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The merits of the University of the Netherlands Antilles in the World of Science

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to present the state-of-the-art of science and scientific research at the University of the Netherlands Antilles (UNA).

Methodology/Approach – The current status of the UNA is analyzed in terms of the scientific and policy publications that relate to its core functions. In addition, prominent lectures held at the UNA are discussed.

Findings – In Curaçao there is a debate between quantitative scientists and those following the qualitative scientific method. This is a variation of the international debate on related questions. The debate is highly polarized and is not productive. The author argues that it is time to synthesize a mixed scientific approach and apply it.

Originality/value of paper – The paper contributes to the debate on science and research in the Netherlands Antilles and to the development of a research climate, by providing a structure within which the debate can be understood. It enhances the UNA as a knowledge centre, and contributes to the debate about the methods that should be part of the curriculum in the different programmes of study.

Key words Curaçao, Knowledge Economy, Science, Scientific Research, Quantitative Research, Qualitative Research, University,

Paper type Case study, Opinion

Introduction

In 2009, the University of the Netherlands Antilles (UNA) celebrates its 30th anniversary. It is an appropriate moment to analyze the scientific merits of the UNA. The Rector Magnificus of the UNA, Prof. Dr. Jeanne de Bruijn (2006 – 2009) has stated on several occasions that the research brief of the UNA needs to be strengthened for the university to become a regional knowledge centre (Bruijn de, 2006, 2007). In his keynote address on the occasion of the opening of the academic year 2008 / 2009 at the UNA Ron Gomes Casseres stated:

“UNA’s faculties¹ must increase their own commitment to research, and UNA’s educational staff should include more faculties with advanced degrees based on their personal and institutional research, so in turn can mentor and guide others to strive successfully for their own PhD’s. ... No self-respecting university today can rely solely or even mostly on teaching, regardless of the excellence thereof. Research must be part of what challenges our youth in higher education institutions, including our own UNA, and it must do so in multi-disciplinary ways.” (Gomes Casseres 2008)

Both de Bruijn and Gomes Cassares state that research is an area where the UNA has improved dramatically. However, this is a question that is open to dispute. It is not exactly clear how the track record of the UNA should be evaluated. Nor is it clear what

¹ The departments of the university are reffered to as faculties.

people mean when they talk of a 'UNA research tradition'. This paper examines the current achievements of the UNA in terms of contributions to pure and applied science, and reflects on debates about the nature of science and how to promote it at the UNA.

The paper is structured as follows. First the UNA is described. This is followed by a description of research at the UNA over time. Next the debate on science and research is described. The paper ends with conclusions.

The University of the Netherlands Antilles

The University of the Netherlands Antilles is a young institution in a young country, and both are struggling to establish their identity. In the 1950s the government of Curaçao started a modest scholarship programme to send students to the Netherlands. It was the era during which the Netherlands Antilles obtained self internal government. Today, about four hundred high school students leave the island annually to study abroad, mainly at colleges and universities in the Netherlands. Of these students only thirty percent return to the island after they graduate. This is a great loss to the creative class (Florida 2007), and has been described as the 'brain drain'. To reduce this drain the UNA was founded in January 1979, as the successor to the School of Law, which had been founded in the early 1970s (Heilegers 2004).

From the year 2002 the number of students has increased significantly. There are several explanations for this growth. First the expansion of the UNA was a consequence of socioeconomic developments in the Netherlands, such as the introduction of the Euro in

2002² and the rise of right wing sentiment, the latter linked to the increasing popularity of the right wing movement of Pim Fortuyn, who was assassinated on 6 May, 2002. This created a hostile atmosphere for people from outside the Netherlands. But the improvement of the UNA also contributed to its own growth. The UNA started to offer a greater variety of programmes. This growth persisted even when the Netherlands changed the system of scholarship, and made it impossible for UNA students to apply for a Dutch scholarship. This measure forced students to apply for a less attractive scholarship at the Curaçao Foundation for Scholarship or opt to study in the Netherlands.

Year	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Students	701	670	767	1,041	1,339	1,658	1,953	2,032

Table 1: Number of students at the University of the Netherlands Antilles
(Source: University of the Netherlands Antilles).

The UNA has developed a number of alliances with local and international institutions in the area of research. The Central Bureau of Statistics of the Netherlands Antilles (CBS) provides basic data, among which the census figures are the most important. Nationaal Archeologisch - Antropologisch Museum (NAAM) is a partner in the area of anthropological research. The Health Department of Curaçao (GGD) has a foundation that conducts epidemiological research. The Chamber of Commerce of Curaçao also conducts some research and provides data for research. Carmabi (Caribbean Research and Management of Biodiversity) was founded as a marine biological research station in 1955, and promotes research, applied nature conservation and education. The Jacob Geltdekker Institute promotes advanced cultural studies and finances several PhD candidates.

² The Euro was introduced in 1999 in the financial markets and in 2002 as physical coins and banknotes. The Euro led to inflation. Studying in the Netherlands became very expensive because of the strong Euro.

In spite of these local and international links, the UNA is not well integrated into the region. The UNA was the Chair of the *Association of Universities and Research Institutions of the Caribbean* (UNICA) in the period up to 2005, and the annual meeting of UNICA was held at the UNA from the 9th to the 11th of November 2005. Prior to that, the 23rd Annual Conference of the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR) was held on the island in 1997, but it is unclear whether the UNA had any involvement. What is clear is that there was no follow-up.

Today the UNA is a small university of about 2,000 students catering mainly for Curaçao and to a lesser extent the other islands of the Netherlands Antilles. According to the Student Service Center of the UNA, there are currently students of thirty nationalities studying at the UNA. There are six departments: the Social Economic Department (SEF), the School of Law, the Engineering Department, the Arts Department, the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Work (BSW) and the inactive School of Medicine. Until 2008 the SEF incorporated the *Curaçao Institute for Social and Economic Studies* (Curises). In 2008 the ties between the UNA and Curises were broken after a lengthy conflict.

Whatever happens to the constitutional reform of the Netherlands Antilles that will go into effect after 2010³, the UNA wants to become a regional university. Part of this

³ The Kingdom of the Netherlands is currently made up of the Netherlands, the Netherlands Antilles, and Aruba. The Netherlands Antilles and Aruba are Dutch overseas self-governing countries. Defence and foreign affairs are Kingdom responsibilities, while the people hold Dutch nationality and citizenship and have full mobility to the Netherlands. The Netherlands Antilles is a federation of the five islands: Curaçao,

strategy is to secure European accreditation and to develop as a regional education and research centre.

Two other commercial universities (Caribbean University and Dutch Caribbean University) have established themselves on the island, but they focus on undergraduate education. There is also an offshore School of Medicine.

Methodology

For the present study the records of the University Library were examined by the library personnel. The work of UNA authors was grouped into categories according to the status of the author, the year and the nature of the publication. This data was analyzed in the light of the policy on research, recent public statements, and other statements and documents on research at the UNA.

A UNA author is:

- A scientist working at the UNA
- A professor at the UNA
- A guest lecturer at the UNA
- A PhD candidate

Bonaire, Saba, St. Eustatius, and Saint Maarten. At the present time the Netherlands Antilles are going through a process of constitutional change. Curaçao and Saint Maarten will become countries within the Dutch Kingdom, just as Aruba has been since 1986. The other three islands will each become a sort of Dutch municipality. These changes are planned to take effect in 2010. After the implementation, Curaçao will be freed from a double bureaucratic layer. Expectations are that this will not only lower the cost of government but will also lead to a more effective and decisive government that will be able to support the development of the island.

Relevant scholarly activity by UNA authors is classified as fitting one of the following categories:

- An article in a peer reviewed journal
- An article in a peer reviewed electronic journal
- A chapter in a book
- A book, a PhD dissertation or reader
- A published lecture
- Membership of a PhD panel
- Editor of a publication
- A scientific report as a consultancy assignment for a government or government agency
- A patent

Research at the UNA

Criticism of the research output of the UNA is not new. In 1994 a report of Prof. Dr. Koers stated that the research performance of the UNA was poor (Koers 1994). In the *Strategic Plan UNA 2006 – 2010* (UNA, 2005a) the university spells out its ambitions in the area of scientific research. Part of the mission of the UNA is, “To become a leading institute for higher education and research in the Dutch Caribbean by 2010, and to serve as an example for education and research institutes in the entire Caribbean.” One of the main objectives is to formulate a UNA-wide research programme and appoint a research coordinator for each department. It is a target that there should be four chairs per department. These initiatives at departmental level will be linked to develop a university-

wide research programme. The SEF formulated a research programme entitled *Economic Development for Sustainable Development* (SEF 2007). In practice, not much has been done with the plan. The other departments still have no research plan.

A study of the research track record of the UNA has not been conducted before, so the present study represents an important step forward. An earlier study that was similar in some ways was a study by Koulen et al. (1984), which analyzed social scientific publications from 1967 to 1984. There are several differences between that study and the current one. Koulen et al. focused exclusively on the social sciences. They did design their study to examine the productivity of the UNA, but had a broader scope, including studies conducted by third parties on the Netherlands Antilles. In their study, Koulen et al. identified a few other studies which they said had similar objectives.

Year	Book	Chapter in book	Article Journal	Report	Lecture or paper	Lecture	Conference /symposium publication	PhD	Total
1979	2					1			3
1980	6		1					1	8
1981	3		5			1			9
1982	2	9	4			1			16
1983	10	12	1						23
1984	7	26			1				34
1985	20	7	1		1				29
1986	14	31							45
1987	7			1					8
1988	7		2		1	2	1		13
1989	6	1			1			1	9
1990	5	23	2		4				34
1991	2		5		4				11
1992	6	3	3						12
1993	1	5	1				2		9
1994	3	1	1	4		1			10
1995	5	7	3	1		1	1		18
1996	5	1	1		1				8
1997	3	17	2	1		1			24
1998	1	1	2	1					5
1999	7	2	2					1	12
2000	2	15					1		18
2001	2	1	1	1					5
2002	5		2						7
2003	3	21	1			1	1		27
2004	4		1						5
2005	3	15	1		1			1	21
2006	2	42	2	1	2	1		1	51
2007		11	4		1			1	17
2008	2	14	2	1		1			20
2009	1	1	3						5
Total	146	266	53	11	17	11	6	6	516

Table 2: Number and type of publications by UNA faculty members

The UNA had his own publications called the *UNA Cahier* (UC) and *Uitgaven van de Universiteit van de Nederlandse Antillen* (UUNA). UC appeared regularly between 1984 and 1999 and was generally a publication by one author. It had a specific format and was

numbered. UUNA was first published in 1979 and was last published in 2000. UUNA did not have a uniform format and was not numbered.

During the first two decades the productivity of the UNA was more or less constant. At the beginning of the third decade productivity changed. After a short, relatively dry period the UNA started to produce again in 2002 with the re-appearance of the *UNA Publication* (UNA 2003a). These publications appeared annually, except for 2004. The third edition in 2005 was a double volume (seventeen articles), including publications from 2004 and 2005 (UNA 2005b). The publication also appeared in 2006 and 2007 (UNA 2006 2007). The objective of the *UNA Publication* is to be a low entry publication forum for UNA scientists, as a stepping stone towards international publications. Based on the number of publications the conclusion must be that this strategy is working.

Another strategy that seems to be working is to publish special editions on special occasions, such as anniversaries. This also increases the number of publications. After 2000 several collections of articles have been published. In 2003 the UNA published *René Römer, als inspirator* (UNA 2003b) to honor one of the most important modern sociologists of the Netherlands Antilles who passed away in 2003. The publication consisted of fifteen articles, covering all the areas of interest that Römer addressed.

In 2005 the UNA (2005c) published *An Initial Approach Towards Integral Development: The view of the Kingdom from a Caribbean perspective (Een aanzet tot integrale ontwikkeling; Bezien vanuit het Caribische deel van het Koninkrijk)*. This was the

documentation of a conference held at the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the reign of Queen Beatrix of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The publication consisted of eighteen articles. One of the conclusions of the conference was that the UNA should be more productive in research, especially in the area of sustainable development. The conference also suggested that a university-wide research programme should be formulated.

In 2008 *Democratie & Deugdzaamheid; Lezing bundel 2007 – 2008* (Democracy and Virtues), containing ten articles, was published. This publication is a collection of lectures presented as a series that was the initiative of the Governor of the Netherlands Antilles (the local representative of the Queen) (UNA 2008).

These last two publications illustrate the point that lectures should also be considered when assessing the contribution of the UNA. In the 1980s the NGO *Kousa Komun* (Common Cause), in cooperation with the UNA, held a series of lectures on good governance, which were later published. That series included an important lecture on the electoral system.

Vereniging Bestuurskunde Nederlandse Antillen en Aruba (Association of Public Administration) has organized several lectures annually since 1997, in conjunction with the UNA, on topics related to good governance and public administration, and most of those lectures have been published.

The last decade has therefore been fruitful for the UNA. Publications over that time have included work from Dr. Peter Verton, Prof Dr. Alejandro (Jandi) Paula and Prof. Dr. René Römer.

The list of publications presented in Table 1 consists of books, chapters in books, articles in journals, reports, lectures or papers, lectures, conference or symposium publications, and PhD dissertations. Among these various outputs, only about ten per cent, or two per year, are international peer reviewed articles. This type of publications is rare at the UNA. Only six PhD dissertations were produced, an average of one every five years.

The production related to the number of researchers would probably show a different picture, because the number of researchers has increased over time. Today there are ten full professors affiliated to the UNA.

School	Full Professors	PhD's	PhD candidates	Other faculty members	Total
Law	5	2	2	0	9
Business	1 ⁴	2	7	3	13
Engineering	1	1	2	7	11
Arts	3	1	1	5	10
Behavioral sciences	0	0	0	0	0
Total	10	6	12	15	43

Table 2: Number of professors and PhDs.as of 1 December 2008. (Source: UNA HRM Department)

To bring this data on PhD candidates up to date, the data for the period since 2000 is now presented. In 2000 there were 12 PhD projects. Five have been completed, but six are still ongoing and one has been abandoned (Ernst & Young 2000). This leads to the conclusion

⁴ The chair Good Governance is a joint venture of the School of Law and the SEF.

that, in absolute numbers, not much has changed. If this is put into the general context of the growth of the UNA, research at this level has been going backwards.

The Rector Magnificus maintains a different list of full professors from the HRM Department, and that data is presented in Table 3.

School	Full Professors
Law	8
SEF	8 ⁵
Engineering	4
Arts	4
Behavioral sciences	0
Preparation	2
Total	26

Table 3: Number of professors according to the Rector Magnificus (Source: Rector Magnificus UNA)

The School of Law has eight professors. Six of them have clearly specified areas of expertise, which are Criminal Law, International Law, Constitutional Law, Family Law, Criminology, and Good Governance.

The SEF also has eight professors, but seven of those positions are currently vacant. The chair of Good Governance, which is a joint appointment with the School of Law, is held by Prof. Dr. in 't Veld. The vacancies are in Accounting, General Management, Marketing, Management Business and Communication, International Business, Internet Based Information Systems, Credit Unions and Poverty Reduction. The last named chair is a post created at the request of the Foundation Multiculturalism and Social Cohesion, and it is being prepared.

⁵ The chair Good Governance is a joint venture of the School of Law and the SEF.

The Engineering Department has four chairs, three of which are vacant. Technology for Sustainable Development is a special chair held by Professor Halman. Construction and Civil Engineering (Bouwkunde & Civiele Techniek), Information Technology and Electrical Systems (Informatietechnologie en Elektrische Systemen), and Industrial Engineering (Industriële Technologie) are all vacant.

The Department of Arts has three chairs: Caribbean Literature, The Language of Papiamentu, The Learning and Didactics of Papiamentu.

The Behavioral Sciences and Social Work Department was only established in 2008 and has only one chair, Sociology, although several other chairs are in preparation.

Several special chairs were created at the UNA. In the 1990s there was the chair Environment and Development, sponsored by the Maduro and Curiel's Bank, which was occupied by Prof. Dr. Riedijk (Bressers 1997). The chairs of Good Governance, Prof. Dr. R. in 't Veld (2006), and Sustainable Technology, Prof. J. Hallman (2008) are well established. There is also a chair of Criminology, managed by Dr. M. van San. Four new special chairs are being prepared: the chair of the Knowledge Based Economy, a UNESCO chair of Globalization of Small Island Developing States, a UNSECO chair of Desalination of Seawater, and a chair of Constitutional Reform.

In 2003 two professors with ties to the UNA, Prof. Mr. J. Saleh and Prof. Dr. Ing. V. Marcha, were appointed at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. In 2008 Prof. Dr. A. Duits was appointed at the University of Groningen, also in the Netherlands.

In relation to PhD dissertations, only Dr. Boom defended his PhD thesis at the UNA in 1980. Several scholars obtained their PhD degree. Dr. Ashley Duits obtained the doctorate in 1992 and Dr. Kenneth Berend in 2003. Neither of them were affiliated with the UNA. Dr. Miguel Goede fulltime lecturer received his doctorate in 2005. Two part time lecturers at the UNA achieved their doctorates: Dr. Rosemary Allen in 2007 and Dr. Rubia Maduro in 2006. In 1987 a Doctorate Honoris Causa was awarded to a Venezuelan President Jaime Lusinchi. And in 1995 the late Dr. Dip received the honor. Recently three other degrees were awarded to: Dr. Bakhuis, Dr. Tirzo Sprockel and Mgr. Dr. Römer in 2008. It should be noted that Römer already held a doctors degree at the time.

In other developments, successful international scholars returned to the island after an academic career abroad. The architect Prof. Dr. K. Weber and the oncologist Prof. Dr. H. Pinendo are back on the island and contribute to science.

The debate on science at the UNA

In the temple of science are many mansions, and various indeed are they that dwell therein and the motives that have led them thither. (Einstein, 1918)

Although the scientific production of the UNA can be improved, there is an implicit debate on scientific method. The debate mainly takes place in the area of the social sciences. This is probably because the group of scientists in this area is the largest and because this debate is inherent to the field of social sciences. This debate takes place around the development of the curriculum, the development of final theses and to some extent around the publications in the *UNA Publications*.

This implicit debate became explicit in October 2008, when an Investigatory Committee presented the report of its findings regarding the events that led to the failure of the SEF to start its programmes on 25 August 2008 (Investigatory Committee 2008). The committee was chaired by a local banker Mr. Ron Gomes Cassares and consisted of a local retired judge, a European professor and a professor from the United States of America. One of the main conclusions of the committee was that three faculty members were responsible for the events that were reviewed. These faculty members dismissed the report, stating that the investigation was *nonscientific*. What they meant by *nonscientific* was that it was not based on quantitative research. They stated, among other things, that interviewing the students on the Student Board does not provide an accurate picture of what is happening in the student population. This critique made the implementation of the results difficult.

At first glance this debate reflects the broader international debate between the quantitative approach and the qualitative approach to research. The quantitative approach strives to construct statistical models to explain what is observed. The researcher knows

clearly in advanced what he or she is looking for. All aspects of the study are carefully designed before the collection of data. Questionnaires are used to collect numerical data. The use of quantitative data is more effective as a means to test hypotheses, but may miss contextual information, as the research remains separate from the subject matter.

The qualitative approach strives to produce a complete and detailed description of the subject. The researcher starts with an idea. The design is formed as the study progresses. The researcher is the data gathering instrument. Data may be in the form of words, pictures and objects. Interpretation is important. Methods like participant observation and in-depth interviews are employed. The results are rich, but less capable of generalization. The researcher is likely to become subjectively absorbed in his or her subject^[6]

In the debate at the UNA the supporters of the quantitative method claim that it is superior. As happens in other places, the protagonists overlook the fact that the two approaches are complementary (Onwuegbuzie 2002). The point is that social theories are often not universal, and that it is necessary to conduct research to develop theories before empirical measurement can take place. This is particularly true on small, multicultural, developing islands in the Caribbean. In 1981 and 1991, Römer had already clearly identified that statistical methods are difficult to apply in a small island population. In this context, current empirical research is just a collection of statistics with no theoretical base, which does not even contribute to the development of such a base. There is no interpretation of the meaning of developments. The lack of interpretation persists because

⁶ <http://wilderdom.com/research/QualitativeVersusQuantitativeResearch.html>

the researchers following the quantitative approach have the upper hand, because their arguments are supported by the arguments in the debate in the developed world.

But below the surface there is more going on. Quantitative scientist justify the low research productivity by pointing to the lack of time and other resources for research, at the same time as they undermine qualitative researchers by labeling that method as inferior. Qualitative scientists are considered a threat because, at this stage in the development of the UNA, developing the theories is of greater relevance than measurement. Even if this argument leans towards support for the qualitative approach, the development of science would benefit from collaboration between the two methods, and the two groups of scientists. However, for various reasons, which include conflicts over status and pride, collaboration has not happened to date.

Conclusions

The UNA is the centre of scientific research in the Netherlands Antilles and in Curaçao. Traditionally the university focused on teaching (Gomes Casseres 2008). Only over the last few years, since 2001 / 2002, has the university put more emphasis on scientific research. But the target of appointing four chairs per school has not yet been achieved. There is still no university-wide research programme. Even so, it would not be correct to draw a picture of the UNA as an institution that does not produce scientific research. Over the years the UNA has published a great deal, taking into account the size of the organization. But the statements made by de Bruijn and Gomes Casseres, that scientific

research at the UNA should improved, are correct. This is especially the case if the number of peer reviewed publications and PhD dissertations are considered.

If the UNA is going to move forward and become a regional force in the advancement of scientific research it will need to select focal points for their research, such as Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, Good Governance, Marine Biology and Accounting. The current debate about scientific method is pointless and counter-productive. Science will be served if quantitative and qualitative approaches are combined and if the philosophy and sociology of science are included in the curricula.

The UNA can become a regional research centre, combining Caribbean, European, North America and Latin America influences and traditions. The UNA has a unique position, working with European, American and regional universities, attracting many scholars, students and internships to the islands. There are students from thirty nationalities studying at the UNA, and, “Students are leading indicators of global talent flows” (Florida 2007:11). Obtaining the European accreditation of the educational programmes and building new facilities are crucial to the success of this plan for future development (UNA 2005a).

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