

## Address on the 444th anniversary of Leiden University, 8 February 2019

By Professor Carel Stolker, Rector Magnificus

In under two months' time, the UK will be leaving the European Union – much to the sorrow of the UK's universities, not to mention the universities remaining in the EU.

Brexit will have a particularly profound effect on the UK's universities: fewer students from Europe, fewer researchers and lecturers too, and the loss of access to research funds in Brussels. And although the British government has promised our British colleagues that it will make up for the lost European funding, this has not reassured them. They don't only want to continue working with universities in Ireland and on the European mainland, but also to *compete* with them. This helps them improve, they say.

Academia is about both these things: collaboration and competition. For centuries, the two have brought academia a long way. And it is on these that I am pinning my hopes because although it may sometimes seem as though the world is falling apart – Brexit is just one example – we should never underestimate universities as a vital and connecting force. In 1796, with war raging between the French Republic and the United Kingdom, biologist and president of the Royal Society, Sir Joseph Banks, wrote in his now-famous letter to his French colleague:

*'The science of two nations may be at peace, while their politics are at war.'*

Why do countries let this happen? Why do they allow their universities and academics to work together when the countries are in the midst of a blazing row? Primarily because countries need each other to achieve scientific progress. A good example of this is the space research programme of the Soviet Union and America, research that is way too big and expensive for one country, research that countries need *each other* for: physics, astronomy and an ever-increasing list of topics. More than ever, the big issues that individual countries currently face are common issues, such as climate change, migration, infectious diseases, energy, pollution and cyber security. This makes it a case of enlightened self-interest.

But all this collaboration and competition has yet another effect. Research and education are also a form of *soft power* in the often somewhat complex international relations between countries and blocks of countries. And as a country you can make use of that soft power too. *Science diplomacy* is what we call it, or nowadays *knowledge diplomacy* as well: universities that contribute to science and peace *at the same time*. So although Europe and Russia have a very strained relationship, they work well together in research and education. The same is true for America and Cuba, for example. Years after Joseph Banks, the European Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, Carlos Moedas, put it like this: 'I believe that science diplomacy can light the way where politics and diplomacy have failed.' This is another reason why states encourage their universities to work together.

And this is how research and education bring people together all around the world – through scientific conferences, journals, mails and social media. And students have become increasingly international too. Take the European Erasmus programme, which has made it much easier for students to study in another European country. For years now, European students have been meeting fellow students from countries with other cultures and languages. And the marriages born from these meetings have in turn given birth to a million 'Erasmus babies', or so it is claimed. This

growing student mobility is not just in Europe but all around the world. The expectation is that by 2025 some three to five million students will study in another country than their country of birth.

*Bridging the world through science, scholarship and marriage* could be the motto here because together all these researchers and students are spinning a web across our planet, a web of people who talk, think, write, stay up all night in their student houses and dream together. Dreams about solving the major scientific and societal issues of our time. Dreams about keeping the world together and making it that bit better. A web, above all, through which the core values of science – freedom of thought, rationality, transparency and universality – are conveyed globally, however difficult that may be with some countries.

How damaging will Brexit be in this light? As with everything Brexit related, the predictions change with the day, but I anticipate that universities on both sides of the North Sea will find new ways of working together that may just strengthen their collaboration. Almost all universities have dealings with each other, on the British and European sides. You read about examples of this every day. The universities of Maastricht and York recently formed a partnership, as have Oxford and Berlin, and Cambridge and Munich. In a few years' time British and EU universities might just offer joint degree and research programmes and have joint institutes. Or British campuses on mainland Europe, where they will work closely with EU universities.

In short, Brexit as a catalyst. When he took office, French President Macron even suggested setting up a network of European universities. This network would help form a new generation of European citizens and would make higher education throughout Europe more competitive.

'EU universities'? Even if you have your doubts about this idea, new energy will still be generated. Witness what is happening along a border that has seen some of the heaviest fighting in Europe: EUCOR, the association of the universities of Basel, Freiburg, Haute-Alsace, Karlsruhe and Strasbourg and the joint research and educational programmes that they are developing. They present themselves as 'five universities, three countries, one campus'. Where millions of young men once lost their lives, young people are now studying together. One thing we can be sure of is that the vital and connecting force of research and education and the dreams of young people will continue to surprise and inspire us. Even after Brexit.