

It is no great secret that European economies are currently struggling through one of the most turbulent periods in their history. In their search for a light of the end of the tunnel, policymakers across the EU are increasingly waking up to the true potential of higher education institutions as incubators for future innovation and economic growth.

Meanwhile, higher education institutions are themselves grappling with unprecedented challenges: radical changes to funding structures, steadily rising student numbers, both from home and abroad, higher student expectations of a measurable “return on investment” from their degrees, and growing competition from the emerging global economies, seeking to attract talented students, lucrative research opportunities and potential partnerships with business.

How can higher education institutions in Europe remain competitive, innovative and strategically agile in a time of economic uncertainty? What should they do better to align themselves with national growth strategies? And what can the Dutch and the British learn from each other’s different experiences and approaches?

About the Apeldoorn: British-Dutch Dialogue Conference Series

The 2012 Apeldoorn: British-Dutch Dialogue conference will take place from **11-13 March** in Manchester (UK). This will be the eleventh high-level British-Dutch conference in the Apeldoorn Conference Series, where the most influential commentators, policymakers, politicians, business leaders, academics and civil society representatives from both sides of the North Sea will come together to pool ideas, expertise and best practice, and create new relationships, alliances and networks.

Apeldoorn delegates will be invited to select one of the four related sub-themes outlined below (**education and employability; enterprise and exploration; engaging with the regional economy; and the EU... and elsewhere**). During the conference, delegates will attend thematic workshops and a supporting site visit, as well as wider plenary sessions, social events and networking opportunities.

1 / Education and employability

For the UK and the Netherlands to remain leading world economies into the 21st century, our higher education institutions (HEIs) will be expected to produce increasing numbers of highly-skilled graduates with a clear understanding of the working world. Institutions will need to step up efforts to recruit students with the most promise while continuing to widen participation, reduce drop-out rates, and offer better support and careers guidance to students throughout their university experience. Despite the pressure to find efficiencies, HEIs will have to constantly strive to provide an excellent teaching offer in order to compete with rival institutions, provide “fit for purpose” education which meets the exacting expectations of employers, and improve employability rates, thereby delivering “value for money” to increasingly discerning students.

- *How can HEIs develop consistently high-quality courses which match both student expectations and real business needs?*
- *What professional skills will tomorrow’s graduates need to be genuinely “employable” in the crowded global jobs market?*
- *How do structural differences between the British and Dutch higher education systems (e.g. Dutch “binary” system and British university rankings) shape the supply of employable graduates?*

2 / Enterprise and exploration

Investment into research and innovation and economic growth are intrinsically linked. Knowledge transfer between HEIs and industry could be a major potential catalyst for new growth. Combining excellence in research and the commercialisation of innovative new concepts and products, HEIs will also need to develop a more entrepreneurial culture among their staff and students, nurture and retain their best researchers, and remove potential barriers to collaboration with the private sector (including SMEs) and international partners.

- *How can HEIs improve dialogue and collaboration with the private sector in order to commercialise valuable research and innovation?*
- *How should HEIs best approach funding research and how do the British and Dutch funding structures differ?*
- *How can HEIs encourage and cultivate an entrepreneurial culture among their staff and students?*

3 / Engaging with the regional economy

Universities are a vital element of the regional economy they inhabit. As “anchor institutions” embedded for the long term in their cities and regions, they drive economic growth as major local employers, act as a hub for inward investment, and engage with local communities and businesses. They can also play a useful role in social mobility by widening participation, extending lifelong learning opportunities to residents, creating local jobs, and inspiring their graduates to settle and work in the region after completion of their studies.

- *What are the current obstacles to cooperation between HEIs, business and government in support of regional development? What are possible solutions?*
- *How can HEIs retain their best graduates for the benefit of the regional economy?*
- *How do regional economic structures in the UK and the Netherlands differ and where do HEIs fit in?*

4 / The EU... and elsewhere

The push for the harmonisation of higher education across the European Higher Education Area has made it easier to build consortia of likeminded HEIs, sharing best practice, swapping researchers and pooling resources and equipment. However, while international students continue to flock to the EU for a world-class education, universities in the emerging economies such as China and India are fast catching up, producing bright new graduates of their own at a rapid rate. European HEIs must think strategically about how to adapt to the changing playing field of global higher education in order to stay ahead of the game.

- *Should our HEIs be looking to the EU or worldwide for future inspiration, cooperation and growth?*
- *How can cooperation between European universities be improved to avoid duplication and maximize the EU's competitive advantage?*
- *How should we promote European higher education both inside and outside the EU?*