

The silence of the rabbits

Who has ever had an encounter with the *zoekcommissie* that searches a new rector magnificus? Certainly not more than the fraction of people who have seen Nessie. It's high time to discuss the mechanisms by which we come to decisions on who may lead the university.

By Nicolai Petkov

In his article *Kies die rector magnificus* (UK of April 10), Peter Keizer opened an urgently needed discussion - for many of us hope for a change, for some a Pandora box. It is about the alleged (im)possibility to elect the rector of the university.

My first observation is that – surprisingly - this timely and important discussion is initiated by a journalist and not by a professor. I am afraid that this is a symptom of an academic disease long feared and anxiously awaited. Some ten years ago I warned a former dean of our faculty and a former rector that, if they treat the professors like rabbits, with time they will get rabbits as professors.

By which I mean that currently professors are defined (in various administrative documents) as employees (Dutch: *werknemer, functionaris*) that supervise large numbers of PhD students, publish many *Nature* and *Science* papers that receive numerous citations, and – most importantly – bring in gazillions of Euros from research grants. In the same system - in force since the introduction of the *Law for Modernization of University Management* in 1998 - professors are not expected to have an opinion about science policy at large and the organization of the university. If they had one, the current system offers no forum where it can be expressed.

This must be an error

My second observation is a quote of our rector naming ‘the deans as representatives of the professors’ (‘de decanen als vertegenwoordigers van de hoogleraren’). This must be an error or a misunderstanding! I cannot imagine that Elmer Sterken whom I value highly for his political and communication skills has said that, impossible!

In the Netherlands, we have the representatives of the people (Dutch: *volksvertegenwoordigers*) who are members of the national or a local parliament. They are called so because they are authorized *in democratic elections* by the people (Dutch: *het volk*) to represent them. Our deans are *not* elected by the professors and may not be called representatives of the professors, they are *appointed* by the board of the university.

On their turn, the deans appoint the directors of the research institutes who are the managers of the professors. In this strictly hierarchical top-down system, the

people who are being managed do not determine who manages them, they have no saying in this at all, it is none of their business.

Hilarious myth

My third observation is the hilarious myth of a search committee (Dutch: *zoekcommissie*). This is supposed to be a committee that is appointed to search candidates suitable for a certain management position.

My interpretation of the term '*zoekcommissie*' is that the committee has been lost (Dutch: *is zoek*): it is a non-existing, imaginary concept, a myth. I may say this after 23 years of experience as a full professor at this university, ten of which as scientific director of one of the largest research institutes: *never ever* during this time I have been approached by any *zoekcommissie* to ask me for my opinion on who should be the next director of the research institute, dean of the faculty or rector of the university.

I am curious how many of the 500 professors of this university had any encounter with a *zoekcommissie*. The fraction is certainly not larger than the fraction of people who have seen Nessie (the [cryptozoological Loch Ness monster](#)), Yeti (the abominable snowman) or an UFO (unidentified extraterrestrial flying object).

There is an urgent need to discuss over the mechanisms by which we come to decisions on who may steer (Dutch: *besturen*) the university or a part of it, be they directors of research institutes, deans or a rector.

We may not be degraded to and behave like silent rabbits.

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