IMPRESSED BY THE UNANIMITY OF COMPUTER SCIENTISTS

Bert Meijer, professor of Organic Chemistry at Eindhoven University of Technology, acquired a unique glimpse into how the natural sciences are organised in the Netherlands during his role as torchbearer of sector outlook Science and Technology. I/O Magazine therefore wondered how he, as an outsider, views the computer science research community. Meijer: 'It is admirable how this community has organised itself within a discipline that is developing so quickly.'

Text Reineke Maschhaupt

'The pleasant and decisive role of ICT Research Platform Nederland (IPN), and especially of Peter Apers and IPN chairman Maarten van Steen, were vital for my role as quartermaster for the sector plans within computer science. There was considerable unanimity about the strongest research areas within computer science and about the allocation of the funding which they had in view. I received a quick answer to each question, and I had the feeling that they genuinely spoke on behalf of the community. Thanks to this unanimity and the good organisation we could award computer science the highest number of positions within the boundaries set by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

At all the universities I visited, I saw that good consultation occurred within the computer science community. Everybody knew how the different specialisms were spread across the Dutch universities. The Netherlands is a small country and does not have a lot of money for extra research. It is therefore important that each university develops its own expertise within the discipline. That requires clear agreements. This is particularly important for computer science because fundamental and applied research are so closely related to each other. Therefore, within each university, these two strands need to find a synergy and on top of that each needs to develop its own expertise.

All computer scientists agree that fundamental knowledge is an absolute condition for ensuring that the digitisation of society proceeds in the correct manner. As an outsider, it is very easy to think everything computers do belongs to the computer science domain as a result of which the differences between applied and fundamental research become diluted, especially because a growing number of collaborations with companies are taking place. What made the sector plans of the computer scientists so strong was an open-minded view about the many applications of computer science without losing the focus on fundamental research.

CATCHING UP

It is interesting to observe that physics and chemistry are now suffering from the rule of the restrictive head start. These disciplines have always been well organised but more recently, they have been lagging behind. In terms of good organisation, both computer science and mathematics have caught up with them. Physics and chemistry are now looking to computer science and mathematics for inspiration and are moving swiftly with new consultative bodies on new pieces of advice. As a chemistry community, we quickly hope to link up with IPN again and to take joint actions.

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A suggestion from the chemistry community would be that computer science can best focus on everything which is directly or indirectly related to computer science and not just defend its own causes. That is what chemistry has always done: stating possible solutions for problems outside of our own field and emphasising the role of chemistry in these. In particular, demanding attention for research that concerns all disciplines would give IPN a strong position.'