

Speech by the Netherlands' Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, Gerda Verburg, at the seminar "Building Our Future Higher Education," Wageningen, September 4, 2007

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would first like to thank Professor Martin Kropff, Vice-Chancellor of the Wageningen University and Research Centre, for his invitation to discuss the future of the Dutch education system at this event today. And of course I am most pleased to congratulate him on the opening of this wonderful new campus.

I must also thank Professor Veen and Professor Van der Heijden for their contributions to this very important debate. It is important, because in my view "Building Our Future Higher Education" really means: "Building Our Future."

I should explain to our foreign visitors that I am actually standing here in my capacity as the second Minister of Education. In the Netherlands, a large share of our educational system, that is, agricultural or "green" education, does not fall under the remit of the Ministry of Education, but under the

Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. From time to time, there are attempts to change this situation, more about which later.

Today, I would like to talk to you about this Government's plans for higher education, the place of green education in these plans, and the challenges involved.

But first allow me to sketch the context in which higher education operates.

The Dutch higher education system is currently the most accessible in the world. Student numbers are again on the increase, in Wageningen too, and we expect this growth to continue. As a result, the number of highly qualified people in the population is also increasing, though we have not yet reached the Lisbon target of 50 per cent of highly qualified people on the job market.

Happily, the high student numbers and their wide diversity have not led to a watering-down of educational quality. Employers usually have no reason to complain about the level of Dutch graduates, and Dutch universities score well on the international quality scale for scientific research.

Green education, and Wageningen University in particular, has made a major contribution to this positive image. Let me note here that in recent decades, the agriculture, nature management and food sectors have become extremely knowledge intensive. This is illustrated not only by the educational level of our agricultural workforce, but also by the knowledge-intensive products we produce, such as complex varieties of tomatoes. And the thirst for knowledge is increasing, as is evident in nature conservation, nature protection and management.

I believe that the strength of green education lies in the many links that have existed for decades between the educational institutions themselves, between institutions, the sector and policy makers; and between Europe and the rest of the world.

All these links with the "field" place green education at the heart of society. "Green" scientists are tackling health and life-style issues like obesity; food production in relation to the economy, including the dilemma of biofuel versus food production; and such diverse matters as nature and landscape, grazing regimes for cattle, biodiversity, organic farming and the greenhouse as a source of energy.

And so Wageningen is doing very well. It is not surprising therefore that *Newsweek* ranked the university sixty-first in its list of top one hundred global universities. And I know that your next ambition is to be in the top 50.

Yet it was only last year that the European Council of Agricultural Ministers concluded that because of falling student numbers, the situation in higher agricultural education in Europe continued to give cause for concern.

This concern also stems from the awareness that Chinese and Indian universities have a huge number of students in the life science and natural science disciplines.

The question for Europe is, where will we find our own experts in both traditional and new areas of science like bio-nanotechnology and veterinary sciences? And we also need experts to integrate knowledge developed elsewhere into the disciplines of life and natural sciences, such as Radio Frequency Identification (RFID).

And although I am happy to see a rise in university enrolment, I would make a plea to everyone involved in green education to put your best efforts into generating a yet greater intake of students, for bachelors as well as masters programmes.

Ladies and gentlemen!

So this is the situation at present. I do not see it as an unfavourable one, in spite of the views of the Agricultural Council.

But how does the Dutch government plan to operate in this environment?

Its starting point is that knowledge, innovation and entrepreneurship are the keys to solving many of the problems in society that are a source of concern to its population.

Knowledge because it is my absolute conviction that progress is founded on new ideas and perceptions. *Innovation* because knowledge demonstrates its value in renewed working processes and new products. And

entrepreneurship because all these innovations need to be applied and sold.

To translate this into a government policy for higher education we are faced with three challenges.

The first is to ensure that research and education produce better results. Students complain that they are not challenged enough, and that gives me, and the government, cause for concern.

The second challenge is how to inject the knowledge and innovative energy of higher education into the innovative potential of our country.

Clearly, one obvious way would be to bring the private sector and education closer together.

The third challenge lies in promoting entrepreneurship by giving it greater prominence in the curriculum.

Ladies and gentlemen!

So what does this all mean for green education, and for Wageningen University in particular?

I am glad to report that for the time being, the special position of green education our system is unquestioned.

But for the continuity and quality of green education, we will need to bear a number of things in mind.

In the first place, cooperation is crucial. By this I mean the links that I referred to earlier – among the institutions themselves, between institutions and the private sector and between the institutions and society.

The knowledge institutions – from the agricultural training colleges to Wageningen University and Research Centre – have given shape to this cooperation in the green knowledge coalition. This strengthens their position and enables them to contribute more effectively and more quickly to the government's plans for exploitation of knowledge, innovation and entrepreneurship.

We also have to be in a position to take the bull by the horns when new themes present themselves. Changes in green policy and in the agricultural sector have shifted the centre of gravity in research and education. Issues such as sustainability, strengthening of competitiveness, People, Planet, Profit have all been placed on the agenda.

That is all well and good, but I want more. I would, for example, like to see consumer knowledge about food improved. This must eventually lead to more sustainable patterns of consumption.

In the second place I would like you to play a leading role in giving voice to the scientific arguments underlying our ambitions for CO₂ emissions, sustainable energy and the fuel-or-food discussion, already mentioned. In this particular field, there is a lot of potential for the agricultural sector.

And another challenge for the future: I believe green education can contribute significantly to achieving the Millennium Goals, an issue that is close to my heart, as it is for Professor Kropff.

I know for instance that here in Wageningen you are making progress with crops that can grow in fairly saline conditions. This could eventually lead to more efficient use of scarce resources of fresh water.

These developments give us reason to be optimistic and I expect that they will inspire you to carry out more research to bring the realisation of the Millennium Goals closer.

Ladies and gentlemen!

As I had already observed, green education, from top to bottom, remains close to actual practice, partly thanks to its traditionally strong ties with agricultural entrepreneurs. This is a good thing, but I still believe that Wageningen could be bolder and more outgoing. I think you could be more aggressive in setting the green research agenda and show the world that you have an eye on the future. That is crucial.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to leave you with some thoughts about the future of green education.

Although Wageningen University functions fully in an international context and enjoys great recognition around the world – I believe there is one aspect that is under-exposed: and that is the relationship between the green centres of learning in Europe. Are they going to compete with each other for students? Or will they concentrate their energy in increasing their joint power of recruitment over the huge non-agricultural institutions? By asking the question, I think I have answered it.

This relationship must naturally not stand in the way of greater integration between the green knowledge system and the non-agricultural knowledge

institutions. On the contrary. Existing collaboration with the Utrecht faculty of Veterinary Health in the area of MRSA is a fine example of this.

I think it is unavoidable that before too long the research institutions will be forced to specialise. To maintain a healthy knowledge infrastructure I will have to choose the knowledge domains that we will prioritise. I will do this in close consultation with the scientific advisers. This will certainly have its effect on the size and scope of our knowledge infrastructure. I hope to discuss this with you soon.

Finally I would like to point out that some issues demand a multi-disciplinary approach – not only in academic circles, but also in The Hague. I am thinking of diet and health (obesity, allergies); energy; and water issues (safety, technology, spatial planning, nature development, innovative housing).

To be able to tackle these issues we need a new type of academic: the technical expert with a birds'-eye view and the sociologist with scientific intuition. I challenge you to design education and research programs that produces graduates like these.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope I made it clear that I am an ardent supporter of our green education institutions, and that I am convinced of its important position in this country's higher education system.

I have absolute faith in the ability of all of you to take up the challenges I have outlined today and to exploit these opportunities fully. In other words to build the higher education of the future and in doing so build the future of society as a whole.

Thank you.