

From academia *for* aid towards academia *as* aid

Challenges for the role of universities in Dutch development cooperation

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“Active participation from a wide range of actors in civil society, the academia and the private sector will be key factors in ensuring that the Millennium Development Goals are reached.”²

The role scientific knowledge and talent play in shaping and determining the competitiveness, innovation and social cohesion of societies has been identified and acknowledged. In this vision, universities play a crucial and autonomous role collaborating with governments and business realising so-called knowledge societies³. However, it has also been noted that developing countries risk being excluded from this dynamics of the global economy, not only in terms of human capital flight (brain drain), but also the likelihood of local concerns in developing countries being overlooked, ignored and postponed (World Bank 2002).

The crucial question therefore is whether and how development agencies and universities collaborate in order to let developing countries participate in the above-mentioned process. Both Thiel (2004) and Sorbo (2001) qualify the relationship between aid and academia as uneasy and rather problematic at this point in time in respectively Germany and Sweden. During a workshop of the Platform International Education (PIE)⁴ it became clear that most experts from universities and institutions of international education see also a problematic relationship between aid and academia in the Netherlands. Their argument is that the current Dutch development cooperation programmes⁵ in the field of higher education are designed in a way that the institutions cannot combine such activities with long-term academic cooperation with partners in developing countries. Most experts expressed the need for a shared vision between government and institutions on the role of the universities in development cooperation. The Dutch development cooperation programmes in the field of higher education are being evaluated and adjusted in 2005. This paper seeks to contribute to the definition of a shared vision called for by the experts during the workshop.

¹ The content of this paper reflects the personal opinion of the expert and does not contain the official standpoint of any organisation.

² Mr. Göran Persson, Prime Minister of Sweden, in a speech delivered on 8th February 2005 at the Dag Hammarskjöld conference on the UN and global security.

³ This point has been clearly made in several European Commission documents amongst which: DG RTD (2003) *The role of the universities in the Europe of knowledge*, DG RTD: Brussels
DEAC (2003) *Education and training in the Lisbon strategy*, DEAC: Brussels
DEAC (2005) *Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy*, DEAC: Brussels
DG RTD (2005) *Building the ERA of knowledge for growth*, DG RTD: Brussels

⁴ The workshop intended to formulate the point of view of Dutch experts concerning the evaluation of the Dutch development programmes in the field of higher education. It was held on the 21st April 2005 at Wageningen University and Research.

⁵ These programmes consist of the Netherlands Fellowship Programmes (NFP) and the Netherlands Programme for Institutional Strengthening of Post-secondary Education and Training Capacity (NPT) currently operated by the Netherlands organization for international cooperation in higher education (NUFFIC).

Nature of problem between development agencies and universities

The Dutch experts generally stated that the lack of possibility to combine long-term academic and institutional cooperation with activities in development cooperation leads towards a decrease of interest by the universities, the marginalisation of the role of universities in the development cooperation and the lost of expertise in this field in the Netherlands. But why were the Dutch programmes designed in the way that this lead to the current troubles? There are several general reasons for the uneasy relationship between aid and academia (Sorbo 2001):

1. Although development cooperation is increasingly knowledge-intensive, development research is not a priority for university leaders. Researchers executing research or other activities for development cooperation therefore heavily rely on external funding by development agencies with little internal commitment by their boards.
2. Politicians and government officials sometimes state that academic advice in the field of development cooperation cannot be applied immediately. In fact, academics are said to operate introvertly, closing themselves off society within an ivory tower.
3. Science and development cooperation are activities from very different sectors with both limited funding. In fact, budget cuts appeared or threat to appear in both sectors.

In the Netherlands, additional specific reasons can be identified:

4. The Dutch ministry for development cooperation has made a thematic choice for supporting post-secondary education instead of tertiary education (higher education). The ministry therewith explicitly marginalises the contribution of institutions of higher education to its cooperation objectives.
5. The Dutch ministry for development cooperation has made an administrative choice for greatly *untying* all funds for development cooperation in the field of post-secondary education therewith intending to liberalise the development cooperation market and opening it for any other executing parties. The universities argue that they are not any other business and therefore do not operate in business like markets.
6. The ownership over all capacity-building projects is exclusively laid with the partners in the developing countries for tendered short-term projects. The universities recognise an ownership of the problems by the partners in the developing countries, but when it comes to the long-term solutions (academic cooperation), they claim that an equal position, shared ownership and mutual benefits will serve development objectives much better in the long run. Both views seemingly conflict.

Concluding, the problematic relationship between development agencies and universities is a consequence of a negative image of universities within development agencies and a lack of commitment by the university leaders.

Academia *on* aid

In the above-mentioned, it was argued that development agencies and universities are faced with huge challenges. Since the relationship between them is problematic, one might doubt that they are ready to meet the challenges. A number of reasons were given for their uneasy relationship. In order to address these reasons, one must look at the role of universities in the development cooperation more in general. One can make a clear separation between higher education and scientific research *on* development cooperation (*academia on aid*) and higher education and scientific research *for* development cooperation (*academia for aid*).

In the first case, academia is analysing, commenting and training on the processes, methods, outcomes and actors of development cooperation itself. Here, the study and research of development cooperation becomes an academic discipline in the so-called development studies and development research. The reasons for the crisis given under one and two are focussing exactly on this role.

But globalisation makes research on and training in development cooperation increasingly relevant beyond the specific context of developing countries, thus globally relevant (Sorbo 2001). In this sense, the role of *academia on aid* must be increasingly seen in the light of the role science on policy-making in general. This is particularly true for the policies concerning competitiveness, innovation and social cohesion.

The first two reasons lack a strong explanatory power since their essence is true for all roles of academia in any policy-making. So, why is the contribution of academia towards competitiveness, innovation and social cohesion generally recognised and appreciated, but not in Dutch development cooperation?

Academia *for* aid

Higher education and scientific research *for* development cooperation refers to the direct contribution of academia towards the results of development cooperation. The reason given under three clearly refers to this role of academia. One can state that academia and aid indeed are different sectors that have different objectives: the first envisages talent and knowledge to support the development of knowledge based societies, and the second aims more directly at the development of less knowledge based societies. But if academia is contributing to the development of societies, why would it not contribute to Dutch development cooperation?

One might argue that it seems rather useless to support and invest into science in the poorest countries of the world. What about scientific knowledge if there is not enough to eat for everybody? Why do you need a PhD if your country does not even have a proper university with possibilities to do research and access to new knowledge? University based research is very important for the quality of higher education, to gain admission and access to research results from the global academic community and the ability to make use of the available results (Hasselgren 2001).

The World Bank confirms the importance of higher education and scientific research in capacity building and reducing of poverty:

“The Bank recognizes the need to embrace a more balanced, holistic approach to investments and to encourage improvements in the entire lifelong education system, irrelevant of a country’s income level.”
(World Bank 2002, page x)

Even if one accepts that academia and development cooperation are completely different sectors that envisage very different objectives, this does not prove that they exclude each other. Quite on the contrary, universities much more likely can play a vital role in the development of even poor societies.

At the core of the problems between universities and development agencies thus lay the reasons given specifically in the Dutch situation: the tendered, hand-off, short-term and project-based funding policy which makes a combination of development cooperation and long-term academic cooperation impossible. In fact, this approach of short-term consulting and capacity-building missions suggests a certain fitting of academia within the framework of development cooperation. In other words, higher education and scientific research are minimised as instruments of development cooperation. In this view, universities become yet another market party fit to execute the tender of a development agency. This clearly conflicts with the autonomous role academia claims and has in the general societal context.

Academia as aid

Given the role of universities in shaping knowledge societies, the above-mentioned questionable funding policies should be replaced by closer engagement with the competitiveness, innovation and social cohesion system as a whole in the developing countries, involving also the private sector as well as the public institutions.

In this vision, higher education and scientific research are an aid intervention area on their own right. This includes various forms of (long-term) academic cooperation to increase the resource base, to strengthen national research capacity, to enable the developing countries to undertake research and to get embedded in global academic networks. Short-term development cooperation projects can precede long-term academic cooperation within a broader strategy directed towards sustainability and equal partnership and ownership in the end. This approach is much more likely to get financial and managerial commitment by the universities because it lies in the international cooperation of the institutions directed towards producing scientific talent and knowledge.

The Dutch policy for development cooperation thus should be embedded in broader policies concerning a) the competitiveness and innovation through international cooperation and b) deregulation (output-orientation and flexibility in collaboration within projects). In this sense, more fine-tuning of the policies concerning international cooperation is needed between the ministries of 1) Foreign Affairs, 2) Education, Culture and Science, 3) Economical Affairs on the one side and the ministry for Development Cooperation on the other side.

Conclusions

The acknowledged role of academia in shaping knowledge-based societies formed the starting point of this paper. At the same time it stated that the developing countries are or are threatened to be left out from this development. Moreover, a problematic relationship between universities and development agencies was identified and a number of reasons put forward. The contribution of both development agencies and universities to let the developing countries participate is limited.

This paper argued that agencies and universities need to define a shared vision on the role of universities in development cooperation if both want to meet the challenges that globalisation puts onto them. For the conceptual clarity, a difference was made between academia *on* aid and academia *for* aid. Academia *on* aid follows the same logic as academia in any policy-making, so the troublesome relationship cannot be found here. The main problem was identified when agencies design funding policies that view universities as instruments of their own policy and making long-term academic and institutional cooperation impossible: academia *for* aid.

That is why another approach was preferred: academia *as* aid. Here, academic cooperation is an aid intervention area on its own right. Sequentially ordering first short-term development cooperation followed by long-term academic cooperation within the framework of competitiveness, innovation and social cohesion was advised. With other words, both the objectives of the development agencies and all universities involved must be addressed if development cooperation of governments and the international cooperation of universities are successfully to be combined. Development cooperation in this view provides the basic help and aid that is needed for the institutions in the developing countries to become equal partners for the institutions in the countries of the North. Long-term academic cooperation between the institutions and incorporation of outputs in the global academic networks provide the necessary sustainability.

Literature

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