This newsletter will cover the symposium and concert on March 1st, 2012 marking the 5th anniversary of 3TU, an interview with State Secretary Zijlstra, and the worries of the 3TU board about the discontinuity of research funding.

Halbe Zijlstra, State Secretary of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), delivered a keynote speech during the symposium marking the fifth anniversary of the 3TU.Federation.

What do you believe is the added value of 3TU in the Netherlands and in Europe?

“Joining forces enables the three TUs to play a more significant part than they would as three separate universities. This strengthens their position both at home and abroad. The Centres of Excellence, set up with OCW funding, are a good and concrete example of this. Simultaneously, the TUs must continue to seek collaboration with other universities, academic hospitals and European partners. Working together, both inside and outside their ‘own circles’, improves the chances of European funding for research.”

How does the government intend to help tackle the shortage of science and technology graduates?

“In recent years we have endeavoured, successfully, to increase the annual student intake of science and technology degree programmes and the annual output of graduates of these programmes. This will remain high on the agenda in the years to come. We annually invest millions in the Physics & Chemistry and the 3TU Technology sector plans as well as the Centres of Expertise at the universities of applied sciences level. It is equally important that the sector be made more appealing to work in. Research reveals that many graduates do not ultimately choose to work in the sector. Businesses should also take appropriate measures to ensure that employees can continue to work for longer and more productively. To be perfectly honest, I do not expect the implementation of the social loan system to have a discouraging effect on science and technology students. The difference with students taking a one-year Master’s degree is € 3,200 at most. A science and technology graduate with a two-year Master’s degree can earn that back in no time, especially in view of the current demand for employees with such qualifications. Furthermore, the choice of a particular Master’s degree programme is based primarily on the programme content: if a student really wants to take a particular degree, an extra investment of € 3,200 is not going to stop him or her. Don’t forget we have a reason for this measure: it will enable us to invest in the quality of higher education.”

What future do you envisage for the 3TU.Federation?

“Differentiation and collaboration are crucial themes in my Strategic Agenda: I believe universities should do what they are good at and mutually determine where the emphasis should lie. Some universities have yet to start doing that; you have already been doing it for five years. That gives you an instant advantage. The same applies in another important respect: valorisation. A university of technology can usually manage that a little easier than, say, a faculty of social sciences. Challenges remain, nonetheless, such as the success rate. Students at universities of technology take too long to complete their courses. The OCW has allocated € 11 million a year to improve the quality of education. So I really expect to see results from the TUs.”

More information, on the Centres of Excellence among other things, can be found at www.3tu.nl
3TU Board concerned about discontinuity of research funding

In recent months the three Universities of Technology have actively contributed to the establishment of the policy regarding top sectors, areas that are designated and supported by the Dutch government who have good potential for the Dutch economy to compete on a global scale. The three TUs emphatically support this policy. They confirm the importance both of a shared agenda and of companies creating room for investment. However, in implementing this policy, the TUs have identified some urgent causes for concern. They have made these concerns known in a letter to Minister Verhagen of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation (EL&I), State Secretary Zijlstra of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) and leading figures in the top sectors. Their first concern is the lack of clarity regarding the continuity of research funding. The TUs are rapidly facing a financial gap between the loss of research funding from key FES programmes (FES = Economic Structure Enhancing Fund) and the development of new funding sources from the top sectors. This could potentially result in approximately 1,000 fewer PhD candidates for the TUs over the coming years. It is therefore a matter of extreme urgency that new funding arrangements be established. In their letter, the TUs indicate their willingness to participate in the establishment and practical implementation of these arrangements. Another important concern is the significance of Europe in consolidating the Netherlands’ competitive strength. Dutch knowledge institutes, including the TUs, are in an excellent position to align themselves to such European programmes as the Seventh Framework Programme, Eureka programmes and Joint Undertakings, and ‘score’ above average in this respect. It is vital to maintain this strong position. The TUs advocate a link to European agendas regarding top-sector policy, so that the national co-financing of European projects can be maintained, for instance. It is particularly important for the technical universities of technology to be able to meet their matching commitments in the context of participation in European projects. Education also is very important. In the years ahead, there will be an increasing demand in the Netherlands for young people with technical qualifications in science and engineering. In this context, the TUs are extremely concerned about the government plan to abolish student grants for two-year Master’s degree programmes. This would lead to science and technology students paying a personal contribution that is twice as high as that paid by art and social science students, sending the wrong signal to both students and the business community! The universities of technology call for collective discussion on the further development of the top sector policy. The complete letter can be found at www.3tu.nl.

3TU.Federation celebrates 5th anniversary

On March 1st, 2012 the 3TU.Federation celebrated its fifth anniversary at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. It was a two-part celebration consisting of a symposium and a concert by the student orchestras of the three universities of technology. State Secretary Zijlstra delivered a keynote speech about ‘education, science and technology’. He commented on the current swing in the Netherlands from a service economy to a manufacturing economy. He also praised the three technical universities efforts to make education more appealing and to provide potential students with better information at an earlier stage. These efforts are beginning to bear fruit: 2011-2012 saw a slight increase of 3% in the intake of technology students and an increase of 9% for physics students. Zijlstra was impressed by this. He did however express concern about the results of the 2010 Science Career Monitor: it turns out that after graduating, half of the science and technology students actually work in a completely different sector. Here lies an important task for employers, as he also pointed out in the interview elsewhere in this newsletter.

The second speaker, Bernard Wientjes, Chairman of the Dutch national employers organisation VNO-NCW, urged the cabinet to do everything within its power to boost the growth engines of our economy – education, research and science, the top sectors and the universities – where at all possible. Cutbacks in knowledge investments now would be altogether wrong, he feels. He stated that the cabinet should consider its actions fully and carefully, particularly for the long term. Mr Wientjes also advised us to be particularly alert to positive signals, such as the substantial recovery of world trade which is expected to develop in the second half of 2012 and in 2013. The Netherlands must be able to respond to this as quickly as possible.

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Concert

In the evening, the student orchestras of the three technical universities gave a unique performance for a near-capacity audience. SHOT (Twente) opened the concert. In their festive encore, this orchestra congratulated the 3TU.Federation on its fifth anniversary. It was then the turn of D.S.M.G. Krashna Musika (Delft) together with the Student Choir of Amsterdam. After the interval Auletes, the brass band of the student music society Quadrivium (Eindhoven) performed. The concert concluded with a collective encore by the three orchestras. Both the individual performances and the collective finale met with a resounding applause from the enthusiastic audience. A fitting conclusion to the 3TU.Federation’s fifth anniversary. Photos of the anniversary symposium and concert, and a film about what 3TU has accomplished over the past five years, can be found at www.3tu.nl.

The next newsletter will focus on developments regarding the Centres of Excellence.