

7 Most important findings and recommendations

7.1 Most important findings

7.1.1 The dynamics of managing a university

Managing a university is a difficult task. Universities are large, complex organizations, with a double task: teaching and research. To achieve high standards in both areas requires high-quality, far-reaching innovation and continuous development. The University of Groningen has been very successful in this respect in recent years. It has risen substantially to occupy a high position in various rankings, attracting a growing number of students whose appreciation for the University's quality of teaching is high overall. In terms of research, the University can boast excellent performances and an outstanding reputation, including as a highlight the Nobel Prize for Chemistry awarded to Ben Feringa on 5 October 2016.

This success can be traced to many interrelated factors. Undeniably, one such factor is the strength of the University's management, and its highly motivated staff, who excel in a variety of disciplines. The University's financial position is healthy, its management effective, its buildings largely sound, its infrastructure satisfactory and its key positions adequately filled. All of these aspects fall under the responsibility of the Board of the University.

Managing a university is, as aforementioned, a difficult task. Not only because of its size and complexity, but also because it combines very diverse interests, and is home to researchers and lecturers schooled in a multitude of disciplines, who have and express opinions of their own, and a great many students who add their own dynamics to the organization. The context in which the Board does its work makes its task more difficult still. Board members must take into account the demands imposed on universities by society but also political developments. The Board's central task is to contribute to future development and manage the process of continuous innovation. This includes, among other things, strengthening the University's international orientation. Neither researchers nor students confine themselves to national borders and the only way for a university to safeguard its future is to compete in the international arena. It is therefore only right that the Board should devote much attention to this aspect – and it should come as no surprise that internationalization is a key theme in the Strategic Plan 2015–2020. International orientation is a flexible concept, which often requires a comparison with other institutions in the EU, the US and, of course, China.

7.1.2 The importance of China for the University of Groningen

Attention for China sharply increased in our country around the start of the new millennium. China's economic expansion was spectacular, with far-reaching consequences for the country's social development. Politically too, people's perception of China changed. Many were fascinated by the combination of a communist regime and free enterprise. Trips to China increased dramatically, as did the number of Chinese people visiting our country. Chinese students gradually became a common sight at Dutch universities. In many areas, including government, business and science, ties with China were strengthened and Dutch activity in China increased. It was therefore a wise and logical step for the University of Groningen to become attuned to development opportunities in relation to China.

Small-scale initiatives had already taken place in the past. Then, in 2015, an opportunity arose to create an international branch campus in Yantai. As part of its academic development, China wanted to launch 10 branch universities. Yantai was the tenth and therefore last option. Yantai's negotiations with University College Dublin had come to a standstill. Via the extensive network of the then President of the Board of the University, Mr Poppema, the University of Groningen was considered as a potential partner. It was an opportunity that seemed to perfectly match the University of Groningen's long-term strategy. It would instantaneously grant the University of Groningen a prominent position in the Chinese academic system, with extensive opportunities for exchange. It would also form an excellent breeding ground for more students in the Netherlands and in Groningen. The risks didn't seem particularly high, especially since the city of Yantai had already invested a lot in the construction of buildings and was prepared to suffer start-up losses.

7.1.3 Quick decision-making

Understandably, there was much enthusiasm about the project, not least because the President of the Board of the University was very persuasive in articulating the great opportunities afforded by the project. But it was necessary to move quickly, or at least so it appeared. As a result, things moved very fast at first. People were mobilized, all kinds of contacts were made. The project initiators were not the only ones to show great enthusiasm; the initiative was welcomed by many. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science was consulted at an early stage and its attitude was receptive, involved, cautionary, critical and concerned, as noted by a close colleague of the Board of the University. The ministries of Foreign Affairs and Economic Affairs felt the initiative was perfectly in line with Dutch foreign and economic policy.

The Board of the University quickly garnered the collaboration of the deans and the support of the Supervisory Board, which issued the green light for a 'further exploration of the collaboration in creating an international branch campus in Yantai' on 16 March 2015. On 25 March 2015, a memorandum of understanding was signed in China, with the express intention of creating 'an independent educational institution with legal entity status recognized by the laws of China, where education programmes of the University of Groningen will be offered'. The memorandum was signed in the presence of Prime Minister Rutte, who was leading a trade mission in China at the time. Clearly, the Prime Minister would not have attended such an occasion if he had felt the initiative was not in line with governmental policy. This project was not only in the interests of Groningen, but in the interests of the Netherlands as a whole, as those present emphasized.

7.1.4 The University Council grants its consent

Events continued to move at a rapid pace, no doubt also reinforced by the strong level of support. An important next step at this early stage was presenting the plan to the University Council. Obviously, this initiative could only be realized with the support of the academic community – and in particular, the University Council. The Board of the University therefore rightly decided to submit the plan to the University Council early on, and the plan was discussed in a University Council meeting on 25 June 2015. At that time, only a first, preliminary draft of the plan was available.

The University Council's response to the plan was mixed. The staff representatives were hesitantly cautious. They were no doubt wary of stepping into an unknown adventure and fearful of any potential damage to the work being carried out in Groningen. The student representatives were far more enthusiastic and apparently deeply impressed by the fiery plea of the President of the Board of the University. However, there were also critical questions from members of student party Lijst Calimero and the Board was urged to involve the Council closely in all further decisions should the original plan undergo any 'major changes'.

Looking back, it was a strange meeting, with remarkable dynamics. At some point, the President of the Board of the University, having noticed that the plan was met with strong support, stated that the University Council would be granted right of consent in the project, rather than only right of consultation, as long as the Council reached a decision straight away about the intended creation of an international branch campus. A formulation that, from the President's perspective, could not be seen as separate from the idea of creating such a campus at Yantai. There was a vote, with all members of the student section voting in favour, the majority of staff representatives casting blank votes, one member of the staff section voting in favour, and one, the Chairman,

against. Clearly, the University Council had granted its consent.

7.1.5 Sealing of intentions in the presence of heads of state

Shortly after the University Council's decision, on 10 July 2015, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science expressed her support for Groningen's plan in a letter to her Chinese counterpart. The plan continued to develop fast. A crucial milestone was the signing of a second memorandum of understanding on 26 October 2015, again in China, in the presence of none other than the heads of state of both countries. This was once again only a preliminary agreement, but it did articulate the first financial agreements. This ceremonial attention at the highest level gave the plan additional cachet. No doubt the project initiators were aware of this and hoped that this heavy-duty external profiling would help push the plan in the right direction, i.e. the one they had in mind.

In short: in barely nine months, the plan had gone from a complete blank to a well-oiled machine running at full speed. It was a time of great diligence and perseverance. There weren't many sceptical voices yet, except perhaps from some other universities and the VSNU, something that the initiators simply took note of. Everything seemed to point forwards: the University of Groningen was poised to play an exceptional role in the international orientation of Dutch universities.

7.1.6 Early criticism: the University Council and the Faculty of Economics and Business

But the first clouds were also gathering on a horizon that had so far seemed only blue. This was true both in Groningen and further away, in particular in The Hague. In the autumn of 2015, dissatisfied tones were also heard from members of the University Council, the composition of which had changed a great deal. Seventeen of the 24 seats were now occupied by new members. The students who had voted in favour of the project had been replaced by new student representatives. Among staff members, there was a growing feeling that important questions remained unanswered. This led the Council to submit a long series of questions (92) to the Board of the University. The University Council also requested a business case, including a risk analysis and schedule, and a clearly marked Go/No Go moment, which had originally been set for 19 October 2015 but had gradually been postponed.

More generally, the University community increasingly expressed doubts concerning the plan. A number of former members of the University Council were critical of what they saw as a surprise attack by the President of the Board of the University during the University Council meeting on 25 June 2015. A special advisory committee from the Faculty of Economics and

Business advocated extreme caution. The Yantai plan was referred to as a 'leap in the dark'. The Faculty Board largely shared this view.

7.1.7 Response to early criticism

The President of the Board of the University responded to this criticism in interviews in *De Volkskrant* on 3 November 2015 and, shortly after, in the *UKrant*. This had the exact opposite of the intended effect, partially due to the President's explicit word choice. In a way, it polarized the project, or at least brought new elements to a situation that had so far been characterized by all parties pulling hard to move the project forward as fast as possible. For the first time, a clear distinction appeared between proponents and opponents, although both camps still reserved final judgment.

7.1.8 Loss of support from the Faculty of Economics and Business

The clouds on the horizon grew. In some places in Groningen, criticism morphed into an unwillingness to cooperate with the plan any further. An important factor at this stage was the fact that the Faculty of Economics and Business pulled out of the plan in early 2016. The original plan had involved not only the Faculty of Science and Engineering (which was to take charge of the majority of the plan), but also the Faculty of Economics and Business.

From the start, the idea had been to have more than one faculty take part in the starting phase to emphasise the plan's University-wide character. After the Faculty of Science and Engineering, the next obvious candidate was the Faculty of Economics and Business. But the Faculty of Economics and Business was not keen. They did not see any immediate advantages for their own faculty and felt that the proposals were not substantiated enough in terms of content. Coming as it did from a faculty that specializes in assessing the validity and risks of plans, this should have been an important signal. But the Faculty of Science and Engineering had enough weight to proceed regardless and, shortly afterwards, the Faculty of Economics and Business was replaced by the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, for whom the project represented a great opportunity with few risks.

7.1.9 Criticism from a different corner: the House of Representatives

Clouds were not only gathering in Groningen but also in The Hague. Not at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, which continued to make a very constructive contribution, despite expressing some concerns about scope and tempo, and also not in other ministries but in the House of Representatives, where questions were being asked by members of the SP. This confirmed the increasing politicization of the project, as apparent from questions about 'this megalomaniac plan'. It was also suggested more forcefully than before that 'no public funds should be spent on this Chinese dependance' (a motion submitted by Jasper van Dijk, SP, which, although rejected, had set the tone). The answer

of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science to these questions was reassuring, cautious and hesitant but still constructive. She emphasised the need for broad support within the University of Groningen. 'At the moment, I see no reason to put a stop to the Yantai ambitions of the University of Groningen.'

7.1.10 The weather in The Hague can be unpredictable

While stormy weather in Groningen had led to a mismanaged response from the President of the Board of the University published in *De Volkskrant*, the clouds in The Hague were apparently not yet recognized as such. This is remarkable, since both the topic itself and the formulations used should have been warning enough that a storm was on its way. This can be gleaned from the Minister's spare words, quoted above. In this context, it is important to note that there were few strong supporters for the Groningen initiative within the political landscape of The Hague. For the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, this was not a political priority. Nor was it really part of the Ministry's policy plan. The Ministry was simply following a university initiative.

In the House of Representatives, the VVD was the only party that was clearly positive about the plan, if only because VVD members are generally in favour of internationalization. Most of the other parties expressed no opinion (yet) or were hesitant, with the SP and PVV being clearly opposed to the initiative. No one wanted to really commit themselves to anything – and neither the government nor the coalition parties were willing to cross swords over the project. The general attitude was: 'If everyone supports this, I suppose we should go ahead with it'. At such times, safety valves are usually put in place, like the requirement that no public funds be used, or that there should be sufficient support for the project. Such conditions can easily be used later on to assess a plan and raise questions where necessary. The University may have been under the impression that although the SP was their only clear opponent, with only a few seats in the House of Representatives, the majority of House members were not against the plan. This is true – but neither were they in favour. And they were clearly weary of incurring any political damage. Or at least that is the analysis of the evaluation committee.

In addition, as mentioned, this plan did not derive directly from the policy of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Originally, it had matched their policy, especially when seen from a somewhat abstract perspective. But there was no general strategy in which this plan (a large branch campus) would be a logical and generally desirable step. There was no question of any financial support, which is a good litmus test of the degree of support for desirable policy initiatives. People found the plan interesting and challenging but not something to stick their neck out for. It was perceived

as being too extensive and precarious for that.

To further the plan, the Ministry had to eliminate some legal obstacles, something that had been taken into consideration. Originally, it had seemed that a governmental decree would suffice but, in the end, a full-blown legislative procedure turned out to be necessary. The Minister of Education, Culture and Science had agreed to initiate this procedure, although there was no reason to interpret this as unconditional support for the Yantai plan. For the Ministry, there was an additional safeguard in the fact that many people were still due to shed light on the plan: a recommendation from the Council of State, followed by a debate in the House of Representatives and, finally, a debate in the Senate. One of the factors playing in the background was that public ideas about relations with China were changing fast. And there was growing unease about academic freedom in China.

These signals did not lead to changes in the lobby, which focused on implementing the required legislative amendments as quickly as possible. Lobbying in The Hague was mostly done in person by the President of the Board of the University. This offered great advantages in terms of consistency and efficiency but the downside was that it contributed to the notion that this was 'Poppema's plan'. This idea, which was growing anyway, contributed in many ways to the project's vulnerability.

Ergo, the response to the clouds gathering in Groningen and in The Hague was not entirely adequate. Clearly, these signals did not in and of themselves suggest that the project should be terminated. But they were omens of things that might and would come.

[7.1.11 Growing unease in Groningen, China and The Hague](#)

For the Yantai project, 2016 was very different from the turbulent launching year, marked as it had been by highly profiled public signatures. In Groningen, the year was spent writing a more than 500-page long application for transnational teaching and a business case. In Yantai, it was devoted to mapping physical and other requirements for a campus. In The Hague, it was spent working towards a draft law. Admiration is in order for the incredible amount of work done. Obviously, things did not go as fast as people wanted but the project continued to move steadily along, especially taking into account the complexity of the operation. On 15 August 2016, the Board of the University established the project's business case.

However, in hindsight, you can also see that clouds were growing in number and size, something not everyone was aware of. The problems in Yantai were far greater than expected: a lot of renovation was required, the IT infrastructure was not up to standard and there was some uncertainty

about administrative responsibilities. In Groningen, an important development was the election of a new University Council, which resulted in the disappearance of the student representatives who had unanimously voted in favour of the project a year earlier, which had a decisive impact on the vote.

The business case also elicited criticism. This criticism was in itself understandable since the business case still contained some important open ends. Another relevant factor was the fact that the business case had been written by the University itself, in the ordinary course of business. This was in itself an impressive performance but it made the business case very vulnerable, both in terms of its content and because it was done by the University itself. Another important factor was that although some companies had expressed vague verbal intentions to finance the project, the amounts promised did not by any means approximate the required funding (the budget amounted to € 25 million) and there was no perspective on any further contributions. This was not unusual at this stage in a project but a greater level support would have contributed to the project's credibility.

In The Hague, people were working on elaborating the legislative amendment submitted to the House of Representatives on 9 December 2015. The new law was not about Yantai, although Yantai did play a role in the background. In the House of Representatives, Yantai was extensively discussed in a General Consultation of the permanent House Committee for Education, Culture and Science on 14 December 2016. The discussion centred on the same themes as before, albeit more heatedly and with more emphasis on the conditions imposed, which the Minister emphatically aligned herself with. What was striking was that the Minister also indicated that the University of Groningen was working on different aspects of the project, culminating in a proposal that the Minister could accept or reject without being bound to any previous statements or decisions. This illustrates that at this stage, the Minister was primarily focusing on following the correct procedure while keeping her hands free.

[7.1.12 By 2017, the wind had changed in The Hague](#)

In the meantime, changes were taking place at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. A crucial development, and one that was completely overlooked in Groningen, was an investigation commissioned by the government in 2016 to be conducted by government consultancy group ABDTOPConsult. The goal of this investigation was to elicit an external perspective on how the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science had positioned itself in the Yantai process, including a recommendation for the role of the Ministry. The conclusions of ABDTOPConsult were critical, which

fed growing scepticism within the Ministry. The ABDTOPConsult recommendations were also shared with the Minister and undoubtedly coloured her perspective. What's more, on 25 November 2016, the incumbent Director-General announced his transfer to a different position. The Director had been involved with the plan from the start and was in favour of it, although somewhat concerned about the scope. He had been viewed as an important ally in Groningen. Other officials who had worked on the plan at the Ministry also sought and found other positions. The new Director-General appointed in the spring of 2017 was more sceptical than his predecessor, in part due to the ABDTOPConsult report. He also had different ideas about the relationship between the University, in particular the President of the Board, and the Ministry. This changed the tone of contact between the Ministry and the University.

Other changes were taking place in The Hague in 2017 that were probably not properly understood at the time. One of them was the legislative amendment passed by the House of Representatives on 23 February 2017. This was a prerequisite but not a free licence for the project. The project initiators may have interpreted this a little too positively and underestimated the significance of the right of consent of the University Council being included in the new law. For hesitant or opposing Members of the House of Representatives, the right of consent was a strong tool for keeping the plan under control. It could reasonably be assumed that this consent would not be granted lightly – and certainly not unconditionally, if at all. This left all options open for formulating a political stance.

Another important factor was the elections of 15 March 2017, after which the Cabinet was outgoing. At such times, policy development is put on hold and no controversial, strategic decisions are taken. It was only on 26 October 2017, following the longest Cabinet formation in Dutch parliamentary history since 1945, that a new Minister was chosen. The new Minister did not yet voice her opinion about Yantai but it would have come as no surprise to an observant outsider that these administrative and political changes had shifted the situation. The feeling grew that this was a soloistic University of Groningen plan, with very few real supporters outside the University and especially not in The Hague.

[7.1.13 University Council elections and their consequences](#)

Another important development was the University Council elections of May 2017, in which – with a turnout of 28.1% among students and 30.7% among staff – a student section was elected with two members, both of whom had termination of the Yantai project as their main election slogans. The same applied to two staff representatives, who had been elected on the same grounds. What's more, earlier support from student party Lijst Calimero had

now morphed into opposition. The new University Council studied the proposal in great detail and prepared its response thoroughly. Council members were apparently very wary of being dragged into yet another project. In response, the Board of the University did its utmost best to convince and meet the University Council halfway. This process lasted a number of months, during which time much effort, creativity and expertise were deployed on both sides. But this came to no avail: the feelings of the University Council remained negative (based on a number of well-substantiated pre-existing arguments).

7.1.14 The end of the plan

Resistance had become too strong. An appeal from the deans came too late to turn the tide. An appeal from a large number of professors in the newspaper had the opposite effect of what was intended. By late 2017, the newly appointed Minister had announced that she would not grant permission for the project. All of this was enough for the Board of the University to decide on 29 January 2018 to call the plan off. No doubt some of the people involved would have liked to have made another attempt but, in the end, the Board of the University rightly decided to not pursue the matter any further.

7.2 What went wrong?

There are two different possible answers to this question.

Answer 1 is 'Not much, actually'. People had worked hard on an ambitious plan initiated by the Board of the University that had originally garnered a lot of support but then found itself in dire straits. An important factor in this context was the shift in the Dutch attitude towards China, starting from 2015, changing slowly at first, then faster, which led to a much less positive climate. Had the plan been launched five years earlier, things would probably have gone differently. It was a built-in aspect of the plan that various institutions (the Supervisory Board, the University Council, the relevant faculty councils and the Minister) would at some point be asked for a definitive 'yes' or 'no' and, crucially, that the University Council ultimately had right of consent. For reasons of their own, the University Council decided not to grant consent, so the plan never materialized. This had always been one of the possible outcomes; these are the rules of the game. What other institutions did or did not think about it was no longer relevant. It had cost money and effort but not to the detriment of the University's primary processes. And it is worthwhile to point out that working on this plan contributed immensely to insights into strategic processes and experience with international projects. No doubt the termination of the project led to frustration and disturbed mutual relations here and there but

this is unavoidable in such strategic processes. That is the short answer.

Answer 2 is longer, more critical and more complex. Mistakes were made throughout the process, none of which were critical in and of themselves but, jointly, they resulted in accumulated negative feelings about the plan. This led to a negative attitude on the part of the University Council but it could just as easily have led to a negative decision elsewhere, for example in the Supervisory Board or the Ministry.

It was not sensible to move so fast in the beginning. Although there was clearly some pressure from China, this should not have been a decisive factor. It cannot be denied that this pressure suited the initiators; it contributed to a sense of urgency that ensured incredible efforts were made but, unfortunately, also fostered irritation and frustration. Nor was it a good idea to further increase this pressure by having documents signed on highly ceremonial occasions since this created the impression that the plan was more or less an accomplished fact. In the short term, such ceremonies are of course beautiful and add cachet and additional pressure to the project but, in the long-run, they can have an adverse effect.

It was also not sensible to quickly and eagerly obtain and act on the University Council's consent granted on 25 June 2015. This ultimately turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory. When it comes to strategic decisions, a University Council is an uncertain institution of which the composition (24 elected members) is unbalanced by definition and, moreover, changes every year. The term of office is one academic year for students and two academic years for staff members, with a possibility of re-election. The four University Councils (academic years 2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2017 and 2017-2018) involved in this project jointly involved 69 members succeeding each other at a fast pace. Despite this rotation, the University Council continued to ask content-related, increasingly difficult questions, the answers to which led to growing dissatisfaction. At this early stage, people already underestimated the signals from the University Council, especially from the members of the staff section who had cast a blank vote.

The meeting between the Board of the University and the University Council on 25 June 2015 was peculiar: poorly prepared in view of the interests involved and with a chaotic and improvised progression, as apparent from the audio recording. In this context, the Chair of the University Council was not entirely free of blame. She was criticised by her own party members for not adhering strictly to the procedure. Although she was the only one to vote against the project, her vote made little impact in proportion and did not send a clear signal. She could have objected more strongly to how the situation was unfolding on procedural grounds, which was clearly her role

as Chair, more so than casting a vote. Although she contacted the Chair of the Supervisory Board after the meeting, she did not ring the alarm bell. On the other hand, it is important to note that a regular majority of 13 members had voted in favour of the decision, resulting in a clear voting ratio (13 to 1). The fact that the decision in question was somewhat questionable is a separate issue.

People also underestimated the significance and long-term effect of the attitude of the Faculty of Economics and Business. Our impression is that their attitude was a combination of sentiments such as 'I don't like it', 'There is no advantage in it for the Faculty', 'I feel hurt by the public statements of the President of the Board of the University' and 'This is not a good plan in terms of content'. Admittedly, this is a position made up of a variety of voices and it is not 100% clear and convincing. Still, coming from a faculty with much knowledge and experience of strategic business plans, this should have been given more attention – the more so since one could assume that this attitude was going to spread further.

One mistake that the project initiators made was trying too hard to give form to the plan themselves as much as possible. One advantage of this was that they could get to work immediately. They knew who was working on what and could move forward quickly and efficiently. Clearly, though, whether in terms of content or in terms of process, the staff did not always have the project under control. Projects of this kind require a heavy deployment of staff on many fronts (in Groningen and in China). More external support would not only have promoted professionalism but could also have contributed to credibility. This played a role in the business case, for example. Incidentally, adequate expertise was hired in for some areas, such as the legal aspects.

The drive to do as much as possible by themselves was clearly strong among the leaders of the project, with the President of the Board of the University playing a central and leading role. This was understandable and had its advantages. But it also meant the plan could easily be flagged and dismissed as the 'Poppema Plan' (or a similar expression), as sceptics were wont to describe it after some time. In this way, ironically, the President's central position and his convincing, decisive, enthusiastic and self-confident approach caused irritation, internally and in such places as the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

This is a frequently occurring paradox: to set these kinds of strategic plans in motion requires determination, persuasiveness and strong leadership but further along the process, these same qualities can be counterproductive. Once again, the President of the Board of the University would have been well-advised, shortly after the start of the project, to take more distance

and to focus, for instance, on maintaining external contacts. In this context, it must be said that although in hindsight this would have been better, at the time, the choices made seemed very understandable.

As a result of this strong focus on Groningen, no collaboration was sought with other universities. Although they probably would have declined, no attempt was made to enlist them either. This was not sensible, especially because in a project of this scope, joining forces is ultimately better (even if it means things take longer to materialize). It would also have been a good test of the project's validity and would have made it less vulnerable: it is harder to knock down a group of universities than a single one.

In this context, lobbying in The Hague was not optimal. Too much value was attached to positive responses, sympathetic letters and great ceremonial display with the signing of the memorandums. The latter was of course tempting since it underscored the plans but it occurred too early on in the process. People also underestimated the fact that Dutch politicians and administrators have no problem revoking decisions and plans, even when sealed in the presence of high authorities. The fact that the ministries of Economic Affairs and Foreign Affairs warmly welcomed the signatures was therefore not particularly relevant. What was more telling were the changes in public perceptions of China and their real and potential effect on political positions concerning academic and other activities there. The project initiators relied too heavily on their good contacts with and the positive attitude of a number of officials at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (some of whom left during the process) and drew from this the erroneous conclusion that the department didn't have many questions about the plan, in particular regarding its scope. They also underestimated how putting pressure on the process (in particular the amendment and governmental decree) could at some point be experienced as nagging and therefore generate irritation rather than support.

What was not assessed quite correctly was the effect of the negative attitude of a single, well-placed (and apparently in possession of strong channels from and to Groningen) member of the House of Representatives (from the SP, to be precise). Criticism also grew among other members of the House of Representatives who did not wish to be associated with the project and, even less, to create the impression they were ruled by Groningen, or insensitive to growing criticism of China in general and its notion of academic freedom in particular. As far as 'The Hague' was concerned, one should also note that although the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science had formulated a general policy on internationalization, it had not yet elaborated on it in any detail. As a result, it was also unclear what concrete conditions the Dutch government could impose.

The decision-making process itself was not particularly well-structured. In hindsight, it seems as if things were largely done in reverse order: the most important aspects first, with much display and publicity, then the elaboration, with only a serious business case at a fairly late stage; a document one would expect at the start of a strategic process. This approach resulted in some institutions lagging behind the facts. This applies, for example, to the Supervisory Board who, having given the project the green light to elaborate their plans, did not devote much attention to further developments, especially in the first year.

The Supervisory Board remained very much in the background and focused first on the risks and later on their role as the supervising authority at the University of Groningen branch campus in Yantai. The Supervisory Board was not very directive and did not intervene much regarding the content or the process. They did, however, respond to signals, for instance by repeatedly emphasizing the importance of gathering enough support. However, Board members had assumed that at some point, a proposal would be submitted for a Go/No Go decision, and that they would be free to stop the plan if it turned out to be premature or insufficiently supported. The Supervisory Board never visited Yantai; the only planned visit was cancelled. There may also have been some disagreements regarding the scope of the plan as it was to be launched. As opposed to the Board of the University, and especially the President, the Supervisory Board, or in any case the Chair, was under the impression that the promised scope (10,000 students) was a symbolic recruitment tool. They felt that a much smaller, more phased approach would be more reasonable. As far as can be ascertained, this difference in perspective was never explicitly addressed in the meeting between the Supervisory Board and the Board of the University.

Incidentally, it is very much the role of a Supervisory Board to keep some distance and give the Board of the University central stage. But in hindsight, it might have been better to create a special position within the Supervisory Board for a supervisor who would be more explicitly involved in the plan's development. This would also have changed the incidental and often verbal communication with the Supervisory Board into more structured information provision. Although the Finance Audit Committee did periodically devote attention to the plan's financial aspects and risks, this was only part of the story and did not touch on content-related strategic considerations or decision-making processes. When the Supervisory Board noticed that opposition was on the rise sometime in 2017, they drastically intensified their attention – something they might have done sooner.

Another consequence of the decision-making process was that on various

fronts, there were great differences in expectations and perceptions of the project and its development. As mentioned in the context of the Supervisory Board, these differences mostly concerned the scope of the project. For example, the President of the Board of the University strongly emphasized the plan's unprecedented scope. From his perspective, it was undoubtedly essential to make sure that the plan was perceived as large-scale and ambitious enough to convince others. However, the original enthusiasm of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science was tempered precisely by concerns about the plan's scope, which resulted in an emphasis on the need for a far more modest, phased first step. The Minister actually said this in so many words during the parliamentary debate. This sentiment was shared by the Supervisory Board: start small and then we'll see. Other institutions had still other ideas about the plan's scope. And the Chinese partners probably felt that 10,000 students wasn't that much at all. These different perspectives should have been given far more attention from the start. It was only in the late stage of the process that more modest and phased options came into view. But by then, it was too late.

From the start, there should have been much more focus on the University-wide character of the plan and the need to involve other faculties. A possible alternative was to start only with the Faculty of Science and Engineering since they were most interested and pushing hard for the project (even though there were objections in this regard, too). This would have created more options for phasing and made for more transparent decision-making. It would also have shifted the focus from the Board of the University to the Faculty Board. For the President of the Board, this was undoubtedly an unattractive idea that impinged on his vision of the plan's character.

The discussion concerning the financing of the preparatory phase was very unfortunate. From the start, it was abundantly clear that no public funds (direct and indirect government funding) could be used to finance the Yantai activities. This had been said both in Groningen and in The Hague. The project was to be funded through private funds,¹ using a complex method of allocating staff hours to the Yantai project, but the project initiators could not rely on much guidance from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science or the inspection on how this was to be done in practice. This was a serious disadvantage since it gave opponents an additional opportunity to express criticism and cast doubt on the project. This risk was perhaps somewhat underestimated. At a later stage, an investigation was conducted into the project's financial accountability and allocation of costs, which did not reveal any negligence, showing only that corrections had been made where necessary. The evaluation committee saw no reason to investigate this further.

In the end, the costs were quite limited for such a large-scale project, with a total (over a period of approximately three years) slightly in excess of € 3 million based on an annual budget of € 700 million. It is true that the expenses did not have the desired result but the possibility of a negative outcome can never be excluded in strategic projects of this kind. It would, however, have been far better if these expenses had been budgeted as normal long-term development expenses, with the explicit consent of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (and not with an attitude of ‘as long as it doesn’t affect regular funding sources, we don’t have an opinion about it’).

The long answer is, as aforementioned, more critical and indicates that things went wrong on a number of fronts. It is of course always easier to judge in hindsight, just as it is tempting to speculate on what might have happened if some persons or institutions had acted differently. The plan might have stalled at an earlier stage, or it might have been implemented in a more modest form. The campus idea might have been replaced by other forms of China-based activities, an idea that, seen in isolation, was both very understandable and highly sensible. A different approach might have led to success. As mentioned above, this is an interesting but not particularly fruitful speculation.

The Board of the University is seen as the central institution of the University, also in the context of the Yantai project. Many would have shared in Yantai’s success but its failure was primarily blamed on the Board of the University, in particular the then President. This is how these things go and, as we have seen, Yantai was no exception. One thing is clear: without the then President of the Board of the University, Mr Poppema, the project would never have materialized for sure; in fact, it would not have reached the stage that it did. Other members of the Board were also committed but none of them were as determined and devoted to the project as the President. Overall, it is not possible in this case to point to a single guilty party. The Board of the University, assisted by a very dedicated staff and led by their President, made a concerted effort that did not produce the desired result. Mistakes were made. But the achievements of all involved were also highly admirable. With a less decisive Board, the project would probably have been stranded much earlier or have never even begun. Ultimately, the damage to the University was limited.

What remains is a persistent impression that this kind of large-scale strategic project is really too big for a Dutch university to tackle alone. A university’s structure, staffing and practices make it ill-equipped for large, controversial projects of this kind – and certainly for establishing branches in large, unknown and controversial countries. This is not part of a

university's normal operation and it doesn't have the professional capacity and internal decision-making processes required.

Pointing to American and British universities that succeeded in similar projects makes for an invalid comparison. These institutions have very different political, administrative and financial embedding. In the Netherlands, one of the relevant factors is that politicians have no qualms about meddling with strategic plans of this kind and universities are often bound to viciously formulated conditions. It would have been better for the initiative to be carried by more than one university. This would have made it harder to gain internal support but easier to gain external support, which would ultimately have made the project less vulnerable.

Groningen going solo meant that the slightest internal resistance was enough to awaken external opposing forces. Incidentally, the internal collapse of the project meant these external forces never became manifest. But it is beyond question that even if the University Council and the Supervisory Board had granted their consent, the game would have been far from won. The next obstacle would have been the Minister's approval of the application for transnational teaching in China. As time went on, the originally proposed, fairly easy to obtain governmental decree had morphed into a legislative amendment binding such applications to increasingly stringent conditions. This meant that the task at hand was getting increasingly harder and provided opponents with ever more tools for causing trouble. In addition to the Minister (who was, of course, the appointed deciding authority by law), the House of Representatives would also have become involved again. When the law was first debated, the Minister had stated that it would not only require her approval (or 'that of my successor'; the Minister was apparently expecting the process to take some time) but 'therefore also of your House'.²

Constitutional connoisseurs might opine that the division of power implies that the Minister is free to make decisions, which the House of Representatives then reviews. But in this case, the political reality apparently led the Minister to wanting to make it clear beforehand that the House of Representatives would also be involved in the authorization process. This illustrates that the University did not gauge political feelings in The Hague very accurately and assumed for too long that all would be well politically once the law and the governmental decree were passed. This summary of the political sentiments in The Hague should incidentally not create the erroneous impression that the project was terminated for any other reason than because the University Council refused to give its consent, which led to the Board of the University withdrawing the plan.

7.3 Recommendations

7.3.1 Introduction

The previous section is highly critical of the way in which the University approached the Yantai project. As has been emphasized a few times, this is all the benefit of hindsight. Many actions were understandable in the context of the time. This does not, however, make them immune to criticism. Nor can it be said that different decisions or a different approach would have led to success. Opponents will no doubt claim that the project should never have been launched in the first place. But this misrepresents the potential of these plans and the broadly shared consensus and commitment to further elaboration at the time.

Another positive aspect is that once the University Council had indicated their intention to reject the plan, the initiators took stock and decided to terminate the project. This must not have been easy for those who had devoted so much time and energy to the project and were convinced of its merits. For a number of University bodies, it must have also been difficult to see such potentially promising, challenging developments being discontinued. On a positive note, we can value the efforts required to contain and process all of this and appreciate the fact that the University continued to do its work in spite of this setback. Another positive note was the efforts to ensure appropriate follow-up and closure of open ends in relation to the outside world and especially to Chinese partners.

7.3.2 Eight recommendations

a. By all means, continue to initiate large-scale, ground-breaking strategic projects, including projects focused on the University's internationalization. However, at the start of these projects, make sure to devote attention to your approach, the decision-making process, and the question of how a large-scale, highly differentiated existing organization consisting of fairly autonomous and highly intelligent but also wilful professionals can follow these developments. To do so, make sure that you first invest in a discussion concerning broad ideas and expectations – and take your time for this. This time will earn itself back later. Also keep in mind that a university can be difficult to read in terms of organizational behaviour. Regular ideas about the management of large organizations and the pursuit of clarity with respect to tasks, responsibilities and authorities are not always compatible with the unique character of a university.

b. Strategic developments are unavoidable. But they also cost money. Make regular resources and staff available, thus making it clear that these are not incidental or private hobbies but essential components of

your work. It should not be necessary to fund these kinds of activities with so-called private funds. This makes a very unprofessional impression and gives the wrong idea about these activities.

c. For large-scale strategic projects like Yantai, seek collaboration with other universities. As a rule, a large-scale undertaking of this scope is too heavy for a single university to manage alone. What's more, the academic administration model is not very suited to the type of decisions involved. It would be better in such cases to create a separate temporary administration body involving a number of universities, with the Ministry functioning as a partner, rather than a supervisor or controller. Such an approach would bypass many of the weaknesses that surfaced in the Yantai project. It would also make it possible to reach sound agreements about finances. Undoubtedly, a factor that played a key role in this project was the fact that the internationalization policy of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science had not yet been formulated in very concrete terms, so there was no clear framework to refer to.

d. The role of the participation councils was remarkable. Ultimately, the plan was discontinued due to the negative attitude of the University Council. A few years earlier, it was the consent of the University Council that had given the plan an extra boost. But, as explained above, there were some questions marks around this consent. It is advisable to devote sufficient attention to the interaction between the Board of the University and the University Council. It is also advisable to make sure that the regular consultations with the University Council and the Supervisory Board contribute to strengthening the role of both. Finally, it is advisable to review whether the current consultative participation model is still ideal. The law allows for two forms of consultative participation: divided and undivided. Groningen uses an undivided system. This offers advantages in terms of efficiency and looks attractive from the perspective of integration. But it also brings a great deal of uncertainty, in particular due to the rapid changeover of student members. This is a disadvantage for strategic projects. A divided system involves a works council elected by and from among the staff to focus on more commercial activities, as well as a student council to provide student participation. This better reflects each group's specific interests and perspectives.

e. Clarify the role of the Supervisory Board. Some might opine that the Supervisory Board should have intervened earlier. No doubt the Supervisory Board could have kept a closer check on things and responded more forcefully, in particular to signals concerning tempo and decision-

making. The Supervisory Board could probably also have strengthened its own position, for instance by appointing a delegated supervisor specifically for Yantai, or by intervening in the somewhat soloistic attitude of the President of the Board of the University. On the other hand, it was absolutely clear that the Supervisory Board would at some point be asked to approve or reject the plan. That moment never came because the information required did not become available. From the start, the Board expressed concerns about the risks (in particular via the Finance Audit Committee), which was the right stance for a supervising authority. These risks seemed acceptable to them, which was a reasonable assumption. Another relevant factor was the fact that signals from the University Council about the process were not of the kind that should really have raised the alarm for the Supervisory Board. More generally, it is advisable to make the formal and material role of the Supervisory Board clear to the University and its various bodies once more. A Supervisory Board does not manage the University but it appoints the Board of the University and oversees its activities from a distance. Clearly, the Supervisory Board must be receptive to signals from the organization. But these signals have to be clear. A Supervisory Board is not a institution of higher appeal for other bodies but has its own role and responsibilities. The Supervisory Board is not supposed to take over from the Board of the University every time there are some alarming signals.

f. Clarify the role of the deans and the Rector Magnificus in this type of strategic project. In the Yantai project, the Committee of Deans hardly played a leading role at all. Their letter, dated 15 September 2017, came too late in the day to make a difference. This was also related to the attitude of the then Rector. The Rector did realize in early January 2016 that the Faculty of Economics and Business would not be brought on board in time to take part in the first cohort of Yantai programmes. But in his role as Rector, he could and should have stepped up within the Board of the University and acted as spokesperson for the doubts and hesitations that many faculties were voicing regarding the Yantai adventure. The evaluation committee advises the Rector to be vocal in their role as spokesperson for the faculties and their deans.

g. Invest in the relationship with 'The Hague'. In the Yantai project, those involved clearly had too little understanding of the developments in national politics. At the highest level, this was exclusively in the hands of the President of the Board of the University. At the expert level, there were also good contacts with the officials of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. But this was not enough and it was also precarious. Especially for a university like that in Groningen, large but located far

from The Hague, there is always the risk of a certain degree of isolation, which is reinforced by a common feeling (justified or not) in the Northern Netherlands that The Hague does not take the North into consideration. More intensive communication could have a positive effect in this respect.

h. Conclude the entire Yantai discussion! This process has certainly caused internal damage to people and relationships and, where necessary, the Board of the University should pay this some attention. Overall, though, the impression is that people have largely closed this chapter and are focusing on new challenges. Spending too much time discussing what went wrong can only detract people from taking on these new challenges.