

Closing speech

*Agnes van Ardenne-van der Hoeven, Minister for Development Cooperation
(given by Jan T. Hoekema, Director for Cultural Cooperation, Education and Research on
25 May 2005 in The Hague)*

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to apologise for the absence of the Minister for Development Cooperation, whose presence in Parliament is required today. In my capacity of Director for Cultural Cooperation, Education and Research, I would like to speak on her behalf.

I understand that you have had an interesting conference, and that you have come up with a lot of ideas, including some that might benefit those of us involved in Dutch development cooperation.

I do not need to convince you of the importance of higher education to economic and social development. You know as well as I do that it is the development and application of knowledge that drive economic and social progress. Developing countries need effective post-secondary education if they are to take part in the global knowledge economy, and meet local demand for different kinds of labour. However, the proportion of students in higher education in these countries is often much lower than in industrial countries, and they usually belong to the elite. In the industrialized world, around 5% of GNP is devoted to education. In the low and middle-income countries it is 3%. Throughout the world, public expenditure on higher education is in decline. The theme of this conference is therefore very relevant: how can we make support for higher education in developing countries more effective?

With that same goal in mind, the Netherlands changed the structure of its international education programmes several years ago. In 2002 we replaced the seven existing programmes of fellowships and cooperation projects with the Netherlands Fellowship Programme – the NFP – and the Netherlands Programme for the Institutional Strengthening of Post-secondary Education and Training Capacity, known as the NPT.

I see these new international education programmes as valuable instruments in providing effective support for higher education in developing countries. They are now more closely linked to bilateral development policy, they are more demand-driven, supply is more flexible, and more attention is paid to the price/quality ratio.

It is still too early to see the results of these changes. But one thing is already clear: the Southern partners in the NPT want to focus attention on projects that strengthen the capacity of the entire higher education sector, and support institutional development in professional education. Of the 70 current NPT projects, I would like to highlight two examples.

First, a project has been launched in Zambia to support both professional education and system development. The Zambian Technical Education Vocational and Entrepreneurship Training Agency aims to improve training programmes. This is to be accomplished by achieving a better match between the demands of the labour market and the needs of different groups of students, and by developing a qualification framework for the whole sector.

In Ghana strengthening polytechnics is one of the main priorities of the Ghanaian education minister. A project was therefore launched that aims to modernize agricultural education programmes by introducing competence-based training. Both these projects are examples of positive developments.

A positive development within the NFP is the interest shown by Southern institutes in enabling staff members to follow a long-term course of study in the Netherlands. This is taking place in the context of multi-year agreements with these institutes. The aim is to

increase the effectiveness of capacity building. Training a larger percentage of their staff increases their critical mass.

Given the importance of the NFP, the Minister recently decided to allocate the programme an additional two and a half million euros annually. This money should be used to expand the current practice of multi-year agreements. We also hope to achieve better coordination between the NFP and bilateral policy.

Improving the effectiveness of higher education also means Southern institutes working together and learning from each other. Because they operate in similar contexts, institutes in the South can learn valuable lessons from shared experiences. These are lessons they cannot learn from Northern institutes, no matter how valuable that cooperation may be. In the Africa Memorandum, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Development Cooperation announced that we would continue to expand our support for regional programmes and organizations, with the aim of building capacity and strengthening institutions. One way we would like to do that is through South-South networks, in which institutes learn from each other's good practices.

One example is the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP). The IDEP is an institute for teaching and research in the field of economics. It trains middle-ranking and senior policy officers in Africa. It also conducts economic research and advises African governments and regional organizations. This project is financed from the International Institutes Cooperation Programme, or SII, which supports South-South cooperation in a regional context.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have outlined to you my vision and what we've done so far. But you might wonder: is this all there is?

The answer is no, in fact I see scope for improving effectiveness. And in addition, scope for renewed involvement by Dutch academics. For instance, involvement in the options that you have been assessing at this conference. Let me clarify.

Improving the effectiveness of higher education does not mean looking at the higher education sector alone. Both the World Bank report 'Constructing Knowledge Societies' and the 'Joint Evaluation of External Support to Basic Education' report, which was initiated by the Netherlands, stress the importance of a holistic approach to the education sector as a whole. We would like to develop this approach further in the years to come. In the first place, this means that we must not look separately at the individual parts of the education sector, such as primary and secondary education. We should focus on how they fit together and on other areas, such as research. On how the different areas can complement and reinforce each other. It also means more attention for post-primary education. It goes without saying that a good system of secondary education, often referred to as 'the missing link', is crucial to effective higher education. Many countries already are already focusing on coherence within the education sector, more particularly on links between the sub-sectors of primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Dutch higher education institutes currently play an important role in the NFP and NPT. But it is important that they also take account of interests of developing countries that go beyond these programmes. For that reason, in the Internationalization Memorandum the State Secretary for Education and the Minister for Development Cooperation earmarked €5 million for 'knowledge grants' for students from developing countries. And in the Africa Memorandum, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Development Cooperation pointed to the urgent need to strengthen African universities and research institutes in the interests of long-term capacity building. That is why I would like to create space alongside the

existing programmes to facilitate long-term partnerships between research centres and universities in the Netherlands and Africa. Of course cooperation between such institutes in the Netherlands and Africa already exists in many forms. What we want to do is stimulate and facilitate such cooperation, but we are still exploring ways of doing this.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You have come to the end of two days and one evening of intensive work. It is late, and I do not want to keep you too long from your well-earned rest. But I did want to share with you some of our thoughts on the theme of this conference. I would also like to thank Nuffic for organising this conference, and all of you who have contributed to it.

Let us leave here with a sharpened focus on education, an indispensable tool for achieving true development.

Thank you.