



# ‘I could be a real pioneer’

From the first coachload of Indonesian students to the 1,500 international students who joined Master’s degree programmes at Delft in the past year. Marietta Spiekerman explains how, in the space of three decades, TU Delft evolved from a university with a predominantly national role into a world-renowned international university of technology.



## CV

Marietta Spiekerman (born The Hague, 1950) began her career in Student Registration at the Institute of Social Studies, which offered study programmes for students from developing countries. After some five years at the Institute, she joined the Ministry of Agriculture as a training and development manager. In 1975 she and her husband, an academic staff member of the Microelectronics department at TU Delft, went to the United States for a year. On their return, Marietta also went to work for TU Delft, initially as assistant to the international guest coordinator, then as clerk to the Board of Deans and finally as a senior policy officer for internationalisation. She retired in September this year, after working for TU Delft for 36 years.

### How internationally oriented was TU Delft when you came to work here 36 years ago?

“I have always known it as an international university. The international guest coordinator and I used to make the arrangements for guests from abroad. There were many Indonesian students, and most of them came here to study Aerospace Engineering (AE). At that time, all the teaching was still in Dutch.”

### Why was AE so popular with these students?

“Because the dean was spending a lot of time in Indonesia, visiting the aircraft factory in Bandung. The Ministry of Education wanted to attract Indonesian students to the Netherlands, as a way of opening up political contact again between the two countries. In around 1985, a coachload of students suddenly arrived and we had a month to arrange things for them in Delft. There wasn't accommodation at the time, and I tried everywhere - even the school for bargees' children. We found a youth hostel where they could stay for a week. Eventually we found accommodation for them in Twente for six months, because the campus there was half empty and we were chock-a-block here.”

### Even back then there was lack of accommodation?

“Yes. It was quite an undertaking to get them all to Twente. It was just before Queen's Day and I thought: they won't be able to go shopping because everything will be closed. I phoned the Albert Heijn supermarket to warn them that a coach with 75 Indonesians was on the way. The students took packs of ice with them in the coach to Twente. We'd arranged a nice meal for them, but two-thirds of the group stayed in the coach. It turned out that Ramadan had started that day. At that time, not many people in The Netherlands knew about Ramadan.”

### Were there other foreign students in Delft too?

“There certainly were. We were already admitting students to research fellowships; post-docs who wanted to spend some time doing research. The College of Deans approved funding for ten fellows per year for the university as a whole. That was nowhere near enough, of course. I increased the number by telling the faculties that if they added to the budget for research fellows, they could recruit fellows themselves for six or nine months. Everything was very much in its

early stages and there was some very creative accounting. Then companies began to donate money and we were able to appoint a Fellow - subject to the same quality criteria, of course.”

### Where did the fellows come from?

“From all over the world: China, Russia, India and the United States. The Rector Magnificus, Hans Dirken, had the idea to set up an International Office, and he said to me: ‘You should be part of it.’ I was clerk to the College of Deans at the time, and wasn't sure about working in the International Office, but when the Erasmus programme was launched in 1986 I became involved straightaway. The position of ‘Policy Officer for Organisation’ hadn't been created yet. That meant I could be a real pioneer. I was surfing along on the wave of internationalisation.”

### What was the idea behind the Erasmus programme?

It was a project initiated by Brussels that provided grants to enable students to spend six to nine months studying abroad or working on a project at another university. One of the good things about it was that the language of instruction was English from the outset. You didn't need armies of translators and interpreters. The aim was to enable students to compete more effectively in the international job market and to give the market greater insight into the education programmes offered in the various countries. This provided the impetus to compare the content of education programmes.” What is the level? “Each country had a different system. This was a reason to make changes with regard to credit points, for example.”

### Was there a lot of interest in the grants?

“Yes, right from the start. The Rector Magnificus at Leuven took the initiative to set up the ‘Leuven network’, with TU Delft, Imperial College, RWTH Aachen and the École des Mines in Paris. This was a core group whose quality you could be sure of, and we could apply jointly for Erasmus declarations. From the outset TU Delft itself also made funding available for our own students, because it could see the benefits of spending time abroad. Compared to other Dutch universities TU Delft was very active in this. It operated on the basis of personal contacts between academics, often through project work. The university already had a strong international orientation:

around seven percent of our students came from outside the Netherlands.”

### How come?

“For one thing, because we have a sudden influx of new students from Norway. The country had one university of technology, Trondheim, and wanted to expand. The government didn’t want another one, because of the cost. Industry needed more engineers, and started making funding available to send Norwegian students to Scotland and England. The Rector Magnificus, Ben Veltman, thought that they should come to Delft too, so I was asked to go to Norway to promote our university. For several winters I spent a week there, battling through snowstorms and flying from place to place in small planes, to tell secondary-school pupils - and especially students in vocational education - why they should come to Delft.”

**The next step towards internationalisation at TU Delft was the introduction of English-taught Master’s degree programmes in 1996.**

“Yes, we’d been visiting Indonesia and were asked if we could offer Master’s degree programmes. At the time we still had a five-year curriculum, and the Bachelor’s-Master’s degree system hadn’t been introduced yet. I visited all the faculties to ask them what they wanted to do in terms of English-taught programmes, but no-one was interested in setting up a Master’s curriculum. The five-year curriculum was sacred, and couldn’t be divided in two. I’d advocated a Master’s degree programme before, and was asked to see if it was possible.”

### How did it go?

“At the Institute of Social Studies I’d had experience setting up selection and recruitment processes. I had to find people in the faculties who were willing to be involved. AE were willing, given their contacts with Indonesia. Electro was facing declining student numbers, and also wanted to be involved. The dean of Chemical Technology simply thought it was an interesting idea. I organised an advance welcome programme for the summer months, to bring the students up to speed. Half way through the year there was a Go/No Go stage. We said right from the beginning that the final attainment level should be the same for all students. In the first year we had 13 students.

Now we have more than 1,500 Master’s students a year.”

### So TU Delft anticipated the 1999 introduction of the Bachelor’s-Master’s degree system.

“Yes, we were the first university in the Netherlands to fully integrate the Bachelor’s-Master’s degree system. I was the project manager. Along with our best partners in Europe, I was concerned that we shouldn’t find ourselves faced with the situation they have in America, where 75% of students leave education once they have a Bachelor’s degree. We wanted to reach agreements with industry that our students wouldn’t be lured away when they graduated with their Bachelor’s degree. In the context of that discussion, the Idea League was set up: a collaboration between Imperial College, Delft, ETH Zurich and Aachen.

**‘We wanted to reach agreements with industry that our students would not be lured away’**

I represented TU Delft in the Operations Board from the beginning and I wanted to compare the partners in terms of content and standard, to see whether we were all actually on the same level. It turned out that we were. We accept each other’s students as our own.”

### What else does the Idea League do?

“In 2005 we introduced a joint Master’s degree programme in Geophysics for which students spend six months in Delft, six months in Aachen and six months in Zurich. They can choose which of these universities they graduate from. Recently, as project manager, I set up a new Honours programme with our Idea League partners.” (See page 11 ‘In the picture in Brussels’)

### What has internationalisation meant for TU Delft?

“I think we have enhanced our international profile. If you can attract good international students, you’ll attract good international staff too. That, in turn, enhances the quality of our education and teaching. I think that the university has benefited enormously from this, in terms of quality.”