‘You must believe in the steps you take’

Paul Rullmann decided to leave TU Delft in April, after nearly eleven years on the Executive Board. He started his career as a musician in a folk band but ‘bounced on’, via a tutorship at a university of applied sciences, into policy. Under his leadership TU Delft grew from over 13,000 to more than 17,500 students and education changed drastically. But times were not always good.

Saskia Bonger

Did you ever imagine you’d stay this long, as a sociologist among the techies?

“I found myself in an entirely different kind of organisation to what I was used to, with a character all its own. It was far from certain that I would form a good combination with my colleagues, but that certainly worked out well. I really do understand technicians’ passion, how they can be totally absorbed by their research, how it can keep them awake at night. And, given half a chance, loop on their bikes at six a.m. to test whether what they devised in the night really works.”

Do you sometimes lie awake like that?

“I used to. I’d lie in bed building crystal receivers, wishing the night away, so that I could do some more soldering. So I do have technical streak. I took science subjects at high school. I went on to study pharmacy but didn’t complete the programme. I was very disappointed. Maybe it had something to do with the programme information back then. I had expected to be helping people with medicines, but it was much more of a combination between chemistry and retailers’ certificate. It was very far removed from medicine. But tinkering fascinated me. I could well have become a dentist or a watchmaker.”

Things turned out very differently. No tinkering; setting out broad outlines.

“I got here gradually, step by step. I was a member of a folk group called Crackerhash, meaning ships biscuits. It was a fairly uncertain living so I needed to earn a little more elsewhere. So I became a lecturer at a university of applied sciences. I taught social subjects: sociology, political science, social psychology, social skills. I became more and more involved in policy. I went from lecturer to lecturer coordinator, policy officer, head of the Policy department to secretary to the Executive Board and, ultimately, to member of the Executive Board. I never have had a clear-cut career in mind, I just bounced on and on.”

Wouldn’t you secretly have liked to live a rock’n’roll life?

“No. I really enjoy music, but a musician is something you have to be. It’s wanting to start playing the second anyone wakes you in the night. I did have the choice. Friends of mine made a living for themselves as musicians, I preferred it to be a hobby. We formed Crackerhash in 1968. We lasted around 35 years. I’ve seen every youth club in the Netherlands. We played English sea shanties; later we wrote our own Dutch lyrics. Made a record, made a CD, and in 2004 we even played a farewell concert.”

What kind of lyrics did you write?

“Contemporary cabaret. Not too political as we wanted to be able to play a song for quite a while. They were often about the morbid side of life: things that go wrong or take a strange twist. Things like love, or which till queue to join. Yes, you always choose the wrong one.”

“I really do understand technicians’ passion, how they can be totally absorbed by their research.”

What did you devise in the night really works.

“Some of them certainly will work in the Netherlands. International students are extremely important. The Netherlands can manage months for study projects. All in all, education has livened up significantly. This has contributed to the continuing increase in the number of students. In 2002 there were over 13,000, there are now 17,500. A much needed rise as there is still a shortage of engineers in the Netherlands.”

Many of the students are from abroad. They are not going to solve the shortage of engineers.

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As the third member of the Executive Board, you were given the portfolio of Education. That was newly created. Why?

“There needed to be more focus on education and research. The education itself was good but it was very compartmentalized and not very exciting. We started with the report Focus on Education. This led to a whole host of changes: more projects during the degree programme, more use of ICT, the major-minor model. This has made education more attractive. Perhaps the most difficult thing was to create more cohesion within the teams of lecturers in how they thought about education. After a few years of the Bachelor/Master system, it turned out that it especially worked for us in terms of administration, but that there was no clear division in the study programme. We then implemented the Bachelor-Before-Master rule. Other measures followed later, such as the binding recommendation on the continuation of studies, the introduction of guarantee months for study projects. All in all, education has livened up significantly.”

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Photos: Sam Rentmeester
You have always been an advocate of digitalisation. Will the university eventually disappear as a physical location?

“In the Netherlands you don’t even really need digitalisation. We have a university or university of applied sciences on every street corner. But worldwide there are millions of people streaming out for knowledge. There are now countless institutions that provide digital materials, including really large ones like Stanford and MIT. They invest millions. This is becoming so important that it will affect the reputation of an ‘ordinary university’. You have to be part of it.”

This also requires lecturers to make considerable changes. That’s quite alarming for them.

“That may well be, but take Columbia. It all started rather hesitantly but now we can’t meet the demand. Not that all the lectures included are good enough to publicise but the lecturers are practising and improving. Research is now very highly valued internationally. The same cannot yet be said of lecturers but they will soon have to fight international competition with very good online material. It places lecturers in a different light altogether, lecturers need to create a different kind of added value.”

Who is Paul Rullmann?

After leaving secondary school Paul Rullmann, born in The Hague in 1948, went to study pharmacy. Disappointed with this study, he switched to technology. Rullmann taught in higher education and held several management positions at the Haarlem University of Applied Sciences. Between 1990 and 1995 he worked as policy officer with the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences. Rullmann then returned to Haarlem University of Applied Sciences. Among other things he was Secretary to the Executive Board (EB) and was appointed member of the ER in 2000. When the university of applied sciences was incorporated into the Inholland University of Applied Sciences, Rullmann moved to Delft in 2002. His function as third member of the EB initiated various secondary activities. Among other things he was a board Member of Studlink, Board Member of Studiekroniek 123 and Chairman of the Supervisory Board of Academic Transfer.

As manager implementing the changes enforced by the OOD, you have to be able to handle criticism. How do you deal with that?

“I am a die-hard optimist. My first reaction to the problems during the OOD was always: Oh well! I’ll sort that. You must believe in the steps you take. Something I learned from Hans van Luijk (former President of the Board, ed.) was that you should be able to explain in one or two sentences why you are doing something. At OOD that was quite clear: we are to ensure that by providing less support, more money will become available for the scientific process.”

How did you get the Student Council to remain so constructive, even if they disagreed with your measures?

“In some respects, students can be very conservative. But you still have to convince them. How I do that? With a lot of talking. I don’t have a balden agenda. Students may know where I’m headed. I am apparently able to include them in the puzzles we face as Board. Students on the Student Council are exempted for a year so they can bombard you with questions. This has sometimes led to heated discussions, sometimes even to a dispute. I value their contribution. They know the organisation, they gather information which we would not otherwise be able to obtain. They spot any bottlenecks sooner.”

What do you consider the highlight of your time at TU Delft?

“The rise in the number of students and education being enforced. The move to set up an independent department of Education and Student Affairs was a very good one. That was part of the OOD. This generated many incentives. The appointment of Directors of Education, one for each faculty, also helped. These eight directors can reach decisions and compromises far more easily than the room full of Directors of Studies that we used to have. It has led to more coherence with regard to assessment policy, timetables, regulation and educational renewal. There is a firm conviction that collectivity will help us more than division.”

And what was the lowest blow?

“The NRC affair: a series of articles in NRC Handelsblad about claims by the Executive Board and the financial situation of the university. I felt it was dishonest and I was shocked that a journalist could arrange the facts in such a way with the intent of harming you.”

Are you looking forward to your retirement or worried you won’t know what to do?

“I would like to remain active in committees or boards but it will be lovely to have more time for things like music and sport.”

Following the OOD reorganisation in 2005 you were appointed Manager of the University Corporate Office. What prompted that decision? It would lead to strange situations.

“People have sometimes accused me of working hand in glove with the University Corporate Office. And it’s true, very occasionally you do find yourself in two camps. But I would rather have that occasional tension than have to take on another manager. So we have the Executive Board, with below them a manager and below him the directors of the various support services. This automatically means that the manager meets with the Executive Board and the director merely performs. Now, we happen to have proactive directors who are capable of accomplishing things themselves. That is why we would like to keep the organisation as flat as possible. The biggest advantage is that between the various boards of directors we can develop policies for the whole university. Take ICT for example: when I first came here there was a firewall between this building (3mE, ed.) and CEG if you wanted to use the feed and return current. Between every two conductors the overhead wire is fed from two directions. The awareness of this should be the first step towards an attitude where ‘conformists’ stand by the need for scientific proof while openly allowing for the possibility that all might not be quite what it seems. An attitude which openly admits that every technology, by definition, has its disadvantages, though possibly unknown when first introduced. Or, as the former US minister Donald Rumsfeld put it: ‘There are things we know we know. Then there are things that we know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns: things we do not know we don’t know.”

A wisdom worth bearing in mind during the forthcoming shale gas discussion. So should an ‘idiot’ submit a theory that seems even shakier than the soil in Groningen, remember: That ‘idiot’ might just be right.

The most technologically advanced tram line in the Netherlands is to be built here. Worried about the magnetic field that the tram’s 1000 amps DC would generate, the executive board examined measures to prevent diffuse fields. Prof. Lou van der Sluis (EEMCS) and Prof. Pieter Kruit (Applied Sciences) found a solution and patented it. In the Mekel Park the electricity supply for the overhead wire is underground to minimise the loop between the authorities on the one side, with ‘idiot’ engineers and the justified need for proof, and the intuition and theories of freethinkers who don’t give a hoot about the commercials opinions on the other. The problem, however, is not that the authorities want hard evidence; the problem is the sharpness and the disdain with which other opinions are rejected and their mouthpieces written off as idiots. That, in particular, created ill feelings, especially when it turned out they weren’t so ‘crazy’ after all. The authorities’ opportunistic attitude undermines people’s confidence in them and hence their authority. As the case in Groningen. That people who think differently are often shot down in flames, is because they are outnumbered. With every initiative, the use of any new technology, or indeed a new use of an old one, there is always someone predicting Armageddon. Get used to it. Politicians, governments, scientists and engineers had all better get used to it. If only for the fact that in most cases there is at least an element of truth in their warnings. The awareness of this should be the first