

Speech RM, International Conference of the Working on Safety Network, De Eemhof in Flevoland, 12 september 2006

Secretary of State, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you, on behalf of the Delft University of Technology, to the Netherlands for this **3rd International Conference** of the Network called '**Working on Safety**'.

I am delighted that the University, in the person of professor Andrew Hale has been collaborating so closely with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, in the person of **Joy Oh**, to bring this conference to our country and I wish them as co-chairs of the conference every success in making your time here fruitful. We are delighted to welcome so many researchers, policy makers and practitioners for these three days of deliberations, exchange of views and results, and above all for the chance to set up or renew the strong bonds of collaboration essential for good research in a multi-disciplinary subject such as occupational safety.

Networking has become a mode word these last years, but that does not make it any the less important. A university such as Delft lives by its networks. No university can be an island, sufficient unto itself, however good the professors and researchers are who work in it.

Good science requires good contacts, the cut and thrust of debate between research groups and the pooling of resources. Traditionally university research has been seen as narrow and deep. Much great work has come out of that tradition. However, we have come to realize in more recent decades that there is another tradition of research which belongs equally at universities, namely the research which cuts across established disciplines, puts together those who have previously worked in isolation and directs its attention to the thorny problems of application in the real world.

Such insights led to the establishment of the Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management in Delft in 1998, alongside the well-established engineering and science faculties. The Safety Science Group, established already in 1982, found its natural home in this new Faculty.

For the last 25 years that group has been a place where engineers, chemists, information technologists, psychologists and medical doctors, among others, have worked together to tackle some of the interdisciplinary problems which typify the areas of safety science and risk management.

I know that some of the debates sparked off by this effervescent mix of knowledge, methods and approaches have been sharp and that, at times, there has been profound lack of comprehension between the members of those diverse disciplines. What is proof? What is good science? How can you conceptualise the failure of structures, the errors of operators, the mistakes of managers and the blunders of politicians in a way which is compatible and shows how they relate to, and cause each other.

The worlds of the physical sciences and the social sciences still differ profoundly from each other on these issues, let alone with the world of the practitioner and the

policy maker, more interested in whether things work, or whether they can be sold to the public or to industry. However, there has usually been a good outcome to these clashes and arguments, which has resulted in advances in theory and practice in the field of safe design, safety management, modelling of accidents and evaluation of prevention measures.

In the last two years, as prof. Hale has passed on the baton as head of the Safety Science Group, which he has held for over twenty years, to his successor, prof. Ben Ale, there has been a new impulse to the subject of risk in Delft. A new University Risk Centre has been formed, with participation from half a dozen of the other faculties. This virtual centre, run by prof Ale, draws in the talents of professors working in civil engineering, aerospace and other transport engineering, mechanical engineering and ergonomics, chemical engineering and mathematics, among others. It consolidates the networking the Safety Science Group had already established within the University and provides one locket for the multi-disciplinary questions coming from the rest of society. It combines the deep knowledge and expertise of our renowned technical professors, with the broad system-based and multi-disciplinary approaches of the Safety Science Group and the TPM faculty and gives us the best of both worlds. It also provides the platform for collaboration with other universities, with research establishments in the Netherlands, such as TNO, RIVM and NIBRA, and with companies, government ministries and independent bodies such as the Dutch Safety Board.

The development of the Safety Science Group and the new Risk Centre in Delft is a microcosm of the issues facing the whole field of safety and health at the level of a company, a city, a country or a continent. At all those levels we need to bring together the diverse talents of many people and disciplines to tackle the unwanted consequences which emerge from our uses and misuses of technology. We need to teach them to understand and speak each other's languages.

Your conference is a perfect venue for that. It represents the step from the national level I have just described, to the international level. So many of our safety problems are now taking on that international dimension, with fears of exploitation of migrant and immigrant labour, the departure of dangerous industry to developing countries, the concerns over trans national pollution and the development of trans national transport links needing to operate under harmonised safety regimes and rules. Above all, the process of making safety regulations and laws, and the funding of large scale research on safety issues, is moving increasingly to the European level.

The networking which you can undertake here, in the coming days, and above all the coming evenings, can prepare you better to survive and prosper in that international world.

I wish you all a successful and exciting conference. I hope to welcome many of you also on Friday afternoon in Delft, when prof Hale will give his valedictory lecture, marking this conference as the culmination of his career in Safety Science in Delft.