



INTERVIEW

With
**Theo Wubbels - President of the European
Educational Research Association**
(Aug. 17, 2016)

The interview with the ex-president of European Educational Research Association (EERA)¹, Professor of Utrecht University Theo Wubbels² (the Netherlands) was taken during his participation in the First Summer School «Educational Research: Communication, Grant Writing, Methodology and Publications» (August 17-20, 2016). It was organized by Ukrainian Education Research Association³ in collaboration with the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv. Funded by the US Embassy in Ukraine, Summer School became part of a large-scale project by UERA «Supporting reform on Higher Education in Ukraine», aimed at raising the level of professionalism in the training and research activities of universities to attract teachers to exchange academic experience and to promote empirical research in the field of Education.

The School was attended by 38 participants from different regions of Ukraine, of which 8 represented displaced universities in Ukraine. School work was held for four days, during which participants were able to participate in the thirteen English trainings. Trainers were invited from Ukraine and abroad, including Utrecht University (Netherlands), Norwegian University of Science and Technology (Norway) and Cambridge University and the University of Edinburgh (UK) as well as trainers from Lviv, Drohobych, Uman, Kharkiv, Kherson, Lutsk, and Nizhyn.

The questions for the interview were prepared by Prof. Serhiy Kurbatov. The interview was held by Prof. Oksana Zabolotna. The published text is the script was the original wording has been preserved.

1. At the beginning of your professional career you moved from the research of the problem of secondary education to the higher education. What were the reasons for this step?

I myself would say I started doing inside the education, then I moved to problems of beginning teachers in secondary education, and later I did work in higher education. What were the reasons? Well, you might think of a very sophisticated reasons but the reason is, in fact, where did I work. I started to work in a department of science education, so where you study science education. Then I started to work in teacher education, science teacher education. And we wanted to know how we could better prepare beginning teachers for their practice. So we thought if we study the problems of teachers in secondary education, we can improve teacher education. So, why did I move...because I moved to teacher education...well, I think I did that because if you want to have an impact, if you are

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inside of the education, you have impact on the student to get science education. If you go working in teacher education, you have an impact on teachers, you have an impact on students. So, the range of people you reach is larger. I think that's the most important reason why I did that. And then I became a Chair of the department of education, and of the center for teaching and learning. And if you are in the center for teaching and learning in the university, you are expected to do research on the university, on the higher education. Then the question is why did I do that? Well, in fact I did it because rector of my university said, «I think that you with your experience in teacher education have something to offer for our university professors to improve their education.» So, I said, «OK. That's a nice new challenge». So the overarching thing is looking for new challenges again and again. That's the main reason for every step in my career.

2. Almost all your professional life is connected with Utrecht University. Could you identify its strong and weak features in the context of national and global system of university education? What are the main features of internal quality assurance system in this university?

- I like the last question most.

- **So, you can concentrate on that.**

- ...But one of the weakness in my career is that we have been attached to the Utrecht University and it's much better if you move also to one or other University and learn things that you can use in your context. I hate sabbatical and visits to other universities to have some experience in some universities, but my routine in my professional life is a weakness. Utrecht university, where I started to work in Teaching and Learning Center in 1994, had very poor evaluations of the students of the quality of the university teaching. So, one of the reasons that they wanted me in the Teaching and Learning Center - because of the poor status of university courses. So, I worked for over 25 years on helping the board of the University improve the quality of education. At that moment it was very low and now, I think, in all evaluation Utrecht University is the best in the country - for research and for teaching.

- **Twenty years of hard work...**

- Yeah. You can't do it in five years. And it's not my own, only my work. Many people worked on it. So now we have a very good internal quality assurance system. So, we sent committees to every program to evaluate it. So, peer evaluation teaching that is done. So we do that sometimes announced. Sometimes, also a little bit, unexpectedly that means that they give one month of warning or so that they will be a kind of accredit visitation but more importantly that we have networks of all the directors of education where they talk with each other about the quality of education: we have a course for educational leaders. That's a long course - it takes a year and a half where upcoming educational directors go for 24 hours every 6 weeks in the hotels in the countryside and get a kind of lectures, they do projects to connect with that they hear to connect with their work at the university; they go on the study trip to other universities in other countries. So that's the second thing we do. These things are working for the professional development, in fact, more important than ore formal internal quality measures that we take. But if you only do the professional development, you also have to do things that measuring what quality is. So, we



measure what's dissatisfaction of students. We also have a very close inspection of the results of the students; we construct the internal quality card.

They are things like:

What's the number of students that fail, what's the number of the students that complete their studies; what's the evaluation of the students, things like that.

Then every year Director talks with the Dean of the faculty about these Quality Cards.

Well, these are some of the examples of things we do.

3. *What is your attitude to university rankings? Could we speak about university rankings as an alternative way of quality assurance in university education?*

It's certainly not the best way to do that. In the Netherlands we have the accreditation system where externally a group of people comes to the university to evaluate research programmes and teaching programmes. I think that is much more important than the rankings. When these committees come along you have discussion with peers. First of all you have self-evaluation which you report and talk with these peers about your self-evaluation and you get an idea of how to do better. And in five years they come again and check what you have done with the advice of the previous visit. University rankings are really very ... indicators. I always see that Utrecht University is in the Shanghai ranking - the highest status in the Netherlands. I think, we are the 58th in the world and number one in the country, number ten in Europe. Well, when I welcome our students I say, «Well, you are in the best university of the Netherlands. Why do you think that is. What are the criteria the people from Shanghai use. The teaching quality? No. It's the number of publications, the number of citations. And - very important - the number of living Nobel laureates» Well, we have one in Utrecht, and in Leiden they only have one in the graveyard. That's one of the reasons why Utrecht is higher than Leiden. Of course, and then I see that is in physics, and Utrecht education has not any proof of it. I do not think that rankings are that important. Of course they can stimulate if the rankings use the right criteria. In the time of higher education ranking it is more important if you talk about the quality of education. The accreditation process is much more important.

4. *You are a president of EERA. How did you achieve such position? Could you describe the main activities of this association? What are your plans for future development of it?*

How did I achieve such a position? Well, EERA is the Association of the associations. As the President of the Netherlands Association I became a part of the Council and then when I am a part of the Council I want to work and I want to do smth. So I was a little bit active and then they said : «Oh! You might be our next treasure and I did that apparently well that they said : «Well, you might be our next President». Oh, that is why now I am doing that.

Well, how do I achieve such a position? Commitments. That is the most important thing. And for the President we look for someone whether he states at the educational research field.

The main activities of the Association - the conferences, the networks. I have talked already about that, is not it?



And the plans of the future. I think at the moment the main part of our strategy is looking on more possibilities for publications for our members. The last two-three years we have been working a lot in influencing the European Commission. So in the HORIZON-2020 Program there is no education. And we are doing a lot of lobbying. So we are doing a lot of lobbying in Brussels, talking with other associations in the Social Sciences and Humanities. We are trying to influence the European Union with some success, but not with a lot of success. So, we are continuing to do that.

Working publications. We have a Journal. I want more journals to have publication possibilities for our networks and then we think it is very important to be inclusive. So we want to have more members from all over Europe. We have been working for that on the last 5 years, I think. You are a candidate member which is one of the results.

Since I am in the Executive Board, we have, I think, at least 12 or 14 more members attracted than we had before. We have a map of the white places in Europe, where we do not have one yet. That is, for example, look at the western part of Europe. They are very small countries. We are nearly covering everything now. So that is smth we want to work on. We want to be inclusive. We want to make it possible also for people from low-income countries to come to the conference. So that is why we have different fees, but we also know that for Eastern Europe even when we give support to people to come to our Council Meeting, it is very expensive.

5. Do you have any previous experience of corporation with the representatives of the Academia of the post-soviet countries. Could you share your general impressions of Ukrainian system of university education and its main problems?

I don't have any idea. I've been in the Armenia but that was not because of my EERA work. That was because I was a member of accreditation committee and there to be honest. I think IREX very important issue of there. I'm not sure that it was in one University. I do not know if in Ukraine the situation is the same as that it was in Armenia but working article behavior was very important here. It's very important there was working on international collaboration. I've gave the example that all of the staff had been in the foreign country and been in Russia. Some people have been in different countries but not very many. You are much more international than Armenia. But I don't have an idea about the Ukrainian educational system.

6. What do you want to wish your colleagues from UERA?

You are doing so good work. So, go on to do the good work that UERA is doing thinking international collaboration, thinking to have the high quality standards for your work. You are bringing the researches together in conferences and seminars. It's really go on with that it would be my main message. You are doing it so well, go on with that and you found the really way to get support by United States. I think there must be possibilities to get support from European Union too.