

NOT A CRYSTAL-GAZER BUT A SCIENTIST

The top professor at VU University Amsterdam never stops studying. Always curious about things he doesn't understand, Peter Nijkamp is continually taking up new research topics - which often develop into flourishing fields of science. And when he has mastered them, the leading economist turns his gaze in yet another direction.



By Rianne Lindhout

Peter Nijkamp (born in 1946) would like to be a student again. Law, maybe, biology, or history. And yet, as the first university professor at VU University Amsterdam, he seems to be right at the other end of the scale. This spatial economist is at the very peak of the pyramid. He has more freedom than other professors, more research funding and no administrative or teaching obligations. In fact, this set-up does allow Peter Nijkamp to remain something of a student. One who has always worked hard because everything was so interesting, and now has a bit more free time to devote to the topics that really fascinate him. Not a bad position for someone with the wide range of interests he has. Thanks to his reputation, people keep on turning up with exciting new jobs. "You'd be astonished at the vast array of things that get presented to me every day," he says. "Fortunately, I have no trouble switching from one topic to another. I'm a real workaholic, but my interests cover a wide field of science

'I'm a real workaholic... and I couldn't be happier in my work'

and policy, and I couldn't be happier in my work." He doesn't need much sleep, is often the first to turn up in the morning and finds it difficult to tear himself away in the evening even after everyone else is long gone.

IT JUST GREW AND GREW

His office is at the end of the corridor in the department of Spatial Economics. Under his leadership, the department has grown since 1975 into a prestigious institute with a staff of eighty. New topics kept on attracting his interest: environmental economics, transport economics, urban development, migration, complexity theory (the use of models to predict the behaviour of complex systems). Most of the topics he touched just grew and grew, and attracted more and more research funding. Till the department needed a new professor to lead the research, and Peter Nijkamp moved on to a new topic. "Each time I got to that point, I would look for someone who was better in that particular field than I was. That is one of the great secrets of building up a flourishing research organization. Many people can't relinquish control. Fortunately, I have never

suffered from that problem." As a result, the management of 'his' department has been in the hands of his successors for the past ten years.

'Many people can't relinquish control. Fortunately, I have never suffered from that problem'

In his office, Peter Nijkamp works on articles for dozens of economics journals or talks to students - for example, on the VU Multicultural Event he is organizing with their assistance. But he doesn't spend all day at his desk or conference table. He travels a lot. Shortly before this interview, he was in New Zealand for a conference on migration, a topic he has been interested in for a number of years. When Geert Wilders claimed that immigrants only cost the Netherlands money, Peter Nijkamp decided to investigate the truth of this assertion. "In fact, migrants contribute a lot to the Dutch economy. Migration leads to more innovation, one of the key conditions for long-term economic growth. Of course, diversity requires effective management to combat the mutual prejudice and conflicts it brings in its wake."

A MOSAIC OF POSTAGE STAMPS

Another congress he attended recently was that of the Network on European Communications and Transport Activity Research (NECTAR), which he had helped to set up. "*Homo mobilis*, man as a traveller, was one of my interests at a given moment. I enjoyed formulating a strategy to bring various interests in this field together. My attempts were successful, and NECTAR now boasts a colourful mosaic made up of postage stamps devoted to the theme of research." Peter Nijkamp is an honorary member.

Last June he visited Portugal to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of the Algarve in Faro. The universities of Brussels, Athens and Bucharest have awarded him the same honour. Peter Nijkamp has been near the top of the league tables for publications in the field of economics for years. In 1996 he won the most prestigious academic distinction in the Netherlands, the Spinoza Prize awarded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

SHINING EXAMPLE

How did Peter Nijkamp achieve this position of eminence in the research world? He had to work hard for it. "I was born and raised under relatively unfavourable economic circumstances," he said. His career really started at his secondary school, when he got hold of a popular book on economics written by the Nobel laureate Jan Tinbergen. This inspired him to study economics in Rotterdam,

'Jan Tinbergen was a shining example to me'

where Tinbergen taught. "He was a shining example to me. He was motivated by two things: a wish to help his fellow human beings and an absolute commitment not to be guided by his emotions but to discover how the world worked by hard scientific analysis." This attitude suited Peter Nijkamp down to the ground. He had always wanted to understand how unfortunate economic conditions came about. "In many cases, they are not due to ill will. No one wanted the wave of unemployment that followed the closure of the coal mines in southern Limburg or the textile industry in Twente. No one wants children in developing countries to starve to death. But these things are driven by inevitable economic laws. A scientist is not a crystal-gazer or a preacher: he has to filter information, formulate concepts and come up with explanations. That is my motivation." Initially, Peter Nijkamp followed in Tinbergen's footsteps by starting his career as a quantitative economist specializing in models, statistics and econometrics. When he switched to spatial economics, he had a whole arsenal of techniques at his disposal that he could apply to this relatively new discipline.

CROSS-FERTILIZATION

In his quest for answers to economic questions and solutions to economic problems, he was sometimes faced by the limitations of his own discipline. "Then I would talk to a sociologist, a psychologist or a lawyer." Such cross-fertilization with researchers from other disciplines led Peter Nijkamp for example to introduce the principle of meta-analysis - quantitative analysis of the results of previous investigations of a given topic, widely used in the medical world - in the field of economics.

'By listening to them, I was able to devise new concepts and help them to change their whole approach'

Nijkamp is often called on to advise such bodies as the World Bank, the European Commission, OECD, the Council of Europe and the Dutch government. In 2010, for example, the Cabinet asked him to draw up a plan to ensure the future vitality of the huge but fragmented Dutch horticultural sector. "There are tens of thousands of people working in this field," said Peter Nijkamp, "and they're all competing against one another. Dutch flowers are flown all over the world. But globalization is forcing us to devise a joint strategy, because we have potential competitors everywhere. If we don't watch out, China will oust us from our leading position." The plan Nijkamp thought up was warmly welcomed by the entire sector

- an exceptional achievement. "The first people I talked to were not the interest groups, but the growers themselves. I told them, 'I've been asked to draw up a plan, but this is not my line of business. You will have to tell me what needs to be done.' By listening to them, I was able to devise new concepts and help them to change their whole approach." Vitaal tuinbouwcluster 2040 (Vital Dutch horticulture cluster 2040) aims to unify the Dutch horticultural sector, creating a new umbrella organization headed by Loek Hermans (a Dutch politician, currently President of the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises - UEAPME). This should ensure that the growers spend less time competing with one another and look for strategic partners in China, South America and Africa.

'I don't make political pronouncements - that would make me a preacher, and we have more than enough of those in the Netherlands as it is'

No matter who Peter Nijkamp advises, he has remained firmly attached to VU University Amsterdam since 1973 - even during his period as Chairman of NWO from 2002 to 2009. "This is a good place to be a researcher, with an open academic environment. For example, the Executive Board supports my migration research. That takes courage, because this is a politically sensitive issue. My aim is to investigate the underlying mechanisms. I don't make political pronouncements - that would make me a preacher, and we have more than enough of those in the Netherlands as it is. You have to remain impartial."

MOBILE MAN

Did you too think that advances in IT led to less physical transport and were therefore good for the environment? It seems a reasonable proposition. Former US President Bill Clinton was among its advocates; the idea has had political consequences. But it is not true. IT is more than working from home and sending less mail by post. University professor and special economist Peter Nijkamp became interested in the topic. What is the real relationship between IT and mobility? "Your range of action increases: you get to know more people and can work with them more easily. But after all those E-mails and Facebook contacts, you want to meet face to face. You may save time by travelling to and from work less, but you make up for it by unscheduled mobility. That's how people are made. Meeting people is a source of inspiration. IT is no substitute."

Thanks to Nijkamp's research in this field, policy-makers now have a more balanced view of the green credentials of IT developments. For example, while more and more goods are ordered online, they still have to be delivered physically to your door...