**Press release AUC 10th of April 2013**

***The State of University Policy for Progress, a Dutch perspective***

*Empower European Universities presents report during panel presentation with major Dutch higher education stakeholders in Amsterdam University College*

The Dean of Amsterdam University College, Marijk Van der Wende, hosted a panel composed of the main higher education stakeholders in the Netherlands to discuss the ‘State of University Policy for Progress in Europe’, a recently report published by Empower European Universities, Maastricht-based foundation chaired by former education Minister Jo Ritzen.

The panel, attended by a diverse audience of students, faculty members, university leaders and administrators, reflected on the recent changes and potential future of the Dutch higher education landscape, using as a basis the ‘uneasy advice for national governments’ provided in this assessment of the contribution of higher education policies to economic innovation in 32 European countries

Amsterdam University College (AUC) provided an illustrative case for some of the recommendations made by the report, particularly regarding the need for more autonomy, and for a concentration on educational quality rather than broad student enrollment. Marijk Van der Wende showed the benefits of additional autonomy that university colleges like Amsterdam University College, have above traditional universities in the Netherlands. AUC can set up a more adapted and flexible teaching offer which is strongly attractive to international students, 50% of its student body not being Dutch . It can also select its students and set flexible tuition fees through this additional autonomy. Amsterdam University College, a highly selective institution specialized in liberal arts education, can be seen a response to the lack of differentiation, internationalisation and excellence as observed by the OECD in its last review of Dutch higher education (2008).

The report also resonated with the need to increase equity and quality in education worldwide, a mission that nonprofit organization Educational Testing Service (ETS), has pursued since 1947. Gerben Van Lent, executive director at ETS, a sponsor of Empower European Universities, showed how the EEU report aligns with ETS’ mission of supporting quality and equity in education, by providing evidence in favour of quality education for innovation and introducing a worthy tool for policy-makers. The report indeed ties to the multiple public policy and comparative research projects conducted by Educational Testing Service has done, which include helping the OECD in its assessment of higher education learning outcomes and adult competencies.

The need to change higher education in Europe to improve its quality was a key motivation for Jo Ritzen, who followed with a presentation of the report the State of University policy for Progress. His presentation stressed that supporting education in Europe was more important than ever, and that different higher education performances were dividing Europe, with Northern European and some Western European countries appearing as clear leaders. Cecile Hoareau, co-author to the State of University Policy for Progress in Europe, followed by presenting trends regarding higher education policy. These trends show that although, the Netherlands is one of the top countries in Europe, recent reforms in funding and autonomy have made this position uncertain.

Three reactions followed suit. Ron Van de Meer, Deputy Director for Higher Education and Student grants at the Ministry for Education, Culture and Science, defended the Ministry’s perspective and recent reforms. He reminded the audience of the relevant reforms undertaken by the Ministry, including encouraging more variety among higher education institutions, reducing student graduation time, and the additional national support for the matching of EU funds in the Horizon 2020 program decided by the new coalition Government. Ron Van der Meer also emphasized that the Ministry did not intend to reduce the autonomy of universities, but that these institutions needed to fulfill the demands for accountability. Finally, he acknowledged the strong debates regarding funding, underlined that, but reminded the audience that higher education institutions in the Netherlands have been able to have strong impact and excellent results based on relatively ‘scarce investments’.

Karl Dittrich, chairman of the Dutch Association of Universities VSNU, tied the report to the ever increasing demands and pressures on universities. He lauded the resilience of universities and ability to continue despite these pressures and society expecting ‘too much’. Karl Dittrich also welcomed the conclusions of the report regarding policy and managerial autonomy, which have been increasingly threatened in Dutch universities in a recent climate of ‘distrust’.

Karl Dittrich also provided somewhat of a Eurosceptic voice, in dire contrast to the indelibly pro-European tone of the Maastricht-based authors of the report. According to him, the EU includes higher education systems of such diverse performance that EU regulations end up leading to the opposite of quality. Karl Dittrich disagreed with the need to oversee funds for public research at the EU level, even though Dutch higher education is one of the main and most successful recipients of ERC funds as well as European-funded Marie Curie fellows.

Thom de Graaf, the chairman of the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, stressed that the Government must aim at organizing dynamics in Higher Education, rather than organizing Higher Education itself in its contextualization of the report for Universities of Applied Sciences. He acknowledged that although the report was about research universities, several of its conclusions applied to the *hogescholen*, including the recent more constraining environment and need to drive innovation up. He restated that Universities of Applied Sciences had a strong role to play in such environment, by forming relationships with businesses and the local community.

These interventions merged around two key points in the panel discussion, chair by PG Kroeger, Science Guide’s editor in chief, namely how university autonomy would evolve in a context of decreasing trust toward institutions, and the consequences of paradigm shift occurring in the Dutch higher education landscape. Panel speakers took it in turn to respond, discussing the role of windows of opportunity in setting up change in institutionally constrained environment, how different parts of the sector were changing and the perceptions and relationships with the academic faculty, in what was a lively debate marked by a strong engagement from all sides to fight for a Dutch higher education which is evolving in an uncertain environment.

*Empower European Universities thanks Amsterdam University College, the NWO, Educational Testing Service as well as the University of Aarhus, Central European University and the University of Maastricht for their support in their research and the organization of this event.*