THE SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY OF APPLIED RESEARCH

ABSTRACT. This paper reviews some of the threats to scientific independence in the Netherlands that have recently alerted the scientific community. The problems are not only apparent in research requested by the government or local authorities; they are also found in a variety of research fields. They are essentially related to the increasing dearth of research funding in the universities. In Europe in general, and the Netherlands in particular, there are no large, independent research foundations which exist elsewhere, so research funding generally depends on funding by government, local authorities or industry. The problem has long been underappreciated and no effective action has been taken. However, more recently and as a consequence of media reports, a number of drastic measures are being taken. This paper deals first with the nature of the threats to the integrity of scientific research, and then reviews the type of actions that have been, and could be taken.

KEY WORDS: applied research, exact sciences, research for big business, research for official authorities, social sciences, threats to integrity

1. INTRODUCTION

There was a time in the Netherlands when all important research was done by universities. These used to fund their own research, whether it was conducted in the social science or natural science faculties. Naturally, such research was rarely directly relevant to policy makers, either in government or industry. But societies change and since about the 1980s two particular developments have slowly put an end to the situation of exclusive academic research.

First, there was a growing need among governments and in parliament to have access to research information in order to build on, to support and possibly to amend policies. Second, there were similar needs for research in private business, such as the pharmaceutical industry, which expected to increase its profits in this way. Both developments, however useful they may be, imply some serious threats to the integrity of researchers and to the scientific independence of commissioned research. They may lead to research of dubious quality, to the proliferation of marketing bureaus as well as to questions about the independence of researchers and even of universities.

In this paper I first consider the arguments pleading for the existence of a government research centre, the objective of which is to conduct what is called ‘policy research’, serving to enlighten the government on policy issues and to propose possible solutions and actions. Second, I examine...
the arguments against such a centre, the central question in the paper being the issue of the scientific integrity of researchers and how to guarantee it. However, there are also other important questions, such as the intrinsic usefulness of such research and the use politicians make of it. Third, I deal with threats to the independence of researchers coming from two different sources, where a distinction should be drawn between research commissioned by political authorities and research requested by industrial concerns and private business organisations. I conclude by formulating some solutions to what is in some respects a worrying situation, because if research centres and universities do not take serious action to insure their scientific integrity they will lose their credibility, not only in the political or industrial world, but also, and even more importantly, with the general public.

1.1. A Government Research Centre

Institutionalised, policy-relevant research started in the Netherlands in the 1980s. At the start of the 1980s the Minister of Justice invited Professor Wouter Buikhuisen, who taught Criminology at the University of Groningen, to come to the Hague and accept a post as a senior civil servant, his main task being to develop a research centre that would work exclusively for the Minister and the Department of Justice. At that time the universities did not want to conduct research at the Ministry’s request: judicial policies were subjected to severe criticism and conducting research for the Ministry was considered contaminated work. Moreover, persons who would conduct what was called applied research were considered by their colleagues to be second-rate researchers. The term most used in that respect was ‘Government criminology’ as opposed to university criminology, which was supposed to be fundamental and of higher quality. This attitude should be understood in relation to the privileged situation enjoyed by the universities in the 1960s and 1970s and the circumstance that they had their own research budgets and were not pressured to seek funding from outside parties. This means that they could afford to cultivate a condescending attitude with respect to this type of research as well as with respect to researchers who conducted it. In addition, in those rare cases that universities accepted government work, they frequently did not respect the details of the research contract, in particular the requirement to finish the study on or before the stipulated date.

On the other hand, the authorities had a pressing need for policy recommendations on complex issues, based on scientific research which the universities could not or would not deliver. This need was related to the increasingly important role that public authorities played in social life in general and with respect to the police, the probation service and the Youth protection service in particular, a role which was a direct consequence of