



International is the new normal

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Dick Benschop became President Director of Shell Netherlands and Vice President Gas Market Development for Shell world-wide on May 1, 2011.

Born in Driebergen, Benschop studied History at the VU University in Amsterdam, and worked in various functions in the Dutch Parliament and in the Dutch Labour Party.

In 1994 he founded his own consultancy firm.

From 1998 to 2002 he was the deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Benschop joined Shell in 2003 and worked in Shell Energy Europe before moving to Kuala Lumpur in 2006 overseeing the Gas & Power business in Malaysia.

In 2009 he became Vice President Strategy for Royal Dutch Shell.

A Dutch citizen, Benschop lives in The Hague. He is married and has three children.

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, thank you for the honour of inviting me to address this annual conference today. I do so with pleasure and with conviction. International cooperation – the goal that NUFFIC strives for in higher education – is a topic that lies close to my heart and something I have focused on throughout my career.

The theme of this annual conference is internationalisation – building the future by means of enterprise! This is very much a current issue and one, moreover, which is very relevant for our company. I consider the key terms in this regard to be knowledge and innovation.

Research on the banks of the river IJ

Let me start by stepping back in time. Back to 1914; a special year for the Netherlands in terms of innovation. In that year, the brothers Gerard and Anton Philips set up their physics laboratory or Natuurkundig Laboratorium, better known as the “nat-lab”. A little earlier that same year on the northern bank of the river IJ in Amsterdam, the laboratory of the Bataafsche Petroleum Maatschappij opened, with a modest number of nine employees. That makes 1914 the year of birth of what are still two of the largest commercial research centres in the Netherlands to this date.

We are now a century on. The Bataafsche Petroleum Maatschappij is merely a name in the history books and is better known today as Shell. Our research is still done on the banks of the IJ. However, the number of employees has increased by a factor of a hundred to around 900.

The composition of the workforce of the Shell Technology Centre Amsterdam – one of the three most important research hubs of Shell worldwide – is also a good deal more varied than it was a century ago. We have around fifty different nationalities working there, together spending around a million dollars on research and development, that is one million dollars per day. In this way, the lab in Amsterdam illustrates how the world is changing, becoming bigger, more diverse and more international.

There are three developments that affect both Shell and research and development in the Netherlands, and hence also NUFFIC.

Operating internationally is second nature to Shell. We are active in more than 70 countries with a total of around 87,000 employees. The Shell workforce in the Netherlands, numbering over 11,000, includes more than 100 different nationalities. Besides English, anyone walking through the corridors of the Head Office in The Hague is very likely to hear people talking Russian, Mandarin, Hindi, as well as Dutch, of course.

If I tell you that some 40 percent of Shell jobs in the Netherlands are connected to our head office, you will understand that the investment climate in the Netherlands is very important to internationally operating companies.

Future growth

The Netherlands has solid foundations, but it cannot afford to rest on its laurels. Europe and the Netherlands urgently need to think through the future of the economy. Where will our future growth come from? What will be our business model in 2020 or 2030? This debate has begun and the education sector can and must make an important contribution, both to the debate and to an important solution for this problem – the significance of education and research for innovation and productivity growth.

After all, the action plan you are familiar with, “Make it in the Netherlands”, points out that while 70% of international students say they want to stay in our country after their studies, in practice only 27% do so. It is my firm conviction that good education and research plus an international attitude are essential in order to be and to remain successful.

In their recent letter to the Lower House in response to the report by the Scientific Council for Government Policy on how to retain a strong economic position in the future, Ministers Henk Kamp and Jet Bussemaker emphasise that our country has sufficient opportunities to develop innovative solutions that can be marketed worldwide. “Global challenges, Dutch solutions” is the ambition announced by the Council of Ministers.

Education has to be a big part of this. In my own student days, the competition was sat on the benches next to you. All you had to do was turn your head. That is no longer true today. Besides

in the Netherlands, the competition is now also in China, India, Australia and in many other countries. These days, the student you are competing with is only a computer screen or smartphone away from you. And if you want to be successful, you need to set yourself apart. Good is no longer enough – today, it is all about excellence.

Exceptional is the new normal, and international orientation plays a crucial role in that. That goes for students, educational institutions and companies. Does that sound threatening? I prefer to see it in terms of opportunities – opportunities we need to take by working together at different levels.

Students are working together with educational institutions, for example, and research institutes are joining forces with business. Students and business, too. And all this takes place at the regional and national level and increasingly at the international level as well. Shell makes strong contributions to these kinds of partnerships. We do this because we understand that we need the world's smartest brains to be able to meet the ever-growing demand for energy, and to do business more quickly and smartly than our competitors.

Shortage of technicians

Along with that awareness, there is also a demographic imperative. Demographic changes in the Netherlands and Europe are such that in the long term, fewer young people will be trained in the sciences at universities and other institutes of higher education. This is an unfavourable prospect. There is already a shortage of highly-trained technicians in the labour market. The appeal of technology is growing, but it remains insufficient.

For example, it was recently reported that the number of girls enrolling in science programmes at universities and other institutes of higher education is on the rise. However, boys still form a clear majority in the sciences. The EU has also observed that the number of people with higher education will need to grow in order to secure Europe's competitive position. At Shell, we recognise the reality of skills shortages today and the even trickier prospects for tomorrow, both in terms of recent graduates and experienced staff.

That is the challenge facing our Recruitment department. Where today do we find the right, smart, well-trained employees for tomorrow? At Shell, we need technicians who can find smart solutions to supply the world with sufficient energy in the decades to come; where will they come from? The answer to that question can be found in part at secondary schools, and perhaps even at primary schools, here in the Netherlands.

Technical education has not always been very popular here. Which is why as a technology-driven company, we put time and money into making technology accessible – investing money and energy to help kids discover technology, making them see that technology can be fun and challenging rather than dirty or exhausting. Ways of doing that include JetNet, the young people's technology network. It is a partnership between government, educational institutions and business designed to give pupils a realistic picture of technology and increase enrolment in science/technical study programmes.

And secondary vocational education is on our radar screen too. Logically so, because a company like Shell has a great need for young process operators and maintenance staff. We maintain close links with regional educational institutions, including at the refinery in Pernis and the chemical plant in Moerdijk, but also at NAM in Assen. Each year, Shell offers over 150 internships – and helps over one hundred young people to find jobs.

And naturally we also look to universities of applied sciences and technical universities, to people who have found their own way to technology, you might say. In 2013, 203 graduates started work at Shell in the Netherlands. Good news in times of increasing unemployment, particularly among young people.

Attractiveness

Ninety of those new colleagues came from outside the Netherlands. That new foreign talent was employed primarily in technical roles centering on earth sciences, safety, IT and research and development. Being attractive to foreign talent not only increases the clout of Dutch companies and research institutions, it also plays an ever greater role in foreign companies' decisions to locate here.

Ministers Kamp and Bussemaker are rightly concerned about the fact that the Netherlands is lagging behind other OECD countries in terms of attracting foreign talent. In OECD countries, an average of 4.2% of the professional population are knowledge migrants, the two cabinet members say. However, the Netherlands is stuck at 2.4%. The Netherlands therefore has some way to go: there is work to be done.

I therefore believe that the key question is how business and research institutes can work together better. The Scientific Council for Government Policy refers to this as the broad agenda needed to strengthen the earning capacity of the Netherlands. Excellent education coupled with an international orientation are the prerequisites for a strong economic position, which will in turn attract more foreign talent and money.

Innovation boosts economic activity and helps us to be and remain distinctive and competitive. How can we work together to offer students at Dutch research institutions the opportunity to develop their talents? As far as Shell is concerned, that partnership should focus first and foremost on the areas where we can make a difference. That does imply making strategic and potentially tough choices; what are we going to do – and going to excel at – and what are we not going to do?

Top sectors policy

Seeking alignment with the “top sectors policy” formulated by the cabinet would seem a natural step. Chemicals and energy have already been identified as top sectors. Shell would like to play a role here – and is already doing so. For educational institutions, that basic principle of excelling in limited areas means that the educational offering will not initially be centred on the wishes of the consumer – the student. Government, educational institutions and business must together provide extra facilities for select subject areas.

Shell already actively does so. We have long had close ties with Delft University of Technology in numerous areas. Less well known is the fact that

Shell is one of the biggest research partners of Eindhoven University of Technology. And it is no coincidence that on February 24 the lab's anniversary year was inaugurated by a robot – developed by Twente University of Technology – doing the bell ceremony at the Amsterdam stock exchange.

In selected fields, we need to create more scope to accept foreign students and researchers. In the long run, this will help resolve potential shortages in the labour market here, and it will help generate an international attitude among Dutch students. Here too, Shell is seeking to play a facilitating role. An example: last year, the first of 75 Indian PhD students came to the Netherlands to work on the Computational Sciences for Energy Research programme set up by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research NWO, the FOM foundation for advancement of fundamental physics research in the Netherlands, and Shell. Over a nine-year period, Shell will be putting twenty million euros into this programme. The research is of a high international standing, which is good for the knowledge infrastructure in the Netherlands and good for Shell.

Internationalisation

Finally, and to return to the theme of this annual conference, I conclude that internationalisation is not merely a trend but a prerequisite for facing the future in an enterprising and successful manner. If we want to make our future a success, it is essential that research and education are open to internationalisation.

Educational institutions and business, including Shell, have a lot to offer each other in this regard. There are already links between us, but where necessary, and possible, we need to work together more closely. The Netherlands is not a bad place to be international and enterprising, but we now need to tackle the future of our economy with a sense of urgency. The key words in this challenge are: growth, innovation, education, international and partnership.