

LOOKING FOR MOUNT EVEREST

(original version; an abbreviated Dutch translation has appeared in NRC Handelsblad on 18 Nov 2006)

Jaap Goudsmit's pointed observations on the "flatness" of the Dutch scientific and educational landscape (Opinie & Debat, 12 Nov 2006) touched more than one nerve. Having arrived here from abroad five years ago to take up an academic position at a major university, I can add the view of a relative newcomer and outsider to the debate. As someone with a growing attachment to the many welcoming aspects of Dutch society, I worry with Goudsmit about the structural obstacles standing in the way of the generally accepted ambition to advance our country through the nurturing and application of "knowledge" rather than becoming a Disneyland of canals and windmills.

There is a tension between wanting to create "focus" and "excellence" in scientific research and the wide-spread reluctance to openly acknowledge the inequalities which make some individuals much more apt than others to add meaningful content to these concepts. In a world which increasingly forces us to position ourselves globally, the urge to talk down our own "peaks" (the outstanding individuals who undoubtedly exist) amounts to an inexcusable squandering of potential and talent. This is already hurting us, not least because it feeds into a latent underappreciation of the intrinsic value of being educated, skilled and knowledgeable, a prerequisite for making outstanding contributions and assuming leadership. Inevitably, this stifles the aspirations of young talent and, by the looks of it, especially from among our young women.

The habitual downplaying of individual achievements (especially comforting when they are somebody else's) sometimes attains the status of an art form, for example, in the way any direct reference to individual scientists is carefully excised from research proposals, evaluation reports and sector plans. Its extent can be baffling to outsiders. I would like to give an extreme example to add to Goudsmit's list of missed opportunities, and one which I have been observing from close by.

There happens to be just a single case of a Dutch Nobel Prize winner who is still scientifically active and works and teaches in the Netherlands. More than that, he is the prime example of a creative scientist of world stature who continues to produce original ideas of international impact on a wide range of topics within his field. Abroad his intellectual sharpness and scientific integrity are held in the highest regard. Add to this his passion for bringing science to the people and improving standards of education, plus the breadth of his outlook on all of science and you recognize all the hallmarks of a Mount Everest in Flatland. I am of course talking of Gerard 't Hooft, who has been attached to Utrecht University for most of his working life.

It seems a foregone conclusion that this man would top the wish list of any university administrator in charge of one of the country's new "Science Parks", conceived as breeding grounds for scientific and technological creativity, which should attract the best and brightest minds from all over the country and the world at large. Who would want to miss the opportunity to honour and tap into the international reputation of the man whose

contributions single-handedly lift his present university's standing from a 65th to a very respectable 40th place in the much-cited Shanghai ranking of the world's top universities?

It also looks like a simple economic imperative: dig in your pockets for 40 MEuro, build a high-profile institute for fundamental science, call it “t Hooft's Denkfabriek”, put the man himself inside as a shining example of high intellectual standards, give him a decent running budget and a couple of able administrators and further let him do what he does best, namely, scientific research. Lobby private sponsors to finance endowed chairs, international meetings, the teaching of “master classes” and scientific outreach activities associated with the Institute. Let it act as a crystallization point for intellectual creativity and excellence and make it a flagship of your international ambitions. As a purely theoretical enterprise, which uses existing strengths optimally, the investment needed is small and the potential long-term revenue enormous, at minimal risk.

If all of this seems blatantly obvious to outsiders like me and many others I have talked to, the reality from within looks entirely different. Not only have, to the best of my knowledge, no such initiatives been taken by anyone at any level, but the Nobel laureate has expressed privately his concern over whether he will be allowed to keep his office (!) for doing research beyond his retirement in 5 years' time. - This has to be heard to be believed. It is “flatland” taken to its logical conclusion: he may be a Nobel Prize winner all right, but who is he to request or be granted an exception to our well-conceived rules, which apply to everyone regardless?

Forgive me for suggesting there is something fundamentally wrong here, something which is in urgent need of change if we want to create an environment that fosters intellectual achievement and productivity. Maybe 't Hooft could be adopted by our German neighbours, who - although not otherwise renowned for the alpine features of their educational system - would at least have built a Max-Planck Institute around him by now. Setting aside the question of what could and should still be done to salvage this particular blunder, the example I have described here serves to underscore some of the systemic problems highlighted by Jaap Goudsmit. His concrete proposals for change must be taken seriously as a starting point for a debate that is clearly overdue.

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