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The idea of one university in Belgium/Flanders since 1814: ‘one nation, one university, one rector’?¹

The perceived trend towards commodification in higher education should be analysed in a broader framework because this phenomenon is to a certain extent the result of other, deeper laying streams that affect our daily lives. If one talks about commodification in higher education one should also speak about „managerialism”, efficiency, the publish-or-perish culture, accountability and the increasing topicality of the sentence ‘to measure is to know’. All these phenomena are, according to our view, expressions of a general societal preoccupation to economize (or economization), at least in the private and public sector. The overarching aim is to put the scarce resources to their best use. This idea implies that one can objectively calculate or reason what is the best way to utilize certain resources. Particularly in the realm of higher education this is extremely difficult to realize because if one wants to economise one should at the outset know what one wants to achieve. And on the latter, the opinions differ hugely and sometimes even seem irreconcilable.

Also in the Belgian/Flemish case, the debate on the commodification of higher education is closely connected to the question what is/are the (main) function(s) of higher education. Should it concentrate on the education of the elite, the training of the future work force or making an end to social injustice? Since the arguments are manifold and consensus seems to be lacking, it becomes relatively easy to join the debate and to try to get a piece of the cake. And then the whole issue, which started out as an economical one, becomes one of politics. In order to understand which course the economization in Belgian/Flemish higher education has taken since it coming into existence, the starting point has to be one that deals with politics. This article will look at how Belgium/Flanders has tried to organize its supply and number of universities and – hopelessly – failed to do so.

Immediately after the abolition in 1814 of the academies of Brussels and Liège, which had been established by the French occupier, a struggle broke out in the

1 Member of the Flemish Parliament Boudewijn Bouckaert (Lijst Dedecker – LDD) in the course of a debate in the Flemish Parliament on the 7.07. 2010.

Southern Netherlands between several cities to secure the establishment of a university within their walls. Particularly the advocates of Leuven² and Brussels pushed forward the ideal of one university. And although many others in principle agreed that one university was enough for the Southern provinces, it appeared to be impossible to reach a consensus about where to establish this single university. From the start, the ideal met with all kinds of conflicting local interests. Within the chaos of the Belgian revolution in 1830, new proposals were launched to transform the existing institutions into one integrated university, yet the intensified ideological conflict caused that the ideal changed into an unattainable idea.

However, the idea of one university actually never left the scene again. Certainly in reaction to the university expansion in the 1960s and the subsequent need of rationalization of the university landscape from the 1970s, the idea of one university (in this period for Flanders) gained in attraction again. Indeed, this time it did no longer function as a more or less realistic ideal to pursue, but rather as an idea with a strong warning function. The policy of rationalization never had the aim to establish one university, but at the other side of the spectrum stood the even more abused reality of one university per one million inhabitants. By its long-term approach this article aims to show the persisting popularity of the idea(l) of one university in Belgium/Flanders. Moreover, it will become clear that since 1814 the outcome of the discussions was not determined by arguments with regard to pedagogy and science, but rather by local, regional, ideological, economic and not the least political priorities, which besides, changed only very little during the whole period.

The lost struggle for one university, 1814-1835³

Following the military defeat of Napoleon in the autumn of 1813, many of the French professors at the academies of Brussels and Liège returned to their home country. In this way both institutions left the scene almost tacitly. Filling the gap

2 Leuven is not translated into English to avoid confusion with the city of the French-speaking Université catholique de Louvain à Louvain-la-Neuve. Until 1968, the University of Leuven refers to the unitary institution in Leuven, from 1968, to the Dutch-speaking Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

3 This section is based on: Pieter Dhondt: De verloren strijd voor één universiteit in België, 1814-1835, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, in: *The Low Countries Historical Review* (2006), 121/2, 197-221. More details and references to primary source material and relevant literature can be found there.

in the field of higher education caused a sometimes very snappy struggle between several cities to obtain a university. The former professors of the old, abolished University of Leuven took the first step on the 27th of May 1814, when appointing two representatives who should urge the re-establishment of the university by different authorities. They received the entire support of the Belgian episcopate, who pointed to the importance of such a catholic institution to take care of the good manners of the youth. Of course, the city government in Leuven supported the appeal to establish a university in Leuven as well, albeit the city administration opted for an independent (state) university without a theological faculty, in order not to offend the protestant king. In reply to the initiatives in Leuven, the city governments of Ghent and Brussels too started their pleas for the establishment of a university in their city.

After the return of Napoleon in the spring of 1815, the issue was postponed for a while. Approximately a month after the decisive battle of Waterloo, the organic decree was promulgated which ended the insecurity for the universities in the Northern provinces. The Northern Netherlands had lost two universities during the French occupation, viz. Franeker and Harderwijk. Leiden, Groningen and Utrecht survived the revolution due to an internal modernisation and some adaptations to the French model. The new regulation of August 1815 was characterised by an administrative centralisation by the state and stronger ties of the three remaining universities to the ministry.

The need to get hold of the situation in the South became more and more urgent. The conflict between the city government and the other supporters of a university in Leuven about the (im) possibility to re-establish the old university continued, but both sides agreed that one university for the Southern Netherlands was sufficient. The existence of several universities would lead to unhealthy envy between different cities and would end in too high costs for the government. Moreover, it was their opinion that higher education was not intended for the mass and that there were not enough professors for several universities. The Brussels' city government concurred largely with this position, but of course with the assumption that this single university should be established in Brussels, mainly because of the risk on a droll and traditional institution in Leuven.

Also according to the supporters of a university in Ghent or Liège the establishment of one university was the ideal solution. However, very soon it became clear that both cities would have no chance at all to obtain this single university because of their peripheral location. Therefore they changed their rhetoric. The main argument of the followers of both cities became the necessity to establish several universities to create a stimulating competition. The objection of the ad-

vocates of Leuven about a lack of professors was passed off as overexaggerated. The city government in Liège reminded the government by the way of the fact that they strived for a large similarity between the regulations in North and South, with the aim to unite both parts of the country more closely. Since then existed three universities in the North, the South was entitled to get three universities as well. It may be interesting to note at this point that at that time the Southern Netherlands clearly had more inhabitants than the Northern part.

In order to get some advice, William I set up a committee that submitted its report in the spring of 1816. The majority of its members was in favour of the establishment of only one university. Formerly one university had been enough indeed and there would always be universities which would be less strict when presenting diplomas, to attract more students, and this to the disadvantage of the quality of education obviously. This single university would compete with the three universities in the Northern Netherlands and within the university competition would arise among the students and professors mutually. Finally, the one university would have more means to its disposal, resulting in more students' scholarships, a larger number of staff, more extensive scientific collections and an easier collaboration with courts, hospitals and the like. The only difficulty was still the question where this university should be founded. Leuven and Brussels received an equal amount of three votes. The city of Antwerp stayed aloof in the struggle. Instead it focused on its commercial interests and supported the candidacy of Leuven.

The Dutch administration agreed to a large extent with the advice of the committee. Nevertheless, against all expectations, the regulation of the 25th of September 1816 prescribed the establishment of three universities. The choice for Leuven was decided mainly by the public opinion. Of course, it concerned the foundation of a university controlled by the government and not the restoration of the old Alma Mater. In spite of this, the risk that the university in Leuven would develop into a catholic bulwark against the protestant government was too realistic to establish only a university in Leuven. Brussels was too close to Leuven and there was always a hazard for political engagements of the students. Liège obtained its university primarily because of the lack of competitors in the region. And Ghent at last could take advantage of the large number of existing educational institutes and the Orangist sympathies of some of its prominent citizens.

Evidently all supporters of only one university were highly disappointed about the new regulation, because the advice of the committee was completely neglected. Certainly the fear to be left with three medium universities increased the longing for one larger institution with an international reputation. Many professors also wondered whether the government had enough financial means at its disposal to

extend six universities. In addition to this, public opinion especially criticised the small number of professors at each university and the lack of highly educated staff in the Southern Netherlands, which resulted in a large portion of foreign professors. In its apologia the government emphasised in the first place the need of a balance between North and South. Other deciding factors were the opportunity of a more individual supervision of the students, the fear of an extreme concentration of the students at one large institution, the healthy competition among the universities and a better dissemination of scientific knowledge to the whole country.

Shortly after the Belgian Revolution of 1830 the ideal of one university for the new country of Belgium came up once again. The provisional government took the first step by abolishing some of the faculties in each university, with the intention to be left with only one university in the end. Partly this decision was dictated out of necessity. The opposition against some foreign professors had reached such proportions that the government had no other choice but to dismiss many of them. Others had left the country voluntary so that some faculties had to close their doors if only because of shortage of staff. From October 1830 the most diverse plans for a reform of the university landscape followed each other: from one university in Brussels; over one university for the whole of Belgium, the four faculties of which were spread out over four cities; to one Dutch-speaking university for Flanders in Ghent and one French-speaking for the Walloon provinces in Liège. Irritated by the lingering of the government, some prominent liberals from Brussels launched the project to found a free university in the capital. When it turned out that the government still could declare itself in favour of one state university in Brussels, the idea was called off, at least temporarily.

Finally the provisional government appointed a committee that had to advise the minister responsible. They too argued for the establishment of only one university. Indeed, Belgium was just a small country with good means of transport and the abolishment of two universities could become an important money-saver. This money could then be invested to attract more and better professors at the remaining university, so that also a broader curriculum could be offered. The members of the committee unanimously rejected the proposal to spread the faculties over several big cities, because they feared that the unity of science would be lost in that scenario. However, they did not pronounce their point of view about the tricky question where this single university should come.

Already before the publication of the report of the committee in March 1832, the universities concerned petitioned the provisional government to preserve their own institution. The arguments were largely unchanged since 1815. With conviction, the state university in Leuven still advocated the establishment of only one

university. And as before, Ghent and Liège argued with forceful arguments for the need of several institutions. In the autumn of 1832 a new player entered the arena however, being the catholic bishops. The disorder at the state universities and the inactivity of the government gave rise to the idea to establish an own catholic university in Malines. Indeed, the bishops did no longer believe in the possibility to transform the state universities according to their views. So the conflict between different cities gradually evolved into a conflict between different ideological groups.

A more permanent solution became absolutely indispensable and a new committee had to give solace. In principle these committee members too were convinced of the advantages of one single university (especially the lower cost constituted a crucial argument), but again they did not find a decisive answer about the location. In Brussels the danger for political agitation among the students was too real (although the government established in 1834/1837 the military school in its capital), Leuven did not dispose of sufficient opportunities for the practical training of the students, and Ghent and Liège finally were located too peripheral. For want of an alternative the committee proposed the preservation of two state universities, one in Ghent and one in Liège. With this extremely cautious conclusion the committee aimed to meet the interests of as many parties involved as possible. The fact that the plans for the establishment of a catholic university in Malines and of a free university in Brussels were no longer imaginary played an important part in this decision as well.

The standpoint of the committee accelerated the initiatives for the establishment of a catholic university, which opened its doors solemnly at the 4th of November 1834 in Malines. The liberals in Brussels for their part fell back on their idea from 1831 for the foundation of a free university in Brussels and only a bit more than two weeks after the catholic university followed the inauguration of the *Université libre de Belgique/Bruxelles*. In that way there existed five universities in the autumn of 1834 – the state universities of Ghent, Liège and Leuven, the catholic university in Malines and the free university in Brussels – even though complaints about the large number of universities were uttered already for years.

The discussions in parliament in the summer of 1835 did not add many new elements to the debate. The Catholics supported tacitly the bill for the preservation of the state universities of Ghent and Liège and the (implicit) abolishment of the state university of Leuven, with the idea to move the catholic university in that case to Leuven. The liberals argued strongly in favour of one university. This single university should then be established in Leuven, allegedly because of the central location and the discipline of the students, in reality of course to prevent the move of the catholic university. Somewhat unexpectedly the liberal members of parlia-

ment received the support of some prominent Catholics who had an eye for the flourishing of science rather than for ideological interests, but this was of no avail. With a narrow majority, 37 members of parliament voted against the preservation of only one state university, 32 for.

After 1835 everyone seemed to have resigned himself with the existence of four universities in Belgium and other themes started to dominate the discussions on university education. Still, regularly the consideration could be heard that one university was actually enough for the small country of Belgium. The development from one university in Leuven at the end of the eighteenth century, over three state universities in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, to two free universities and two state universities in 1835, was largely the result of accidental occurrences. The opponents of a dissemination of the intellectual and financial capital over several institutions had not expected in 1830 that they would lose their struggle for one university once again. And indeed, the decision of 1835 had far-reaching consequences. It prescribed the rules according to which the game had to be played and it was clear for everyone that it was not scientific interests that decided upon these rules, but priorities of the cities and of different ideological groups.

University expansion in the 1960s

The question of the number and the place of universities in Belgium came only on the political agenda again at the beginning of the 1960s. It is true that already at the middle of the nineteenth century a few new university institutions were established, but these were not of a kind that they provoked a fundamental debate about the whole issue. The Jesuits, for instance, had extended their philosophical education at the Collège Notre-Dame de la Paix de Namur in 1845 to offer an (ultramontane) counterweight against the too progressive University in Leuven at the time, at least according to their interpretation.⁴ The foundation of the Institute Saint-Louis in Brussels followed some ten years later, but it had a completely other ideological background. The institute was established in the aftermath of the conflict about the professors François Laurent and Hubert Brasseur at the University of Ghent, who had dared to deny the divinity of Christ.⁵ In reaction to this, pope Pius IX summoned the Belgian bishops in an encyclical to establish in each diocese

4 Roger Troisfontaines: 1831-1981: Origine et brève histoire des Facultés Notre-Dame de la Paix, in: A propos de l'Université, Namur 1987.

5 Emiel Lamberts: De Heilige Stoel en de zaak Laurent-Brasseur (1856), in: Belgisch Tijdschrift voor nieuwste Geschiedenis (1970), 2, 83-111.

a school where the ultramontane catholic philosophy would be taught.

In the dioceses of Bruges and Tournai the foundation of such an institution did make no sense because of a lack of students. The bishop of Liège could content himself with the education at the local university, where right-minded graduates from Leuven taught the philosophical courses. The Jesuits interpreted the decision of the pope correctly as an expression of sympathy towards their college in Namur and they tried to establish similar institutions in Ghent and Brussels. In Ghent this happened at the Collège Sainte-Barbe from 1857, but the courses in philosophy continued there only for some ten years. The foundation of similar courses in the archbishopric Malines took some doing, due to the opposition of Archbishop Engelbert Sterckx, who feared for a too fierce competition with his own university in Leuven. Finally he decided to be ahead of the Jesuits by moving the existing commercial college in Malines to Brussels and to extend the programme with philosophical courses. In that way the Institute Saint-Louis à Bruxelles was established in 1856.⁶

The Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis (FUSL), as the institute was called since 1948, was one of many university institutions to receive a Dutch-speaking counterpart at the end of the 1960s, in this case the Universitaire Faculteiten Sint-Aloysius (UFSAL), in 1992 renamed into Katholieke Universiteit Brussel (KUB). The committee of 1834 had already pushed forward the linguistic aspect as one of the arguments for the preservation of two state universities, one in the Flemish part of the country in Ghent and one in the Walloon provinces in Liège. In that period this reasoning was not very relevant yet, since nobody really considered offering teaching in Dutch. Only in 1930 when the University of Ghent was changed into a Dutch-speaking institution, the Flemish Movement had reached this crucial objective, viz. higher education in their own language.⁷ Leuven followed Ghent relatively quickly. By 1935 most of the programs were also taught in Dutch. However, after the settlement of the language border in the early 1960s, the situation in Leuven became extremely tense because of the existence of a French-speaking branch of the university on Flemish soil, which was moreover intending to stay and even to expand in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Violent demonstrations in 1968 preceded reaching an agreement about the splitting up of the Dutch-speaking Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (K.U. Leuven) and the French-speaking

6 Gaston Braive: *Histoire des Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis. Des origines à 1918* (Travaux et Recherches 3), Brussels 1985.

7 Karel De Clerck a.o.: *Kroniek van de strijd voor de vernederlandsing van de Gentse universiteit*, Ghent 1985.

Université catholique de Louvain à Louvain-la-Neuve (UCL).⁸ One year later also the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) got its Dutch-speaking counterpart, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB).⁹

In what follows we will focus only on the development in Flanders – the ministry of National Education was split-up at the end of the 1960s and had from then on two ministers. The debate about the rationalisation of higher education from the 1970s was much less intense in the Walloon provinces and has never taken the form of a plea for one Walloon University. The situation there was also a bit less complicated due to existence of only two dominant players, the liberal ULB on the one side and its catholic opponent the UCL at the other side. The University of Liège had lost much of its popularity and had fallen in esteem. Moreover, many of the small university institutions in Brussels, Mons, Gembloux, Arlon or Namur were very keen on their independency.

The establishment of Dutch-speaking counterparts of existing university institutions was only one aspect of the university expansion of the 1960s. More important was the dominant idea of democratisation, which became the main objective in educational policy in the 1950s.¹⁰ Following on a post-war international trend, the conviction prevailed that everyone should be enabled to enter the university.¹¹ Supported by the social partners and out of the need of more higher educated professionals, pleas for the establishment of new university centres followed each other very quickly. Another argument that recurred frequently read as follows, that „the spread of university education would be useful for the dissemination or consolidation of certain views of life – catholic according to some, liberal according to others – to the farthest corners of the Flemish region,” wrote Albert Westerlinck, professor at the University of Leuven and one of the most important critics against the university expansion.¹²

The last argument was without a doubt the main motivation for the establishment of a department for undergraduate studies in Kortrijk by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 1965 (KULAK). Even though the episcopate defended the foundation with the witticism that they wanted to bring the education closer to

8 Jo Tollebeek, Liesbet Nys e.o.: *De stad op de berg. Een geschiedenis van de Leuvense universiteit sinds 1968*, Leuven 2005.

9 Els Witte/Jeffrey Tyssens: *De Tuin van Akademos. Studies naar aanleiding van de vijftiengste verjaardag van de Vrije Universiteit Brussel*, Brussels 1995.

10 Ruimere kansen voor allen. *Spreading van het universitair onderwijs in Vlaanderen*, Antwerp 1964.

11 Clark Kerr: *The Great Transformation in Higher Education, 1960-1980*, New York 1991.

12 Albert Westerlinck: *Het universiteitsprobleem in Vlaanderen*, Dietsche Warande en Belfort 106 (1961), 7, 457.

the people, still it was clear to everyone that another (if not the most important) aim of the new institution was to attract catholic students from the region, to the disadvantage of the state university in Ghent. The University of Ghent however, did manage to get the KULAK to be established in Kortrijk and not in nearby Bruges.¹³ A few years earlier the Jesuits had extended their commercial college in Antwerp already with the faculties of Arts (including law studies) and Political and Social Sciences, resulting in the Universitaire Faculteiten Sint-Ignatius Antwerpen (UFSIA). In 1965, the UFSIA succeeded to get its programs recognized and subsidized by the state.¹⁴

Reactions on these catholic initiatives could not stay away. Stimulated by the socialist burgomaster of Antwerp, Lode Craeybeckx, the State Commercial College (Rijkshandelshogeschool), the Colonial College and the Higher Institute for Translators and Interpreters merged, (also) in 1965, into the Rijksuniversitair Centrum Antwerpen (RUCA).¹⁵ In general, these regional institutions were highly promoted by politicians of different parties, firstly because the discourse of democratisation was omnipresent, but also because of the existence of regional electoral districts, what made that politicians were continuously tempted to give preference to their regional electorate instead of to the public interest.¹⁶

A second reaction followed a few years later when a group of free-thinkers, together with some progressive Catholics came up with a new type of university, viz. the pluralistic institution. Within these universities the two dominant directions of thought (free-thinkers and Catholics) were given the guarantee to be represented. Tolerance was the point of departure, but by no means neutrality.¹⁷ In practice, in 1971 the Limburgs Universitair Centrum (LUC) was founded in Diepenbeek with a decisive catholic ascendancy and a blocking minority of non-Catholics. In Antwerp a pluralistic superstructure was established in the same year, the Universitaire Instelling Antwerpen (UIA), which offered education in the second and third cycle for most of the study tracks that existed at the UFSIA and the RUCA.

The origins of most of the new institutions that had been established in the

13 Ingrid Casselman: *De lange weg naar Kortrijkse kandidaturen. Universitaire expansie 1957-1965*, Unpublished master's dissertation, Leuven 1984.

14 Piet Lenders: *Ontstaan en groei van de Universiteit van Antwerpen*, Leuven 1991.

15 Robert Van Beeck e.o.: *Bouwen aan de Universiteit Antwerpen. Dertig jaar RUCA, 1965-1996*, Antwerp 1996 and Lode Craeybeckx, *Universiteit Antwerpen nu*, Antwerp 1962.

16 Luc Huyse: *Democratisering van het onderwijs. De story van een slogan*, *De nieuwe maand* 10 (1975), 589-600.

17 Els Witte: *Rectorale redevoeringen. 1994-2000*, Brussels 2000, 56. The tendency of pluralism was taken on in this period in the whole sector of education, cf. Daniel De Neve a.o. (ed.): *Pluralisme in het onderwijs in Europa*, Brussels 1997.

1960s were thus clearly ideological, regional and linguistic interests. Nevertheless, chiefly the feeling of a need of democratisation had inspired the university expansion at the beginning of the decade. All kind of protest was thus bound to follow. Especially because the objections against the university expansion of the National Council of Science Policy had been brushed aside completely as well. The government had asked this council, which was established in 1959, for advice about the issue, but its report had been entirely neglected.

Firstly, according to the Council, a real university spirit could attain its full development only within a complete university where all branches of human knowledge were confronted with each other. Secondly, universities of a certain size could attract highly qualified professors much more easily and they could provide for better equipment. Moreover, the small number of students from certain regions of the country (what had been one of the immediate causes for the university expansion) could be attributed in the first place to the social structure of the population in this area. In this respect it did make no sense to establish university institutions in these provinces without taking important socio-economic measures at the same time. In addition to this the Council criticised the regional and provincial spirit that was at the basis of many initiatives aiming precisely for the foundation of a pre-eminently universalistic and international institution, as was the university. And finally, one of the main counter-arguments was probably the financial cost. A decentralisation of higher education would bring along a large increase of the financial burden, possibly at the expense of the quality of education.¹⁸

Prevailing feeling of disappointment

Many people involved in particular shared this last concern, including the rector of the K.U. Leuven, Pieter De Somer. The foundation of the KULAK was not less than a financial disaster in his eyes. And also his colleague at the University of Ghent, Jan-Jacques Bouckaert, emphasized especially this argument in his objections against the university expansion in a letter to the prime minister in 1964:

„If Ghent would like to survive, this University has to dispose of a sufficient number of students to enable the recruitment of its staff needed for teaching and scientific research. Moreover, it is self-evident that the country can only spend limited resources on financing higher education.

18 Karel De Clerck, Rector Bouckaert had toch gelijk, *Uit het Verleden van de R.U.G.* 20, Gent 1985, 11-13.

When these means are spread out equally over the existing and the still to establish University Centres, our University would dispose of an absolutely insufficient number of resources for its existence and its development. For these two reasons, it is doomed to disappear due to a slow suffocation and a death by strangulation.”¹⁹

Despite the support of his colleague from Liège, Bouckaerts words – which were also inspired by the fear for the extension of the sphere of influence of the K.U. Leuven – were taken into account just as little.

Certainly the new law of 1971 on the financing of universities made a big hole in the budget of the Belgian government, of which the state universities suffered in the first place. All university institutions were dealt with on equal terms and the basic revenues were based exclusively on the number of students in relation to their subject of study. Each year a lump sum was fixed per student and the number of students to be paid for was decided upon. Actually the law was prepared for a climate of economic expansion and fitted into the dominant discourse of democratisation, but immediately it came into conflict with the crisis of the public finances in the middle of the 1970s.²⁰

Whereas the main argument against the university expansion was thus not changed since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a number of other arguments was added as well, one of them being the fear for a prevailing sphere of provincialism. Among other professors, Westerlinck considered the establishment of the new universities an attack on the real function of a university. As such, he opposed the foundation of separate undergraduate education centres because they ran counter the central idea of a university as being an institution where all sciences are represented, a position that he shared with many of his colleagues from the beginning of the nineteenth century.²¹

According to Westerlinck these new institutions were not established in the first place for the benefit of science, yet to meet the need of more higher educated people by offering them a vocational education, and thus not in a university spirit. Part of experiencing this university spirit consisted of liberating oneself of the own Heimat and coming into contact with students from a different background, with other opinions and other views of life. A typical manifestation of this prevailing spirit of provincialism, Westerlinck founded in the fact that Flemish students returned home each weekend, „as pigeons who want to return to their own cage

19 De Clerck, Rector Bouckaert had toch gelijk, 20.

20 Karel De Clerck: Tien jaar universitaire expansie in Vlaanderen, Handelingen van het XXXe Vlaams Filologencongres, Gent 1975, 323-329.

21 Westerlinck, Het universiteitsprobleem in Vlaanderen.

again as soon as possible once the courses are finished on Friday afternoon". And indeed „one can argue in favour of provincial interests in huge countries such as Russia or America, but does it make sense on a small piece of land as ours?", he wondered.²²

In reply to the argumentation that in smaller institutions a better supervision of the students was possible, the opponents stated that if it was true that undergraduate students at the larger institutions needed more coaching, this was certainly something to work at. „Sparing the students of getting acquainted with the ‘real’ university as long as possible, seemed not to be the optimal means to prepare them on what is coming after leaving the university”, according to the historian Jan Roegiers in a reflection on Westerlinck's objections. He considered the increasing use of dialects symptomatically for the narrow-minded university climate at the new provincial colleges.

Many people involved were also disappointed because the university expansion had not realised all of the expectations. Despite the large increase in the number of students, great doubts remained about the social effects of the democratisation of higher education. „This seems, it is alleged, to have missed its ultimate target, since at present children of the less educated make two to four times less use of it than do children of the more highly educated”, Marc Depaepe introduces his article in which he pleads for a more critical approach of statistics with regard to the university expansion.²³ In addition to this, several professors feared for a lowering of the level of education. Just as two centuries before, it was argued that due to the existence of such a big number of universities, inevitably some medium professors had to be appointed.²⁴ And finally complaints arose about a fragmentation of forces by the lack of cooperation. Within a radius of 25 km, students could, for instance, study Germanic languages at six separately functioning institutions, at the K.U. Leuven, the UCL, the VUB, the ULB, the KUB and the FUSL.

Since the arguments for a large part were unchanged compared to the situation at the beginning of the nineteenth century, many critics also came to the same conclusion and proposed the idea of one university, this time for Flanders and no longer for Belgium. At that moment, in a context of far-reaching ideological tensions, the proposal was not realistic at all, but still, attempts to reach a certain

22 Westerlinck, 462-464.

23 Jan Roegiers: Pleidooi voor kwaliteit, *Ons Erfdeel* 41 (1998), no. 1, 24-25.

24 Marc Depaepe: Blinding statistics? On the university expansion in Flanders and the need for research into the history of education that transcends quantifying sociology, in: Marc Depaepe/Paul Smeyers (ed.): *The ethics and aesthetics of statistics*, Unpublished papers of the Research Community: Philosophy and history of the discipline of education. Faces and spaces of educational research, Leuven, 5.-7.10.2009, 33.

degree of rationalisation were absolutely indispensable, if only because of the oil crises of the 1970s which made the maintaining of the financing law of 1971 almost impossible. The great challenge was to find a mechanism, which treated all Flemish universities on equal terms without endangering the livability of the most vulnerable unit, the VUB. On behalf of his colleagues, Laurent Vandendriessche, rector of the UIA, and his direct colleague Karel Van Goethem, elaborated a detailed project with regard to the division of tasks and the coordination in university education in Flanders, but their proposal was soon dropped without having any practical results.²⁵ Just like many of their followers – among who both ministers of National Education – they bumped against the self-interest of the universities what prevented any far-reaching measure of rationalisation.²⁶

Therefore one had to wait on the initiative from the authorities, which happened in 1991, just two years after the state reform that delegated the competence of education entirely to the Flemish and Walloon communities. By decree, the Flemish ministry of education decided that, when the university claimed to receive government support, an academic program had to attract an average of 40 students in the first cycle and 20 students in the second cycle during two consecutive years following its establishment. For existing programs the standard of 20 students in the first and 10 students in the second cycle was used for a possible continuation of the financing by the government. However, this so-called 40/20-rule did not reach its goals either since the universities paid with their own reserves for the programs that were threatened to disappear or they just cross-subsidized them. In this way all efforts for a rationalisation were in vain.

One university area according to Roger Dillemans

Another attempt followed a few years later when Roger Dillemans, honorary rector of the K.U. Leuven, was appointed by the minister of education Luc Van den Bossche to study several possibilities to reach an optimisation of the university landscape in Flanders. In contrast to his predecessors he did not start with the question of a rationalisation and how to abolish certain study tracks, but instead with the question which kind of university landscape was to prefer. Dillemans op-

25 De Clerck, *Tien jaar universitaire expansie in Vlaanderen*, 323-329.

26 Karel Van Goethem: *Universiteiten in Vlaanderen/1. Taakverdeling, integratie en coördinatie*, *Intermediair. Tijdschrift voor leidinggevende personen* (1978), 17, 1-3; Karel Van Goethem: *Rationalisatie van de academische opleidingen*, in: *Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsrecht en Onderwijsbeleid* (1995-1996), 1, 50.

posed the idea of one University in Flanders out of the standard persuasion that competition was needed to stimulate the separate institutions. Instead, he opted for one university area in which he accepted the existence of four complete universities which had to reach a division of tasks with regard to less popular disciplines, the K.U. Leuven, the University of Ghent, the VUB and the University of Antwerp (UA).²⁷ A far-reaching cooperation between these four institutions appeared to him the best option from an economic viewpoint, to save the government budget without losing the advantages of a stimulating competition.

The only criterion for these institutions could become quality, and no longer ideological or regional interests, according to Dillemans. In this respect it was often referred to the Dutch situation where the idea of pluralistic institutions, which were administrated by representatives of different ideological backgrounds, was removed from the constitution in the second half of the 1980s, and replaced by a principle of quality concern. Herewith Dillemans supported the great ideal of the university as a universalistic, international institution in the service of science. Entirely in the same style as Westerlinck, Dillemans wrote in his report about

„the youngsters from round these parts, who, far from the church tower and mother's drawing room, learn to look out into the wide world of science through the open windows of a modern, internationally oriented, but still somewhere in Flanders located university.”²⁸

Nevertheless, Dillemans contradicted himself somewhat by permitting a regional spread of undergraduate education institutions, even though his heart was clearly not in it. According to the critics he did not manage to distance himself from the catholic pillar and thus from his own institution by leaving the possibility for increasing cooperation between the K.U. Leuven on the one hand and a series of smaller university institutions on the other hand (such as the KULAK, the KUB and to a lesser extent the LUC), all of them being institutions which he personally rather preferred to have abolished. In particular Els Witte, the rector of the VUB, considered the possibly increased cooperation between the K.U. Leuven and the KUB a direct attack to her own institution, even though Witte too realised that something had to change in the Flemish university landscape which was far too disintegrated.²⁹

27 Mark Elchardus: *Uit de schelp: de kennismaatschappij en de universiteiten*, Ons Erfdeel 41 (1998), 1, 18.

28 In 1978 the name Universiteit Antwerpen was introduced by decree, indicating the confederal cooperative of the UFSIA, the RUCA and the UIA.

29 Roger Dillemans: *Optimalisering universitair aanbod*, Brussel 1997, 27.

Still it was mainly Dillemans' successor as rector at the K.U. Leuven, André Oosterlinck, who met a lot of criticism with his plea for more cooperation between the VUB and the UA in order to maintain only three universities in the end. The idea to let the freemasons at the VUB cooperating with the Jesuits in Antwerp failed to gain approval in general. As a matter of fact the situation in Antwerp was already complicated enough as being a confederation of the UFSIA (a Jesuit institution), the RUCA (a state institution) and the UIA (a pluralistic institution). A free-thinking university did not fit into this picture, according to the rector of Antwerp.³⁰ His colleague at the VUB was neither enthusiastic, to put it mildly.³¹

Impact of the Bologna Process

The ambiguous attitude in the report Dillemans and the apologetic reactions to it from rectors of several Flemish universities indicate that everyone was indeed aware of the economic and mostly international need of rationalisation, but this could not be realised at the expense of the own institution. However, according to Van Goethem and Willy Wielemans, professor in Leuven,

„the wide perspective of some of the proposals of rector Dillemans deserve a better chance than be rejected or welcomed on the basis of obtained or to obtain positions on the market of university education.”

Indeed both authors wondered whether such a fundamental discussion shortly after the decrees of 1991 was really necessary, but since these decrees clearly had missed their goal, the answer forced itself upon. Democratisation was far from realised, the regional spread of the institutions was no longer needed and, mainly, the disastrous situation of the public revenues made some measures of rationalisation absolutely compulsory. „At the universities too economism is penetrated”, they started their comments on the report Dillemans.³²

Van Goethem and Wielemans themselves were not really supporters of the idea of one Flanders University, but at the beginning of the years 2000 the proposal was launched increasingly often. Indeed, in this period it did no longer function as a more or less realistic ideal to pursue, but rather as an idea with a strong warn-

30 Witte, Rectorale redevoeringen, 56.

31 Fred Gaasendam: Ererector KU Leuven pleit voor meer samenwerking, Cursor. Informatie- en opinieblad van de Technische Universiteit Eindhoven 41 (1998-1999), 3.

32 Witte, Rectorale redevoeringen, 2000.

ing function. One of the main proponents became Rector Paul van Cauwenberge of the UGent, who received support from socialist circles in this regard, among others from Vice-premier Johan Vande Lanotte. For a large part the arguments were unchanged in comparison to almost two centuries before: a great number of universities would lead to a fragmentation of the forces; to have one big Flemish university competing with foreign institutions would bring about much better results than provoking a paralysing internal competition between different local institutions; only at a big university students could be submerged in a real university spirit; ideological and regional interests should no longer decide upon scientific issues; cooperation with external bodies and the industry would be much more evident for a large institution and, of course, a great number of universities was much too expensive.³³

The opponents too recycled some of their predecessors' arguments, the main of them being the need of competition. Even though, for instance, Roegiers opposed the provincial and regional institutions and the spectre of one university per one million inhabitants, still he was neither attracted by the alternative:

„one 'Flanders University', where the varied entity which we have now would merge into one big, rationally structured and streamlined giant institution, divided upon a few specialised campuses. (...) The elimination of healthy competition and colourful variety in shape and form would constitute rather an impoverishment of the university landscape, than an enrichment,”

according to his opinion.³⁴ Moreover it would be much more difficult to realise the essential interdisciplinary contacts within such a mega-institution.

In the debate, both positions were defended by referring to the situation in the United States. The American top universities with on average hardly 17.000 students served as an example for Paul De Grauwe, economist at the K.U. Leuven. Especially the financially completely independent private universities could push up the number of students very easily, but the fact that they do not do so, is an indirect proof that such kind of large-scale advantages do not exist. Simultaneously he repeated the classical argument that „excellent institutions (...) need the underdogs to put their excellence continuously to the test”. Van Cauwenberge for his part looked

33 Karel Van Goethem/Willy Wielemans: Naar een optimalisering van het universitair aanbod in Vlaanderen, Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsrecht en Onderwijsbeleid (1996-1997), 6, 373.

34 Paul Van Cauwenberge: We doen het nu... voor later, Gent 2006-2007.

„to the examples of SUNY, State University of New York consisting of 80 locations, and UC, University of California with branches in Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego... In each case, one official university per state with tens of millions of inhabitants, but with far-reaching autonomy. And all these individual branches do a great job and play their own role in the scientific and social world.”³⁵

There was another reason too why in particular the University Ghent was so much in favour of the idea of one Flanders University. One of the key elements of the implementation of the Bologna declaration in the Flemish legislation was the establishment of associations between universities and university colleges (hogescholen), with the aim to get the education of two cycles in the Flemish university colleges on an academic level. Although the initial intention of the government had been to organise the associations on a regional basis, the K.U. Leuven was ahead of the Flemish regulations determined by decree and connected itself to almost all catholic institutions spread out over the whole country, including in Ghent and Antwerp, and one pluralist university college, situated in Leuven. With his plea for increasing cooperation between the Flemish universities, ideally in the form of one Flanders University, the rector of Ghent wanted to counterbalance this re-intensification of the ideological conflicts as a result of the establishment of these associations.



Figure 1: The location of the HUB, KUL, KULAK, tUL, UA, UGENT and VUB.

The student associations were in general very disappointed about the whole Bologna reform because of the strong dominance of the economic aspect. And according to them, also the debate about the rationalisation was determined only by

economic motives, without really taking into account possible scientific arguments. The diversity in the university landscape did not lead to fragmentation and useless competition, the Flemish Union of Students asserted, but on the contrary to an interesting confrontation of ideas which stimulated the creativity of mental processes and in that way advanced the quality of education and research.³⁶

The impression of the students was for a large part correct. Economic, ideological and regional considerations in the first place led in the years 2000 finally to some realisations in the rationalisation debate, which dragged along already for some years now. In 2001, the LUC managed to enforce its position by starting a partnership with the Universiteit Maastricht in the form of the transnationale Universiteit Limburg (tUL). The VUB closed some of its programs (e.g. dentistry). The KUB too ensured its existence by the establishment of the Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel (HUB) in 2007, merging itself with a few other catholic university colleges in Brussels, and entering the association of the K.U. Leuven. In Antwerp the ever-increasing cooperation between UFSIA, RUCA and UIA resulted in one united Universiteit Antwerpen in 2003. The permission to establish new programs functioned in this kind of merging often as a sort of political lubricant. Also with regard to the cooperation in the field of research a few successes were achieved, viz. the foundation of the Interuniversitair Micro-Elektronica Centrum (IMEC), already in 1984, and the Vlaams Instituut voor Biotechnologie in 1996.

In other European countries too, it seemed as if the external pressure of the Bologna declaration helped somewhat to open up the discussions and to reach solutions in a question that was stuck already for some time. Particularly the situation in Finland is remarkably similar. In the 1960s, a far-reaching policy of regionalisation led to the establishment of universities in among other places Oulu, Joensuu and Kuopio. In 2010 some of these younger institutions merged with other universities to ensure their existence, again in the first place out of an economic necessity: e.g. the Aalto University, consisting of the Helsinki University of Technology, the Helsinki School of Economics and the University of Art and Design Helsinki; and the University of Eastern Finland as being a joining of institutions for higher education in Joensuu, Kuopio and Savonlinna.

The idea(l) of one university in Belgium/Flanders

Despite the realisations of the years 2000, the rationalisation did not go far enough according to many people involved. For instance, the ministerial committee for

36 Paul De Grauwe: *Universiteit Vlaanderen? een waanidee*, De Standaard, 5. 10. 2006.

the optimisation and rationalisation of the landscape of higher education under the direction of Luc Soete (professor of international economic relations at the Universiteit Maastricht) proposed in 2008 to abolish undergraduate programs with less than 115 students from 2015-2016. However, these proposals are not put into law texts yet. According to the critics the focus in the report was too much on a purely economic rationalisation rather than a real optimisation of the university landscape. Whether this optimisation should take the form of one Flanders University was very disputable, but everyone agreed that there was actually no space for such small institutions as the KULAK, the KUB or the LUC (since 2005 University Hasselt) and that they owed their existence only to the fact that the demand for rationalisation often broke down „on the interests which had grown as a hard shell around the long-standing institutions”.³⁷

Very remarkable is to what extent these local, regional, ideological, economical and not the least political priorities were identical in the discussions between 1815 and 1835 and these between 1970 and 2010. During the discussions many scientific arguments were brought up, but these were never decisive for the final result. Besides, the whole issue has always been closely connected with the question which kind of university education was to prefer, mass universities or elite institution, even though it is not an issue of either... or. Each university needs a sufficiently large critical mass of students to be able to select the best out of them. What then the ideal size of a modern university is, is hard and most likely impossible to tell. In any case the idea(l) of one Flanders University remains temporarily not more than a strong idea with a long historical background.

Abbreviations

FUSL: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, HUB: Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel, KUB: Katholieke Universiteit Brussel, K.U.Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, KULAK: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven Afdeling Kortrijk, LUC: Limburgs Universitair Centrum, RUCA: Rijksuniversitair Centrum Antwerpen, tUL: transnationale Universiteit Limburg, UFSAL: Universitaire Faculteiten Sint-Aloysius, UFSIA: Universitaire Faculteiten Sint-Ignatius Antwerpen UA: Universiteit Antwerpen, UCL: Université catholique de Louvain à Louvain-la-Neuve, Gent: Universiteit Gent, ULB: Université libre de Bruxelles, VUB: Vrije Universiteit Brussel

37 Van Cauwenberge, We doen het nu...voor later.