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The ‘Americanisation’ of Dutch universities in the 1960s and 70s: The case of chemistry at the University of Groningen

SOON AFTER WW2, AMERICAN SCIENTIFIC education and research became the ideal model for many of the teaching staff at Dutch universities. Despite the fact that chemistry at universities in the Netherlands rated quite well in international comparisons, it did not have such high achievements as chemical science in, for instance, Germany or Switzerland. It was hoped that American style science would boost the level in the Netherlands. In this paper I will analyse chemical education and research during the 1960s and 1970s at the relatively small University of Groningen (established in 1614), in the north of the Netherlands. By 1960, chemistry at the University of Groningen had suffered as a result of severe competition for the best professors by rivalling Dutch universities. Within a decade, however, a group of young science professors — many of them with experience at American laboratories — managed to place the Groningen chemistry faculty on the world map. At the end of the 1970s, these professors and their best scholars ranked among the top figures in Dutch chemical science.

This paper compares the characteristics of classical chemical education at Dutch universities with that in the United States. It is well known that the science faculties at American universities were much more egalitarian than those at Dutch and other West-European universities. The newly appointed chemistry professors in Groningen stressed the importance of further growth of the numbers of professors and lecturers, while at the same time trying to keep the number of tenured scientific staff to a minimum. The professors also decided that their research domains had to be limited and concentrated, that the emphasis should be on group cooperation and not on competition, and that openness — towards colleagues as well as students — should be the norm. This meant that chemical education was perceived as a group responsibility, one of the objectives being a reduction of the time students took to graduate (by then, on average, much longer than 7 years). More generally, they opposed the traditional form of student life in so-called corpora, with their appalling initiation rituals. Instead, they tried to cultivate enthusiasm for science as a moving spirit in society, and they took responsibility for spreading the ‘gospel of science’ to the public at large.

I will argue that these American-inspired attitudes towards chemistry — and science in general — among the chemistry professors at Groningen made them better prepared for the international political turmoil that was to come: the student protests of the late 1960s and the demands for science policy and accountability made by the Dutch government in the 1970s.

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