

1. The background, the terms of reference, the areas requiring investigation and the approach

1.1. The background

A phone call from Great Britain

The message arrived at the University of Groningen's main Administration Building at Oude Boteringestraat 44 at an opportune moment. None of those who were directly involved can agree on the who and the when of it all; those finer details have become somewhat blurred. But the long and the short of it is that the then President of the Board of the University received a phone call from one of the contacts in his network; it was a colleague in Britain, and it was the end of January.

A message for the President of the Board of the University of Groningen

The recipient of said British colleague's message was Professor S. (Sibrand) Poppema. At that time he had been President of the Board for a good six years; the Supervisory Board announced his appointment on 22 November 2007. Almost a year later, on 1 September 2008, he succeeded Professor S.K. (Simon) Kuipers for a term of almost five years, which – as announced by the Supervisory Board on 23 September 2014 – was extended until 1 October 2018.

Mr Poppema had made a name for himself both in Groningen and elsewhere. He is a universally respected professor and medical specialist who is highly regarded in his field, pathology. As Dean of the Faculty of Medical Sciences, he had proven himself to be a skilled director. As President of the Board of the University of Groningen, he was also greatly appreciated both within and outside the University for his commitment to the University of Groningen, to the city of Groningen and to the province of the same name.¹ Thanks in part to the extensive and valuable network he had skilfully built up over the years.

Under his Presidency, the University of Groningen experienced a sharp increase in the number of students. In the 2008-2009 academic year, the University of Groningen had 25,082 students;² in 2014-2015 there were 28,361,³ and in the most recently completed academic year, 2018-2019, that figure stood at 31,115.⁴ That is an increase of 24% compared to the 2008-2009 academic year.

There was also a rise in the number of staff members, although it should be noted that the higher education sector in the Netherlands was hit by considerable budget cuts in the years after 2008, which resulted in a drastic reduction in the number of staff members. Nevertheless, there was an increase of more than 20% compared to the 2008-2009 academic year.

Table 1.1.

Number of staff members (excluding UMCG)

| Category | 2008 | 2014 | 2018 |
|------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Academic staff | 1,735 | 2,230 | 1,801 |
| OBP ⁵ | 1,533 | 1,638 | 1,909 |
| Professors | 222 | 269 | 297 |

¹ See Max van den Berg, Lou de Leij and Elmer Sterken in: Passion and Performance. Sibrand Poppema's Liber Amicorum: 'In other words, the University of Groningen experienced "a golden decade" under the rule of Sibrand Poppema'. (page 11) See also the contribution of the then mayor of Groningen, Pieter den Oudsten.

² <https://www.rug.nl/about-us/where-do-we-stand/facts-and-figures/annual-reports/2008/rugjaarverslag2008.pdf>

³ <https://www.rug.nl/about-us/where-do-we-stand/facts-and-figures/annual-reports/rug-jaarverslag-2014.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.rug.nl/about-us/where-do-we-stand/facts-and-figures/annual-reports/rug-bestuursverslag2018-v9-definitief.pdf>

⁵ Support and administrative staff (Ondersteunend en beheerspersoneel).

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| UHD ⁶ | 217 | 233 | 251 |
| UD ⁷ | 322 | 377 | 483 |
| PhD students with employee status | 508 | 801 | 688 |
| Other academic staff | 466 | 561 | 616 |
| Other | 40 | 26 | 29 |
| Total | 5,043 | 6,135 | 6,074 |

In the 2010 *Academic Ranking of World Universities*, the so-called *Shanghai ranking*, the University of Groningen placed outside the Top 100.⁸ In 2013, the University of Groningen broke through the Top-100 barrier and settled at spot 92. In 2014 the University jumped up ten places, and in the following year it moved further up the table to 75. In 2016, the University of Groningen rose three places, and in 2017 it leapt up the *ranking* again, landing in 59th place. The year after, it slid back down slightly to 66th. In 2019, the University of Groningen held on to its high ranking; it came in at 65th.

In terms of student numbers, the University of Groningen is the second largest university in the Netherlands. It is also the country's second oldest university, and it has a large number of faculties.⁹ As such, it offers a broad range of Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes, many of which are now taught in English. This development received support by the then ministers of Education, Culture and Science, Dr R.H.A. (Ronald) Plasterk, Ms M.J. (Marja) van Bijsterveldt-Vliegenthart, Mr H. (Halbe) Zijlstra and Dr M. (Jet) Bussemaker.¹⁰

The question put to the President of the Board of the University

In that telephone call from Great Britain at the beginning of 2015, the caller wondered whether Mr Poppema might know of any universities that were capable of filling a gap in China and setting up a branch campus there to provide degree programmes similar to those taught in Europe; university curricula culminating in a degree certificate from a renowned European university, which also offered English-taught programmes. Was he aware of any suitable universities?

⁶ Associate professors

⁷ Assistant professors

⁸ <http://www.shanghairanking.com/ARWU2010.html>. Information on the ranking in previous years can be found at <http://www.shanghairanking.com>.

⁹ See the University of Groningen's organizational chart in the appendix.

¹⁰ Mr Plasterk was Minister of Education, Culture and Science from 22 February 2007 until 23 February 2010. Ms Van Bijsterveldt-Vliegenthart was State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science from 22 February 2007 to 14 October 2010. From February 2010 onwards, she was the State Secretary responsible for higher education and academic policy, among other things. In the Rutte I cabinet, responsibility for her portfolio was passed on to State Secretary Zijlstra. Ms Van Bijsterveldt-Vliegenthart became Minister of Education, Culture and Science in that cabinet. They were ministers from 14 October 2010 to 5 November 2012. Ms Van Bijsterveldt-Vliegenthart was succeeded by Dr Bussemaker on 5 November 2012. Since 26 October 2017, Ms I.K. (Ingrid) van Engelshoven has been Minister of Education, Culture and Science.

Figure 1.1 Map of China and its provinces



The establishment of such branch campuses reflected changes in the Chinese higher education and scientific research sector; budgets for higher education and research exploded around the turn of the 21st century. A number of universities and research institutes benefited from special funding programmes such as the ‘211 Project’ and the ‘985 Project’. The first project was launched in 1995 and sought to create new universities and increase the number of degree programmes in key research areas. The ‘985 Project’ was introduced in 1998, with the aim of helping several dozen Chinese universities to become ‘world-class universities in the 21st century’.¹¹ Among those universities is the China Agricultural University in Beijing, which is listed in the *Academic Ranking of World Universities* and, according to this ranking, is one of the top forty universities in China.

The China Agricultural University sought to achieve its goal of becoming one of the ‘word-class universities’ by building a new campus in Yantai, a metropolis on the Shandong peninsula in north-eastern Shandong province on the Yellow Sea. To that end, in 2003 a 110-hectare campus was built, where a branch of the China Agricultural University would provide research and education opportunities for 10,000 students. The city of Yantai in particular contributed to the € 240 million required for the construction of the campus.

But before the campus was completed and officially opened, the plans for this new branch of the China Agricultural University in Yantai were scrapped due to new legislation. From now on, Chinese universities were no longer allowed to set up branches in other provinces. However, also in 2003, regulations were adopted ‘on Chinese-foreign Cooperation in Running Schools’, which permitted about ten universities to collaborate with foreign universities to establish ‘joint institutes’ with an ‘independent legal status under Chinese law’. Foreign higher education institutions were also given the opportunity to provide joint educational programmes under the auspices of their Chinese sister university.

¹¹ Ingrid d’Hooghe et al., *Assessing Europe-China Collaboration in Higher Education and Research*, Open source publication of Leiden Asia Centre, 1 November 2018, p. 5.

The University of Nottingham and the Zhejiang Wanli University in Ningbo were the first to agree on such a 'joint institute' collaboration. That was in 2004. This was followed by two universities from Hong Kong, three American universities, the University of Liverpool, an Israeli technical university and, taking the total to nine, the almost 250-year-old Lokomosov University in Moscow.

Figure 1.2 The nine joint universities in China

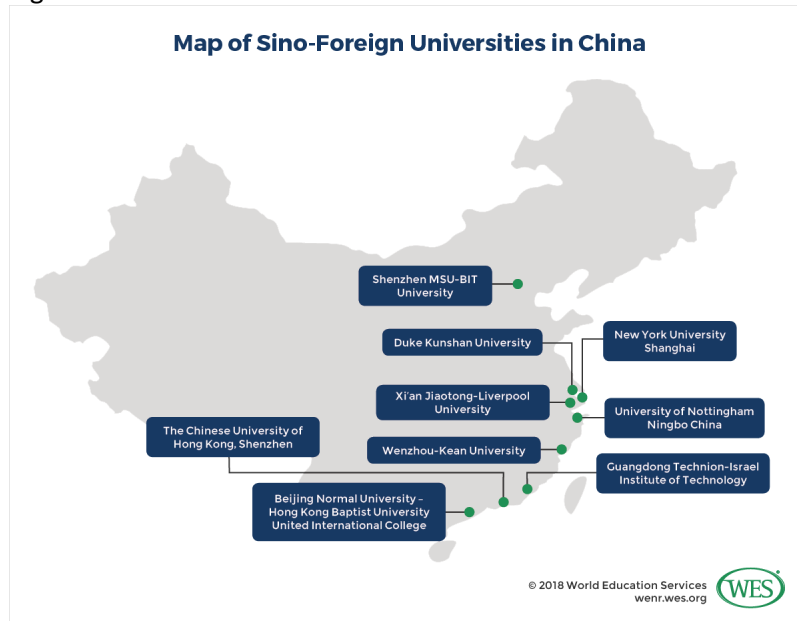
| The Nine Sino-Foreign Cooperative Universities in China | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------|
| SINO-FOREIGN UNIVERSITY | YEAR EST. | LOCATION | FOREIGN UNIVERSITY | YEAR EST. | U.S. NEWS 2018 GLOBAL RANKING | SINO UNIVERSITY | YEAR EST. | U.S. NEWS 2018 GLOBAL RANKING |
| University of Nottingham Ningbo China | 2004 | Ningbo, Zhejiang | University of Nottingham, UK | 1881 | 143 | Zhejiang Wanli University | 1950 | N/A |
| Beijing Normal University – Hong Kong Baptist University United International College | 2005 | Zhuhai, Guangdong | Hong Kong Baptist University | 1956 | 535 | Beijing Normal University | 1902 | 324 |
| Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University | 2006 | Suzhou, Jiangsu | University of Liverpool | 1881 | 129 | Xi'an Jiaotong University | 1896 | 380 |
| New York University Shanghai | 2011 | Shanghai | New York University | 1831 | 28 | East China Normal University | 1951 | 511 |
| Wenzhou-Kean University | 2011 | Wenzhou, Zhejiang | Kean University | 1855 | N/A | Wenzhou University | 1933 | 1,240 |
| Duke Kunshan University | 2013 | Kunshan, Jiangsu | Duke University | 1838 | 21 | Wuhan University | 1893 | 321 |
| The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen | 2014 | Shenzhen, Guangdong | Chinese University of Hong Kong | 1963 | 148 | Shenzhen University | 1983 | 864 |
| Guangdong Technion-Israel Institute of Technology | 2016 | Shantou, Guangdong | Technion Israel Institute of Technology | 1912 | 239 | Shantou University | 1981 | 1,055 |
| Shenzhen MSU-BIT University | 2017 | Shenzhen, Guangdong | M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University | 1755 | 267 | Beijing Institute of Technology | 1940 | 491 |

Source: U.S. News & World Report, Best Global University Rankings, 2018. www.usnews.com/education/best-global-universities/rankings

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Figure 1.3



The tenth place had been reserved for the China Agricultural University with its campus in Yantai. University College Dublin had initially been approached for this collaboration. This university, founded in 1854, currently has around 33,000 students, one third of whom are of non-Irish nationality. Many of them are Chinese. On 16 December 2013, the then President of University College Dublin, Professor Hugh R. Brady, reached an agreement with the China Agricultural University and the city of Yantai on a branch campus in Yantai, where, as of 2015, the first students would begin their studies: 'The Yantai campus will primarily focus on agricultural science, food science, life sciences and bio engineering'.¹²

On 1 January 2014, two weeks after rubber-stamping the Irish-Chinese cooperation, Professor Brady was succeeded by Australian professor Andrew J. Deeks. The new President quickly changed course; On 28 December 2014, University College Dublin decided to establish UCD Global Centres in China (Beijing), India, Malaysia and the United States. The cooperation between the China Agricultural University and University College Dublin was terminated. News of this termination was reported on the University College Dublin website on 28 December 2014.

This opened the door for a new partner university to set up a 'joint institute' in collaboration with the China Agricultural University on the Yantai campus. We already know Mr Poppema's response to the question put to him in that telephone call. The University embarked on an administrative process which lasted more than three years, involving many people and also involving complicated forms of discussion, which did not lead to the desired outcome.

1.2. The terms of reference

The evaluation committee's terms of reference for this investigation were laid down in the Board of the University's Institutional Decree of 16 October 2019, which is included in the Appendix to this report. The evaluation committee interpreted these terms of reference as instructions to carry out a factual reconstruction of the administrative and decision-making processes concerning the cooperation in Yantai between the University of Groningen and the China Agricultural University, as well as an evaluation thereof.

¹² College Tribune, UCD Dublin Newspaper, 10 September 2013.

1.3. The areas requiring investigation

The areas requiring investigation are laid down in the Institutional Decree. Firstly, the evaluation committee was asked to investigate and shed light on the University of Groningen's decision-making process concerning the Yantai project (2015-2018). The Institutional Decree identifies a number of administrative and other bodies and departments of the University of Groningen as the parties involved. Furthermore, the evaluation committee was also asked to identify any lessons that can be learned based on the evaluation of the proceedings.

The evaluation committee is authorized to formulate, investigate and answer questions; it exercised this power on two occasions. Here, the evaluation committee confines itself to the question that arose with regard to the role of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the communication between this Ministry and the University of Groningen. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 to 5. In Chapter 3, the evaluation committee discusses a question that arose in response to a report about members of the University Council being influenced by members of the Board of the University. The evaluation committee investigated this report on the basis of two questions: was there an attempt to influence the Council members and, if so, was this attempt improper?

1.4. The approach

In order to reconstruct the decision-making process underpinning this investigation as accurately as possible, the evaluation committee relied upon a number of documents, including: all meeting reports and meeting documents of the Board of the University, the Supervisory Board and the Finance Audit Committee, the Yantai Steering Committee, the Programme Team, and the Faculty Boards and Faculty Councils of the Faculties of Science & Engineering, Economics and Business and Spatial Sciences. The evaluation committee also consulted on reports of trips to China, correspondence between the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the University of Groningen, and meeting reports and meeting documents of the University Council and its committees. Naturally, the evaluation committee also took note of open sources, such as publications in the media and publications in specialist journals. The evaluation committee was also given access to confidential documentation and messages.

The evaluation committee conducted interviews with those most directly involved. Cooperation in these interviews was generally very open and constructive. This is discussed in more detail in the appendix on accountability. In addition to these interviews, the evaluation committee also spoke to individuals who, although not directly involved in the administrative process under investigation, were able to provide the evaluation committee with information useful for the purpose of this investigation on the basis of their knowledge and experience.

Although the evaluation committee notes that it has been able to draw on a large amount of information, it is nevertheless aware that the information provided cannot be said to be 100% complete or accurate. First of all, not everything has been recorded in writing; many reports of visits to Beijing and Yantai are missing, for the simple reason that these reports were never drawn up.

Furthermore, it is also important to bear in mind a phenomenon that often occurs in administrative processes that are highly complex and involve decisions being taken at a fast pace, namely selective reporting. Details that are initially less important later turn out to be major issues. Summary reports need to be described in more detail later on.

It is also important to factor in memory distortions, such as the so-called error of omission, whereby people are scarcely able to remember the matter at hand or the important details thereof, so they are unable to give a complete description. Errors of commission may also occur, whereby people add factually incorrect memories to their description of an event, for example. People may also be

affected by hindsight bias, where they perceive events that have already occurred using knowledge that they have now. Memories may have been influenced by information obtained after the fact from the media or through conversations with others.

In light of such complications, 'irrefutable facts' have to be constantly checked and double-checked by consulting as many sources as possible. With a view to staying on track, the evaluation committee drew up a timeline prior to conducting the interviews, which ultimately ran to more than eighty pages. An abridged version of this timeline is included in the Appendix.

Substantive sections of this report have been submitted to the Board of the University for cross examination. The findings of the evaluation committee have been presented to a number of relevant individuals. This is discussed in more detail in the appendix on accountability.

The evaluation committee's report contains six chapters in addition to this introductory chapter. These chapters are divided into two parts. The first part (Chapters 2 to 6) contains the factual reconstruction of the decision-making process and the roles of the various actors. Chapter 2 presents the background of the project. Chapter 3 provides a reconstruction of the preparations: from February to June 2015, the Board of the University sought support for its plans from the Deans of Faculties, the Faculties concerned, the University Council, the Supervisory Board and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. At the same time, frequent and intensive discussions and negotiations were taking place with the China Agricultural University, the city of Yantai and Shandong Province. The period between July 2015 and February 2017 was dominated by the formalization of the cooperation in Yantai between the University of Groningen and the China Agricultural University (Chapter 4). The fifth chapter covers the period from March 2017 to February 2018; the period in which the cooperation was terminated. Chapter 6 examines the aftermath; the abandonment of alternative plans to continue cooperation in a different form and with a different scope.

The second part (Chapter 7) reflects on the whole process based on the evaluation committee's main findings and recommendations.