High intensity

As the new rector of TU Delft, Karel Luyben leaves no doubt:
the level of research and education must be raised.

Joost Panhuysen

How are you finding being rector?
“I feel very much at home. The position, the responsibilities, the tasks: everything is as I had expected. And the two other members of the Executive Board – Paul Rullmann and the president Dirk Jan van den Berg – allow me the latitude to fill the role as I would wish. Of course, it is a new situation. The three members of the Executive Board must act as one. I still regularly remind myself, ‘wait – I first have to consult my colleagues before I offer my opinion’. And you must never take important decisions on your own. I am therefore quite cautious. I suspect they actually find me too cautious! But I’ve been pleasantly surprised by how well we are able to work together already.”

Are the board members very different people?
“Yes. We complement each other very well – also in terms of experience and expertise. Since 2002, Paul Rullmann has gained enormous experience on the Executive Board in matters relating to education. The support available to education has greatly improved under his leadership. During the months ahead, Paul will be taking a very close look at the finances of the faculties. I shall be working with him a lot on the education side. Compared to me, Paul is more a ‘feelings’ person. Not that I’m entirely without feelings, you understand. But Paul really enjoys music. For many years he played guitar in the folk group Crackerhash. And he likes to visit me to celebrate the annual Carnival.”

What sort of president is Dirk Jan van den Berg?
“Forceful. He knows his mind and is not afraid to pursue his ideals. But if you have any critical comments and know what you’re talking about, he will listen and is willing to adjust course where necessary. As an expert in econometrics, Dirk Jan has been able to bring the financial discussion with the other universities onto a higher plane. That has made millions of euros’ difference to us. Of course, not everyone is quite so grateful. Dirk Jan is also a true diplomat. If a conflict seems likely, he will come up with some creative compromise which makes all parties feel that they have won something. No one suffers any loss of face.”

How do you complement the other board members?
“I have a lot of experience in finding the best people and assembling the best possible team. I am good at selection, and that is an advantage if you want to optimise a university. And yes, I know TU Delft very well. I know what the researchers are doing. I’m familiar with what their various disciplines entail. And, not importantly, I know the little tricks that a faculty or dean might pull in an attempt to hoodwink the Executive Board!”

Can you give an example?
“Suppose the Executive Board has set aside university funds to cover redundancy payments following a reorganisation. A faculty might be tempted to ‘disguise’ the departure of someone they actually wanted to get rid of for some time as a reorganisation-related redundancy. In that case, it would be the Executive Board and not the faculty which would bear the costs.”

What sort of devious mind could come up with something like that?
“You will never hear me admit to such dirty dealings when I was dean [he says with a smile]. But such things are possible. Fortunately, as Executive Board you can reduce the temptation by requiring the faculty itself to contribute towards every redundancy scheme.”

Is your main aim as rector to improve the quality of the university?
“Yes. I see it as my task to maintain the academic level of our university, and to raise it where necessary.”

And where is that necessary?
“A good question. That’s what I would like to know too!” [he says with a smile]

I assume that the problem does not lie with the faculty of Applied Sciences, the ‘showhorse’ of TU Delft?
“That is too simple a statement. The problem could just as easily lie with Applied Sciences as anywhere else. Half of its groups are performing under the faculty average. As dean, I helped to raise that average.”

Who is Karel Luyben?
Karel Luyben was born in Tilburg in 1951. He studied Chemicals Technology at Eindhoven University of Technology and by the age of 28 was already a senior researcher at Wageningen University. Following a brief period in private sector research (with the Dutch agricultural cooperative Cehave and the German chemicals company Bayer), in 1983 he was appointed Professor of Biokinetics at TU Delft. Five years later he became Professor of Bio-process Technology. In the 1990s, Karel Luyben was Scientific Director of the Leiden-Delft Research School for Biotechnological Sciences. However, he is probably best known as the man who made such a mark on the faculty of Applied Sciences as its dean from 1998 to 2009. Despite the excellent reputation he helped the faculty to acquire, in 2009 he decided that it was time to step down – even if he were not appointed rector. In the event, he succeeded Jaap Fokkema as Rector Magnificus of TU Delft in January 2010. Karel Luyben is married and has one son.
If you focus on becoming the best possible university with the best possible people, won’t that make some staff – assistant professors for example – feel like ‘second rate’ academic staff. They might think that they are obviously no longer good enough for TU Delft.

“That risk does exist. And that means that we must treat every member of staff with respect. The people who were taken on when our wishes and quality standards were different are still very much part of the team. They must be taken just as seriously as the newcomers. But that’s not to say that a university can never change and that you mustn’t develop a new strategy for the future. When I say that we intend to ‘raise the bar’, am I excluding all the academic staff who are already working at TU Delft? Perhaps some people will see it that way, but the world changes constantly. Fact. If you can’t cope with change, you shouldn’t be working in a dynamic organisation such as a university.”

Doesn’t every organisation, even a university, need different levels? In addition to the excellent staff, shouldn’t there also be those who, well, just average?

“The average won’t disappear. If you manage to raise the level of the academic staff, there will be a new average.”

But can you carry on raising quality indefinitely?

“You can always strive to achieve a higher level. The world is changing, requirements are changing. What was possible or the only alternative twenty years ago is no longer the norm today. But raising the level is a gradual process. You must not think that a large proportion of staff will suddenly fall below the required standard just because the overall level has risen slightly. It’s very easy to explain. Most people know enough about statistics to understand that if I appoint people who are below average quality, the average will fall.”
You once said that a rector should be more of a leader than a manager. Does that leadership also involve motivating people?

“Yes. It’s really nice to speak to a room full of PhD students and postdocs about the opportunities they must seize, and to see them infected by my own enthusiasm. But motivation can also happen at a more modest level: people who leave this room thinking, my batteries have been recharged.”

How do you do that? It isn’t a pep talk.

“That’s difficult to say. It’s all to do with enthusiasm, a passion for my profession.”

Where does that enthusiasm come from?

“It’s just the way I am. When I do something, I do it with ‘high intensity’. When I cycle, I cycle fast. If I’m investigating something, I want to know every last detail. And if I’m repairing something, I don’t give up until it is working as good as new. In fact whatever I do, I do it with such intensity that some people get a little irritated.”

Such as?

“My wife, for one! Let’s say the coffee machine has broken down because a coil in the switch is broken. I then spend an entire Saturday afternoon winding 0.7 millimetre copper wire to make a new coil. ‘Are you barking mad?’ she’ll say. ‘You can buy a new coffee machine for less than 20 euros.’ But that’s not the point, I tell her. I want to fix it myself. It may also be due to my concern for sustainability. I don’t like just throwing things away. My bike is now 35 years old. I recently replaced the pedal crank arm, the chain and the gear cogs.

“I’ve always been very interested in overseas development and devote five percent of my time to various projects. A few years ago, I initiated the Africa project here at TU Delft, and I have taught in developing countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines.”

You’ve been known to repair things here in your office too: from loose cupboard doors to tape recorders.

“I like to do things. As a boy I’d help out in my father’s painting and decorating business, and I still do all the decorating at home. In the past, if you had asked me if I was more of a do-er than a thinker, I would have said yes – that my outlook was indeed more practical than theoretical. Even just after graduation. But apparently my theoretical side was strong enough to earn me a professorship in time. I’ve always believed that a manager should have done every job on the workfloor himself, within reason. Then at least you know what is reasonable to ask of people.”

People often regard managers as distant figures, far from the workfloor.

“Really?”

Perhaps it is a cliché, but the impression does exist.

“It certainly exists here at the university. Manager is a dirty word. That’s why as dean I would never refer to the Head of Finance as the ‘Finance Manager’. I even suggested that the entire university should revert to using the title ‘head of…’ whatever, since it seems to command more respect among academics. It’s a trivial detail, but that’s the way things are.”

You’re known as someone who will point out shortcomings and reprimand the people concerned.

“That’s my style. I don’t beat about the bush. Of course, I try to remain polite and diplomatic, but if I don’t agree with something I have to speak out.”

Do people accept that?

“Usually, yes. Perhaps there have been a few times they have not...but I didn’t notice.”

You don’t think you have made any enemies?

“There will undoubtedly be a few, but again I have not noticed. If by ‘enemies’ you mean people who are suspicious and mistrustful, people who do not believe in my good intentions, then I think that I ended my time as dean with fewer enemies than I began. In the early days, people would often accuse me of having a hidden agenda. They assumed that a dean must always be playing little political games. I told them, ‘listen – if you find my hidden agenda, tell me what it is. It’s my ambition to go through life with no political games whatsoever and to run this faculty accordingly’. Some people found this very hard to believe. But I think that by the time I left, far more of the staff knew that I really meant it.”