

“SIRE, GIVE ME A HUNDRED DAYS”

Interview with Vice-Rector International Policy at K.U.Leuven, Professor Bart De Moor

Since the start of this academic year, the K.U.Leuven has a vice-rector for international policy, professor Bart De Moor. *The Voice* met with him for an interview about this new function and his ambitions, but also touched upon such subjects as the integration problems and the 2020-aims.

Bert Willems ||

“As a description of my new function I prefer ‘international policy’, because in my feeling the word ‘internationalisation’ is a very imperialistic term. ‘International policy’ is much more neutral and appropriate. It is about relations, networks and mobility. On the one hand it is a clear topic, but on the other hand it is everywhere and nowhere, it’s a transversal dimension, not a competence, and it is present in all aspects of education, science and society.”

The Voice - *What are your personal tasks and responsibilities?*

De Moor: First of all, we have to try to define the international policy of the university and the association. Many things are happening now on the international scene. The big challenge for the team of rector Waer and myself will be to define a clear international policy.



lect certain points of gravity and which messages we want to send out into the world. There is a big controversy about university rankings. In the latest one, Leuven ranked 64th, but one of the winners was a university in London. This institution has a clear branding message and they isolated four topics, only four, in which they want to brand themselves. They also emphasise interdisciplinarity, and this is interesting for Leuven. We call ourselves a complete university because we house all possible disciplines. But now we have to turn this multidisciplinary university into an interdisciplinary one by establishing cross-links. Progress in science can only be made through these cross-links, like linking genetics with information technology, or linking clinical research with engineering. I would not call this a problem because we’re already quite attractive as it is, but we could still do a much better job. This would also help us in selecting our international students. By now the limits of our capacity have been reached, both here and in the rest of Flanders. Increasing this capacity is one option, and we are doing this, but we also need to think about being more selective and clearer research lines will help us with that. The idea of a non-binding entrance exam for Flemish students has recently

national scene. The big challenge is the team of rector Waer and myself will be to define a clear international policy. There are many bottom-up initiatives at our university, but we miss an umbrella, a policy document that guides us in our priorities. Our main challenge in Flanders is that “abroad” is a very big country. So we need to make choices in our actions and guidelines on how we do that are missing right now. The many initiatives result in many invitations for cooperation, but we need to decide which ones are the best. Every action in international relations should be a win-win situation for both partners.

The Voice - What is your personal motivation to be involved with international policy?

De Moor: I never expected that rector Waer would ask me to coordinate the international policy of our university. My profile is more that of a researcher and besides that I have had a parallel career in politics. I have been in several ministerial cabinets, including that of former minister-president of Flanders Yves Leterme as his ‘head of cabinet’. The question of the rector therefore came as a surprise, but by now, after some time in this job, I find it to be a very nice and exciting challenge. There are so many ideas and opportunities. We need to capture and combine them in a strategic plan, and I find this task very attractive. Another issue is that we are confronted with many practical problems. We have many bottlenecks that need to be tackled, concerning hospitality, capacity, mobility,... Removing these thresholds would be a second motivation.

The Voice - What are the goals you



Bert Willen

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would like to see accomplished this year and during your mandate?

De Moor: There is a famous book about the political career of former prime minister Jean-Luc Dehaene titled “Sire, give me a hundred days”. He asked the king to give him a hundred days to unravel the complexity of Belgian politics. I promised myself the same thing. Until Christmas I will be in a kind of absorption mode. I walk around a lot and have many bilateral contacts with students, researchers and administrators. Then, during the coming Christmas holidays I intend to make an outline of a strategic plan, but now already I see certain lines. There are many good international programs at the faculties and many top-down initiatives coming from the international office, but we have to improve the connection between those two. Bottom-up and top-down have to meet in the middle. There needs to be a better match between supply and demand. Another important aspect are the intercultural connections between students. I would not call it integration, at least not in the sense that visiting students should not be distinguishable from local students. Nowadays however they live in segregated groups and we will only be able to speak about a successful integration policy when we see both local and foreign students sitting together,

studying, talking, connecting. It is a big challenge, but not an impossible one, because at American universities there isn’t even a discussion about this, it’s just natural. The problem is cultural, and alas, cultural problems are the most difficult to solve.

The Voice - Which aspect of the international experience do you find the most important?

De Moor: That would be the contact with other cultures, because it teaches us a lot about our own culture. This confrontation also invokes some modesty. Western people tend to be very imperialistic, but there is always more than one truth. Besides that, there is also a certain levelling between cultures. This aspect of globalisation is very exciting, because from this melting pot we will hopefully be able to retain all the good elements of the different cultures and re-order them into one big global culture.

The Voice - How do you sell our university abroad?

De Moor: Leuven has a real challenge for branding itself internationally. We say everywhere that our educational system is among the best in the world and this gets consolidated by certain numbers. Although we can be proud of this, what does it buy us? We have to se-

that. The idea of a non-binding entrance exam for Flemish students has recently been formulated and we have to think in the same way about our foreign students. There are many ideas on how to make this selection more strict, but they are still in an early stage.

The Voice - How do you see Erasmus in Leuven in the context of the 2020-aims?

De Moor: All faculties implement Erasmus in a different way, which on the one hand is understandable because the networks and the culture in the faculties are different. On the other hand, I’m a bit worried about the size of these differences. The coordinators only discuss practical matters, not content. On the strategic level there is the objective of sending 20% of our students abroad for at least a year by 2020. Nevertheless we see the number of students going abroad fluctuates over the years. Maybe this has to do with the fact that younger people travel more. It’s hard to analyse this phenomenon, but having an international experience remains crucial in the general education of all of our students. If we don’t do that, then they will only get their wisdom from books and everybody knows that that’s about the worst wisdom you can have.

Hopefully, we will achieve the 2020-aims. But objectives are sometimes symbolic. When I was young, the Jesuits told me to always aim higher than the target, because the arrow drops in its flight. So we would also be pleased with 15 percent on the short term. |