

Stevin Centre for History of Science and Humanities

1. Mission statement

Academic knowledge is an essential part of contemporary society. The VU University has traditionally attached great importance to courses in the history of academic knowledge as a contribution to the balanced education of its students. University-wide courses can clearly demonstrate the interaction between academic disciplines and of academia with society. The Stevin Centre for History of Science and Humanities, a university-wide VU centre, will offer such courses. In addition it has formulated a common research theme entitled “Knowledge Practices and Normativity within their Historical Context”. This theme has links with the research of most of the participants. The concept of science will be problematised, and the role of philosophical, normative, religious and legal aspects will be central in the historical analysis. The Stevin Centre aims at making its results available to the wider community and to achieve this it will organise activities for the VU community and special activities for particular groups.



2. Background

Both the natural sciences and the humanities, as well as the economic, social and technical sciences, play an essential role in contemporary society and have contributed to making it what it is. For somebody with a university education knowledge of the own discipline is not enough: insight into the interconnections between the sciences and into their role in society is also important. The need for a broad academic education is therefore more pressing than ever.

The history of the sciences is an important way of contributing to such insights. At the VU it has traditionally been considered important to give students an introduction to the history of their discipline. Recently the significance attached to this subject has been confirmed again by giving the history of science a place in the so-called Academic Core of every bachelor education. In addition to philosophy of science such courses are deemed essential in the academic training of every student. The internationally renowned historian of science, Reijer Hooykaas, was appointed professor at the VU in 1946, which made the VU the first Dutch university that gave history of science a structural position, both in teaching and research. Hooykaas taught history of science to students of the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Science. Subsequently other faculties introduced courses in the history of the knowledge field concerned. The present situation is that most faculties offer introductory courses in the history of individual disciplines, some of which are obligatory for all students, while others are elective. In Appendix 1 an indication of the present situation is to be found.

Research in the history of the individual sciences and humanities has an important place in the various faculties as well. A range of subjects is being studied, primarily embedded in the individual knowledge domains, but with additional attention being paid to the discipline in question as an inextricable part of the wider academic world and of society.

3. Developments in the history of science

History of science as an independent discipline came into being in the twenties of the last century. Initially specialists in various areas began to study the history of their own disciplines, so that the history of a science was linked directly to that science. The focus was on the internal development of the sciences, for which the philosophy of science offered analytical frameworks. In recent decades the focus on the content of science has been less exclusive, although there are differences between the various knowledge domains. In the practice of historiography, the sciences and the humanities are viewed today as part of the entire intellectual and material culture. Attention is therefore being paid both to the content and the context of knowledge, and to the interaction between the two.

As a result the historians of the various sciences and humanities have, more than in the past, overlapping interests, and in addition the interaction with 'general historians' has become of essential importance to them. And, as some 'general historians' now view



knowledge development as the object of their research, the interaction with the historians of science and humanities is essential for them. The effect of these developments has been that history of science and humanities is viewed, more than in the past, as an inextricable part of the discipline of history.

In addition the insight has grown that societal, economic and anthropological analysis is essential in the study of the history of science. The perspective of the philosophy of science is also important: History and Philosophy of Science is widely recognized as an integrated discipline in academic teaching and research, which can advance our understanding of science and its role in society. Moreover, growing attention is being paid to the material heritage of science, including books and instruments, as it is being preserved in libraries and museums.

It can be concluded that it is natural that the historians of the individual knowledge domains, the general historians who are interested in knowledge, and philosophers and sociologists of science and humanities and other researchers with an interest in the history of science and humanities, collaborate more and more. Such collaboration can only have a stimulating effect, both in teaching and research.

4. Collaboration at the VU: teaching and research

Against the background of the historical interest in history of science and humanities at the VU and the developments in the discipline, and because of stimulating developments elsewhere, in particular the foundation of the Descartes Centre in Utrecht, a growing group of interested people at the VU (which for convenience here includes the Protestant Theological University located at the VU) has started consultations about possible collaboration. The potential participants expected that such collaboration would have a strong stimulating effect. There was another motive for this increase in scale. Organizational developments within the academic world made it advisable to initiate formal collaboration with like-minded academics and in this way strengthen everybody's position.

This initiative has turned out to have wide support within the VU. Initially members of staff of the Faculties of Arts, Law and Philosophy joined the initiative originally taken by the History of Science Section of the Faculty of Exact Sciences. Subsequently interested people from most other faculties at the VU joined the initiative. By January 2014 there were 37 participants from nine faculties and the Protestant Theological University (see Appendix 2). Although most potential participants have probably been reached, new enquiries are still made occasionally.

At the meetings in 2012 and 2013 collaboration in the areas of teaching and research was discussed, and the first steps were made towards the creation of a VU centre for history of science and humanities. An honours course has been developed that will begin in the academic year 2014/2015. The title is: *Science and Religion: Views from History*. Staff from the Faculties of Science, Arts, Law and Philosophy will contribute to this course, which will be coordinated by Professor Karel Davids. A minor is being considered. The point of departure is the university-wide minor 'Science under Discussion', a collaboration between



philosophers and historians of science. The aim is to launch a minor that has a more exclusively history of science character. In the Faculty of Arts there is the master track 'Medical History' as a specialisation within the master study 'History', while the master track 'Knowledge History' is being developed. This is done in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam and the Huygens ING KNAW Institute. Although there is as yet no formal relation between this initiative and the foundation of the VU centre for history of science and humanities, several members of staff are involved in both initiatives, and it is clear this project concerns a common area of interest.

There has also been an exchange of ideas about a common research theme, which has resulted in a short text entitled '*Knowledge Practices and Normativity within their Historical Context*' in which a potential common research theme is explored and possible research topics are given (Appendix 3). This theme has both sufficient focus and sufficient breadth. A single theme has been chosen, within which normative, philosophical, religious and legal aspects are clearly present. In this approach the concept of 'science' is problematised and the historical development of knowledge and knowledge practices is the object of study. Historians have become aware that knowledge is more than scientific knowledge; it can be intellectual, rational, artisanal, intuitive, sensory, religious, ideological etc. It has been realized that views of what knowledge is or should be, and of the role it should play in society are different in different places and at different times and are normative in character. Knowledge practices can be found among all kinds of intellectual, social and religious groups and in many different domains: from law, religion, statistics and education theory to technology or art. Questions arise about the production, transmission, circulation, appropriation and consumption of knowledge. These processes are influenced by views of what counts as a good explanation and at various levels normativity plays an inextricable role in these processes. From the examples presented in this research text it is apparent that the theme has links with much of the current research of the participants. In the longer term proposals for new research projects will have to be formulated, for which funding has to be acquired.

Both broad-themed teaching and research will clearly demonstrate the interaction between academic disciplines and academia with society in a convincing way and contribute to the development of the identity of a VU centre for history of science and humanities.

5. The form of the collaboration: The Stevin Centre for History of Science and Humanities

In light of the above it has been decided to create an interfaculty collaboration in the history of science both in teaching and in research. On March 18, 2014, the festive opening symposium of the *Stevin Centre for History of Science and Humanities* will be held. At the opening ceremony the website of the Stevin Centre, which is being developed in the Faculty of Arts and which is to be managed there for the time being, will be accessible to the public. No official regulations are connected with the centre. The centre offers the possibility of



collaboration and of radiating a common purpose, while all the members keep their appointments at the faculty to which they already belong. All VU members of staff who are interested in the history of science or contribute to it, are invited to participate in the Centre. The steering committee, consisting of the Chair, Prof. Ida Stamhuis (Faculty of Sciences) and the Members Prof. Karel Davids (Faculty of Arts / Faculty of Economics and Business Administration), Prof. Jan Hallebeek (Faculty of Law) and Dr. Henk de Regt (Faculty of Philosophy), will administer the day-to-day management of the Stevin Centre. It is expected that this will be sufficient for the time being. In future additional arrangements may have to be made for the website and the secretariate. There are indications that money from central VU funds will be made available for costs of the opening symposium and further activities during the first year. In the longer term a more structural financial arrangement will have to be made. More generally it is possible that future developments will make a more institutionalised embedding of the Stevin Centre desirable, as the form and the intensity of the collaboration will undoubtedly change in the course of time. The steering group will use their discretion and act according to circumstances.

A consolidated form of collaboration, supported by the VU, is that of an Interdisciplinary Research Institute (Interdisciplinair Onderzoeksinstituut, IOZI). In view of the size of the group of people interested in the history of science a separate IOZI is not an option. It is possible to associate the Centre with an existing IOZI. CLUE, the 'Research Institute for the Heritage and History of the Cultural Landscape and the Environment' is the most natural choice. It seems that the intended research of the Stevin Centre can, without too much of a problem, become part of Programme 4 of CLUE, entitled 'Knowledge formation and its history: ontology, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, economics, and rhetoric'. Talks about this possibility are being held. The specific character of the Centre will have to be taken into account. The Stevin Centre will not limit itself to research, while this is the exclusive function of IOZIs. In addition the members will not be able or willing to introduce all their research time into the Centre and thus into the IOZI concerned, as their research is often first and foremost embedded in their own faculties. The Centre will need to have a certain independence, both as regards content and organizationally, and also financially.

In addition to the development of joint research and teaching, the Stevin Centre will initiate various other activities, such as colloquia, conferences and workshops, which may or may not result in joint publications. One aim is to create the possibility of giving eminent historians of science from abroad temporary guest status in the Stevin Centre. An inventory will be made of existing international contacts of the present participants that can be useful for the development of the Centre. These contacts will be intensified in the context of the Centre. The proposed guest status will play a stimulating role in this.

A variety of activities of the members, nationally and internationally, will contribute to the visibility of the Stevin Centre. Looking at editing activities, in addition to the membership of editorial boards of several journals, the editorship of two important journals whose scope entirely or partially corresponds to that of the Stevin Centre are in the hands of members. One is the *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* (Journal of History), of which Prof. Inger Leemans is an editor-in-chief. The other one is *Centaurus*, the official journal of the European Society for the History of Science, of which Prof. Ida Stamhuis is the editor.



In addition the Stevin Centre will try to play a role in stimulating the awareness of the VU community about the interconnections between the sciences and the interaction of the sciences with society. Both university-wide lunch lectures and meetings focused on particular audiences are options. The idea is to experiment with easily accessible forms of presentation, such as a brief talk with a picture or historical artefact as a starting point. These possibilities will have to be worked out in the near future.

6. The name of the Centre

The Centre is named after the polymath Simon Stevin (1548-1620), who was born in Bruges, but lived from 1581 in what is now the Netherlands. Stevin developed a wide range of activities, in which knowledge and knowledge practices always played a central role. He not only advised Prince Maurice about fortifications and dyke building, he was also involved in the foundation of an engineering school in Leiden and he published on urban house construction. He advocated not only the use of decimal fractions, but also the use of the living Dutch instead of the dead Latin language. He occupied himself not only with mathematics, perspective and mechanics, but also with bookkeeping, accounting and music theory. He was concerned about the principles of good citizenship, and he expressed himself on the education of youth. An intense desire for the return to a peaceful and perfect society is manifest in several of his writings.

7. Positioning in the Dutch academic world

The *Stevin Centre for History of Science and Humanities* is conceived as an inextricable part of the VU. In its teaching it will be in line with the educational aims formulated by the VU in the Academic Core. In the choice of its research theme the specific VU character is present of a responsible university which considers that reflection on the normative aspects of science and humanities should be one of the basic competences of every graduating academic. This does not imply that the Centre should confine itself to the VU and should not engage in wider collaboration.

The most natural development is collaboration with the historians of science of the other Amsterdam university. What form such a collaboration might adopt would have to be worked out in talks with the colleagues of the University of Amsterdam. This could vary from a loose collaboration between an UvA centre and the Stevin Centre at the VU, to a complete merger into a single Amsterdam centre. With some of the colleagues of the University of Amsterdam it has been agreed that for the time being the VU centre will proceed independently of developments at the University of Amsterdam. The Stevin Centre is expressly prepared to engage in balanced collaboration in the future. Whenever policy decisions have to be made, the Centre will try to ensure that no form of collaboration with the University of Amsterdam will be jeopardized by them. Collaboration with professional



colleagues of the University of Amsterdam fits in with the general development of greater collaboration between the two Amsterdam universities. The Faculty of Dentistry (ACTA) belongs to both universities and the collaboration between the science faculties is well-advanced. In addition it should be mentioned here that that the previously discussed master track 'History of Knowledge' that is being developed, is conceived as a track for both Amsterdam universities.

In preparing the plans for the Stevin Centre the colleagues in Utrecht were a source of inspiration, as they were the first in the Netherlands to set up a university-wide centre for history of and philosophy of science and humanities. This centre, whose initiator was Prof. Wijnand Mijnhardt, is very successful. The question arises what the position of the *Stevin Centre for History of Science and Humanities* is going to be in relation to the *Descartes Centre for the History and Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities*. A possible answer is that the master course of the Descartes Centre and the planned Amsterdam master track 'History of Knowledge' have a different character and that they will attract different groups of students. In addition the Stevin Centre has, compared to the Descartes Centre, a more concentrated focus, as the Descartes Centre embraces philosophy of science besides history of science. Contrary to the research of the Descartes Centre, which has three themes (Circulation of Knowledge, Foundations of the Sciences and Discipline Formation), the Stevin Centre concentrates on a single theme (Knowledge Practices and Normativity within their Historical Context). In addition nearly all the research of the participants has interfaces with this theme or can develop them. Characteristic of the Stevin Centre is that it will problematise the phenomenon of science, and that, beside philosophical aspects, in particular normative, religious and legal aspects will be central areas of attention. This means that the Stevin Centre will have its own specific identity.

Obviously collaboration and harmonisation of activities can only strengthen the two institutions. They will provide their own courses, but for advanced courses there will be opportunities to collaborate. In the case of the organisation of large-scale events, e.g. international conferences or activities for a wider public, joint action (together with other institutions such as the Huygens ING KNAW Institute) will improve the quality of the event. Apart from the collaboration with the historians of science of the University of Amsterdam and the Descartes Centre at Utrecht, collaboration with other institutions, such as the Huygens ING KNAW Institute, and other universities, such as the Open University, will also be possible, depending on the type of activity.



Appendix 1: Teaching

Faculty of	Subject, (ECTS, Ac.Core (Y,N))	Target group, Obligation (Y,N)	Student Number
VU Arts	Intellectuele en wetenschappelijke cultuur in Europa 1350-1700 / Intellectual and scientific culture in Europe 1350-1700	B History (offered 2008 - 2012, N)	
VU Arts	Medische geschiedenis / Medical History (24, N)	M History Culture and Power; M Medicine Scientific Intern; M Pharmacy; M Biomedical Sciences; M Social Sciences (N)	20
VU Arts	Various 'Overview' Subjects: Middle Ages, Early Modern Period etc.	B1 and B2 History (Y)	
VU Earth and Life Sciences	Geschiedenis van de levenswetenschappen / History of life sciences (3, Y)	B3 Biology / Biomedical Sciences (Y)	140
VU Earth and Life Sciences	Wetenschapsgeschiedenis/History of science (3, Y)	B2 Earth Sciences (Y)	45
VU Economics and Business Administration	Unknown, probably almost nothing		
VU Human Movement Sciences	Wetenschapsgeschiedenis en - filosofie van de Bewegingswetenschappen / History and Philosophy of the Movement Sciences (6,Y)	B1 Movement Sciences (Y)	200
VU Human Movement Sciences	Filosofie van de Bewegingswetenschappen / Philosophy of the Movement Sciences (6, Y)	B2 Movement Sciences (Y)	150
VU Human Movement Sciences	History and Theory of Movement Sciences (3, N)	M Movement Sciences (N)	
VU Law	Wetenschapsgeschiedenis: Rechtsgeschiedenis/History of law (6, Y)	B1 Law (Y)	450
VU Law	Boeken van belang/Important books (6, Y)	B1 Law (Y)	450
VU Law	Historische criminologie/Historical criminology (6, Y)	B2 Criminology (Y)	150
VU Law	Diplomacy and law in history (6, N)	Honours, Law & Criminology, start Sept, 2015 (Y)	10
VU Law	Historical introduction to European legal science (6, N)	M Law and exchange students (N)	10
VU Philosophy	Modern Philosophy I (6, N)	BA 1 (Y)	
VU Philosophy	Descartes on "I think" (6, N)	BA3, MA (Y)	
VU Philosophy	Spinoza seminar (N)	MA	7
VU Philosophy	Summer Course: Walter Benjamin (N)	MA (N)	
VU Philosophy	Introduction to the History of philosophy in Islam (6, N)	Philosophy (Y)	
VU Philosophy	Introduction to the history of Philosophy in the Ancient and the Patristic world (6, N)	Philosophy (Y)	



VU Philosophy	The Good. The Classical Tradition of a Philosophical Concept from Plato to Nietzsche (6, N)	MA Philosophy (Y)	28
VU Philosophy	The True as a Transcendental. Medieval Theories of Truth (6, N)	MA Philosophy (N)	10
VU Philosophy	Middeleeuwse wijsbegeerte (6, N)	BA Philosophy (Y)	35
VU Philosophy	History of philosophy of science (6, N)	BA3/M Philosophy (N)	10
VU Philosophy	History of philosophy (6, N)	MA Philosophy (N)	6
VU Philosophy	History of philosophy (of science) (6, N)	MA Arts (Y)	
VU Philosophy	The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (6, N)	MA Philosophy (Y)	19
VU Psychology and Education	Pedagogische vragen in historisch perspectief / Pedagogical questions in historical perspective (6, Y)	B2 Students in Education (Y)	80
VU Psychology and Education	History and Philosophy of Psychology (6, Y)	B3 Students in Psychology (Y)	300
VU Sciences	Wetenschapsgeschiedenis/History of science (3, Y)	B2 Mathematics (Y)	40
VU Sciences	Wetenschapsgeschiedenis/History of science (3, Y)	B2 Informatics (Y)	45
VU Sciences	Wetenschapsgeschiedenis/History of science (3, Y)	B2 Physics, Chemistry, Pharmaceuticals, medical natural sciences (Y)	75
VU Sciences	Science and society in a historical perspective (6, N)	M (N)	10
VU Social Sciences	Institutes / Institutions (6, Y)	B (Y)	
VU Theology	Religietheorieën + Wetenschapsfilosofie van de Religie / Religion Theories + Philosophy of Religion Science (6, Y)	B Theology and B Religion Science (Y)	15
VU Theology	Geschiedenis van de filosofie / History of Philosophy (6, N)	B Theology and B Religion Science (Y)	60
VU Vumc School of Medical Sciences	Geschiedenis van de geneeskunde / History of medicine (3)	B, part of Course 'Leren Dokteren' (Learning to be in practice as a doctor) (Y)	350
Protestant Theological University (PThU)	Theologie als wetenschap en ambacht/Theology as science and profession (3)	B Theology (Theologie Klassiek) (Y)	30
Protestant Theological University (PThU)	Kierkegaard on Religion and Science (5)	M Theology (N)	20
Dentistry / ACTA (VU & Amsterdam University)	Geschiedenis van de Tandheelkunde / History of Dentistry (Museum Lecture)	B1 Dentistry	120
Dentistry / ACTA (VU & Amsterdam University)	Ontwikkeling van de Tandheelkunde / Development of Dentistry (Lecture in other course)	M Dentistry	80



Appendix 2

Participants of the Stevin Centre for History of Science and Humanities.

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Appendix 3

Research Text Stevin Centre for History of Science and Humanities.

Knowledge Practices and Normativity within their Historical Context

A possible research theme of the *Stevin Centre for History of Science and Humanities*

Historians have become aware that scientific knowledge is something much wider than intellectual knowledge; that skills, material objects, and traditions represent knowledge as well. And knowledge is more than scientific knowledge; it can be intellectual, rational, artisanal, intuitive, sensory, religious, ideological etc.. These forms of knowledge demarcate themselves against each other, they weaken or strengthen each other, and they gain or lose recognition and prestige. In addition it has been realised that views of what knowledge is or should be, and of the role it should play in society are different in different places and at different times and are normative in character.

On this basis the university-wide Stevin Centre for History of Science and Humanities of the VU University formulates its first tentative ideas for research, with the theme: knowledge practices and normativity within their historical context. Knowledge and knowledge practices can be studied in many different domains: from law, religion, statistics and education theory to technology or art. Knowledge practices can be found among all kinds of intellectual, social and religious groups. Questions arise about how and where knowledge is produced, how and why it is transferred between domains and/or groups, how and why it changes, and how it is used and applied: in other words, about the production, transmission, circulation, appropriation and consumption of knowledge. These processes are influenced by views of what counts as a good explanation, an explanation that produces genuine understanding; conceptions of understanding are employed in actual scientific practice and vary over time and across (sub)disciplines.

At various levels normativity plays an inextricable role in these processes. What norms does knowledge have to satisfy (in a certain context, at a certain time and place, amongst a certain group) for it to be considered valid and intelligible knowledge? Is it assumed that different forms of knowledge can exist side by side, for example scientific and religious knowledge? And when this is the case, what does this imply for the norms of what counts as valid knowledge?

This programme is suitable to be tackled by a wide group of historians of science and humanities like the one that has assembled in the new centre, as the topic does not concern a particular form of knowledge and knowledge practices. The exploration of such a theme is a fitting undertaking for universities that hold that reflection on the normative aspects of science and humanities should be one of the basic competences of every academic.

The following **examples** of research topics show that the theme can be explored in very diverse domains of knowledge. The choice of examples has been made in light of the research interests of the participants in the Stevin Centre, but it is certainly far from exhaustive.

- The transformation during the Middle Ages of academic theology into 'Frömmigkeitstheologie' (devotional theology) and the functioning of the resulting new knowledge in a community of believers like the 'Modern Devotion'.
- The translation of theological doctrine to a practical level in handbooks for confessors and in treatises on what was allowed in good conscience in the practice of business, in the scholasticism of the early modern period, when the first *differentiae* literature (comparison



between what is allowed according to moral theology and according to civil law) appeared as well.

- The reception (production, transmission, circulation, appropriation and consumption) of legal theory during the early modern period on the basis of case studies of certain legal concepts, such as, for example, the law on commercial transactions.
- The phenomenon that it took a considerable time before pedagogical knowledge was recognized academically, even though it had long ago proved its social benefits, and the transformation of this knowledge in the process.
- The relation between religious knowledge and scientific knowledge, such as the theory of evolution. Were these forms of knowledge assumed to be able to exist side by side independently, or was a synthesis deemed necessary, or perhaps a partial adaptation to each other? This relation can be studied amongst various social and religious groups, such as the educated middle class or the orthodox Calvinists, and in different periods, for example around 1900, or in the 1960s and 70s, or very recently, the period around 2010.
- Developments in the views about the mind-body relationship. In the background there are ideas about the relationship between scientific knowledge of body and mind, and religious and everyday knowledge about mind and soul.
- The role of norms in relation to scientific understanding. What norms does knowledge have to satisfy (in a certain context, at a certain time and place, amongst a certain group) for it to be considered valid and intelligible?
- The changes in the role of quantification in relation to economic and social changes. How did these processes interact with changing norms about the importance and the characteristics of objective knowledge? These processes took place during different periods, in a wide variety of sciences as well as in various sectors of society. The research can be extended to other kinds of transformation of knowledge such as standardization and the formulation of scientific laws.
- The connection between the transformation of the university during the 19th and 20th centuries and changing views of the aims of university education and the content and significance of academic knowledge?
- Different knowledge practices and normativity in matters of intellectual property, plagiarism and fraud.

Ida Stamhuis

Based on contributions by those present at the meeting of June 12, 2013: Gijsbert van den Brink (VU Theology), Niels de Bruijn (VU Law), Karel Davids (VU Arts, Economics and Business Administration), John Exalto (VU Psychology and Education), Ab Flipse (VU Arts), Koen Goudriaan (VU Arts), Jan Hallebeek (VU Law), Gert van Klinken (Protestant Theological University), Inger Leemans (VU Arts), Huib Looren de Jong (VU Psychology and Education, Philosophy), Frans van Lunteren (VU Sciences), Henk de Regt (VU Philosophy), Ida Stamhuis (VU Sciences), Hans de Waardt (VU Arts).

