it concerned young people that could not be held completely guilty of the situation they were in. Wasn't it true, some critics stated, that in the end it was the group of professors that was responsible for what was happening?

There is, however, an interesting disparity in the opinion about the professors. On the one hand in the nineteenth century there is an increasing belief and confidence in general in science and in scientific applications. And wasn't all this based on the work of the

9. The *Studentenschetsen* by Klikspaan (ps. of Johannes Kneppelhout) appeared originally serialised between 1839 and 1841. The sketches were seen as a realistic image of student life at Leiden university between 1830 and 1840. After being published together in one book in 1841 they had numerous reprints.

professors at the universities? Interesting proofs of this positive attitude towards them can be found in numerous advertisements in newspapers in which hair-tonics, glasses and multifunctional ointments are recommended with reference to findings by professors “in all universities”. Even in advertisements of the famous Holloway’s Pills, curing “every form of known disease” the manufacturer named himself “professor” Holloway.

That there were, however, problems in the Dutch universities was not a secret. Also the government was aware that things weren’t as they should be. After the democratic revolution of 1848, in which the Dutch king William II became a liberal after one sleepless night, as is said, a committee was appointed to deliberate about a new law on higher education. One of the best known and controversial Dutch philosophers of the time, the Utrecht professor Cornelis Opzoomer (in conservative circles nicknamed “a pest of the country”) wrote a minority report in which he claimed that students indeed were not studying well and not living well, but in which he also pointed at the body of professors who mainly kept their positions for pecuniary reasons and were very much mediocre in everything. The only thing a student had to do to pass his examinations was carefully study not his books but his professor: how he reacted, what he wanted to hear et cetera. Opzoomer understood very well, he wrote in his report, that the “tabard or the gown of the learned” did not arouse authority anymore among the people.¹⁰

It was not only Opzoomer, the one from inside, who criticized the university and its professors. Especially the fact that professors were partly directly financially dependent on students was a thorn in the flesh to many observers. Many of them considered professors as self-important people. More than once it was suggested that one of the three Dutch universities easily could be closed down (Dorsman 2001). The opinion on the professors was rather harsh and ex-

10. C.W. Opzoomer, *De hervorming onzer Hoogeschoolen. Rapport, Wetsontwerp, en memorie van toelichting* (Leiden and Amsterdam 1849), p. 10, 11. Also: *An., Een woord over het Hooger Onderwijs door een’ student* (Leiden 1849) p. 11, 12. This brochure was allegedly written by a student, but it is generally accepted that it was Opzoomer who wrote it.

pressed in strong language. A medical doctor from the town of Arnhem in 1844 wanted the greater part of the medical professors removed from their post, because not seldom “the professor, because of his imbecility was too often the *risée* of the studiosi”, he said.” The *Arnhemsche Courant* newspaper, also in 1844, accused the government of consciously appointing weak professors, because they would not ask for much facilities like laboratories or new classrooms.

There were not only fierce comments on the scientific work of the professors which was not seldom ridiculed in the press. It was also their teaching that was considered as a problem. One of the recurrent *topoi* about teaching was the accusation of not renewing their lessons. Year after year, according to the critics, the professors gave the same lesson again and again. And never they showed their enthusiasm about their subject. Every lesson was boring and for students the trick was to train themselves in automatic writing in what Opzoomer called “the factory of doctors, lawyers and vicars”.

The government

So in the two decades between 1830 and 1850 the students didn't have much sympathy among their fellow countrymen and professors were quite often ridiculed and accused of incompetence and laziness. The criticism did not stop with those two groups, but was also extended to the government. Of course there was a financial problem. Everyone knew that. The new kingdom inherited a huge debt from the Napoleonic era and was not able to change that. The problems with the rebellious south also were rather expensive and the result were all kinds of budget cuts in the 1830's. Higher education didn't escape those budgetary problems. There were cuts in grants, cuts in prizes in prize-contests etc., but these were not seen by the general public as sufficient, sometimes even as counterproductive. In the 1840s a group of professors from Utrecht even decided to pay these prizes out of their own purse. In a pamphlet

11. S.P. Scheltema, in a review in the monthly *De Gids* vol. 8 (1844), p. 139-155, esp. 149-150.



FIGURE 3: Three Utrecht law students dissatisfied after their pub is closed for six weeks by the authorities, drawing by P. van Loon, 1851 (Het Utrechts Archief).

some expressed the fear that the Netherlands would become “a second Portugal”.¹² What was needed was a more fundamental discussion about higher education.

The result were debates in the press and in parliament on the quality of the Dutch universities (Wachelder 1993). Two themes dominated in these debates. The first theme was the already mentioned defective examination system: there were no admission tests but also no final exams. The debate was rather strong because ideological differences of opinion were involved. A part of the public opinion felt that the government had nothing to do with this: it was the responsibility of the universities and of the professors. Some schoolmasters warned that admission exams were very much to the advantage of those students from higher social circles (the universities thus becoming social elite institutions), because they expressed themselves easier and weren't so quickly impressed by the professors asking questions. But there were also voices to be heard that argued in favour of those admission exams, because this was an opportunity to raise the standards in the universities.

The second big debate about the relationship between the universities and the state in the years 1830-1850 and especially concerning the responsibility of the state circled around the question of how many universities a country like the Netherlands needed. Also king William I had openly asked the question if “suppressing” one of the universities might be an option. Was three enough or maybe too much? Should there be two? Or maybe one? For this last scenario there were two varieties circulating. The first was to keep one Dutch university in Leiden. Leiden was the oldest, the most famous one, at least in the past, and very near to the Hague, where the government had its seat. The already mentioned professor in philosophy Opzoomer had the same idea of one university for the Netherlands, but he saw Utrecht as the best location. That was not because he was a professor in Utrecht, but he thought it best when a university was *not* so near the government. And he saw an important role

12. S.H. Koorders, De gronden voor de vermindering van het getal onzer akademiën onderzocht en onhoudbaar bevonden, door den schrijver van ‘Voor achttien jaren’, enz. (Utrecht 1849).

for the then upcoming railroads. Utrecht was in the middle of the country and would be easily accessible from all parts of the country.

One other interesting idea was circulating, but had only a few adherents. That was the idea that analogous to the French system there would be one central university, but with faculties spread over the country. In such a system every university town could have its own faculty and could be a part of the higher education system. In this way, the Athenaeum Illustre in Amsterdam could be transformed into a university faculty without the cost of a whole new university.

A failing government

So there were all kinds of plans to meet the financial problems of the state, but in the end every town with a university wanted to defend the status quo and keep its own university. Also the broader public didn't want the closure of one of the universities: "vandal destructiveness", someone called it. But this indecisiveness did not solve any of the problems. The oppositional newspaper *Arnhemsche Courant* especially criticized the lack of ideas and plans. Now, take the possibility of the different faculties in the different towns, it wrote. That was not a well-considered idea, that was designed to run with the hare and hunt with hounds, in other words: the government was afraid to make a choice en tried keeping friends throughout the country. A few weeks later the newspaper again taunted the government: it was always the same, a policy of "do-and-not-do".¹³ It was not only the opposition that accused the government, dissatisfaction was broader than that. And although, as we have seen, there was fierce criticism of the students *and* the professors it was generally thought that in the end it was the fault of the government because it didn't act and didn't ask from professors and students alike to meet more stringent requirements. The government had to make a choice, wrote an anonymous author in *De Tijdgenoot* when in 1842 a

13. *Arnhemsche Courant*, November 26th 1848, December 20th 1848 and January 13th 1849.

rumour spread that a budget cut of fifty thousand guilders was necessary and that this meant that one of the universities had to closed. What does in fact a university cost, he asked? Should the government not follow a fair and honest course? He had calculated that the cost of the whole of Dutch higher education amounted to not more than a quarter of the sum that was spent on the cavalry alone.

Conclusion

The question now is: can all these pamphlets, articles and letters to the editor in newspapers be read as a plea for a new kind of university, for an elite institution? I don't think so. It was just criticism of the malfunctioning of the existing university system. One of the arguments was that there was no admission exam which had as a consequence that anybody who was able to pay for it was able to study. There was no selection whatsoever, which meant that students from the social elite had easy access. They dominated the system, even if they weren't fit intellectually for the university. In this way the answer to the question is: the criticism of the university in the first half of the nineteenth century was not so much a plea for an elite university, it was really a plea to make an end to the Dutch university as an institution for the social elite.

But then came 1848, the liberal revolution that brought the Netherlands a modern constitution. This constitution however was only a framework, after which very much legislative work had to be done to give the country the new system of laws it had hoped for so long. A state commission was installed, but wasn't able to come to conclusions. Yes, they concluded that there was much wrong in Dutch higher education, but there was too much on which they couldn't agree. One of the hot issues was the question if a university should have a faculty of theology or that it needed religion studies in its place.

It was only in 1868 that a bill on higher education was put forward in Parliament. The bill tried to ameliorate the universities by demanding admission exams, more requirements for professors (no jobs on the side for them for instance), retirement for professors at 65 or 70 years, et cetera. But nothing came of it. The government

had to resign for other reasons and the new government had other ideas about higher education. The former bill was rewritten, although some elements were kept in again another bill. Once more, the government resigned before parliament was able to discuss it and it lasted until 1874 that a new bill was put forward in Parliament. In the explanatory memorandum of the minister of the interior, who was responsible for this law, we find on several occasions statements about the explicitly scientific character of the universities, for instance on doctorates.

There was also still the question how many universities a small country like the Netherlands needed. The decision was: keep all three of them. One of the arguments was that three universities were able to compete which would raise the quality of each of them. Although the government fell again, the next one decided to bring this version of the law in parliament which started discussing it in March 1876 and at the end of April it had passed both chambers of parliament. It was published in the beginning of May. Interesting is the first paragraph of the law compared to the Royal Decree of 1815. Then, I mean in 1815, higher education was understood as: “such kind of education which is meant to prepare pupils who have finished primary and secondary education for a position in the learned class in society”. In 1876 the first paragraph said: “Higher education includes training and preparation to autonomous practicing of the sciences and to occupy positions in society for which a scientific training is required”.

Again, this is not the beginning of an elite university in the Netherlands. But what is formulated here is a wish to develop scientific talent in higher education. No longer the universities were seen as the place for social reproduction of some of the higher strata in society. Of course the university was still the place for the social elite to send their children, but not everyone was automatically admitted anymore. And although Greek and Latin were still required for those who wanted to go to the university, in 1865 an important new type of secondary school was established, the Hogere Burger School (literally translated as High School for Middle Class Citizens). To obtain admission to the university an examination in Greek and Latin was required which could be done in the Gymnasium

schooltype, which still had the character of an elite education. But those with a diploma of the Hogere Burger School were admitted to the university when they did state-examinations, as they were called, in Greek and Latin. Much talented pupils from these schools went to university by this way and brought a new spirit into, especially, the natural sciences. Because of the emphasis on autonomous practicing of science there is an argument, albeit a small one, in favour of calling the Dutch university of 1876 a scientific elite university compared to the social elite university of 1815. Maybe the striking number of Dutch Nobel prizes in the early history of the prize are proof to this statement.

Sources and works referred to

- Berkel, Klaas van: *Universiteit van het Noorden: vier eeuwen academisch leven in Groningen*. Deel I. De oude universiteit 1614-1876, 2014, pp. 736-740.
- Dhondt, Pieter: *Un double compromis. Enjeux et débats relatifs à l'enseignement universitaire en Belgique au XIXe siècle*, 2011, pp. 49-79.
- Dorsman, Leen: *De stad Utrecht en de dreigende opheffing van haar academie in 1849*, in: *Gewina*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2001, pp. 116-125.
- Schalk, Ruben: The power of the purse: “student funding and the labour market for Dutch Reformed and Catholic theology students, 1800-1880”, in Schalk, Ruben: *Splitting the bill. Matching schooling to Dutch labour markets 1750-1920*. 2016, pp. 115-140.
- Wachelder, Joseph: *Wetenschappelijke vorming – een omstreden kwestie*, *Gewina*, vol. 16, 1993, pp. 123-140.
- Wingelaar, Koos: *Studeren in Utrecht in de negentiende eeuw*, *Utrechtse Historische Cahiers*: vol. 10, no. 1-2, 1989.