



Universiteit
Leiden

PROFESSOR CAREL STOLKER

Closing speech of the 442nd Dies Natalis



LEIDEN ASIA YEAR

Closing speech given by

PROFESSOR CAREL STOLKER

Rector Magnificus

during the 442nd Dies Natalis
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We have already had two lectures this afternoon, and I imagine you are not keen to hear a third. I will therefore not do that, and will just speak a few words.

This is the fourth time I have stood here as your Rector, after taking over the chain of office from Paul van der Heijden in 2013. And each time, I have seen it as my task to emphasise the tremendous importance of universities. It seems to me that this importance is only increasing.

I told you once before about Clark Kerr, the former president of Berkeley, who remarked that of the 85 institutions that existed in Europe around 1520 and *still* exist today, in a recognisable form, more than... 70 are *universities*.

The other institutions include the parliaments of England and Iceland, a couple of Swiss cantons, and the Dutch water authorities. The question is naturally what makes universities so enduring? Three things, says Kerr. First, their physical roots: they are nearly all still housed in the buildings where they began; think of Oxford, or Heidelberg – and Leiden, of course. They are also mostly managed by the academics themselves. But the most important reason is: they have remained true to their task – teaching, research and service to society.

Service to society. 500 years of serving society. That is an incredibly inspiring thought.

And at the same time, an anger is permeating our country, as it is permeating Europe, and indeed the whole world. An anger against just about everything, and therefore also against our universities with their teaching and research.

That anger can take on vicious forms. ‘Corrupt science’ was the headline of a recent editorial in the newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*: science is ‘defective’, ‘biased’, ‘influenced by stakeholders’; it is tainted by ‘faking’ and ‘plagiarism’, and the funding of that research is ‘unsound’.

Certainly, people ask us pertinent questions: whether the balance between teaching and research has perhaps been lost; or we have become too competitive;

attach too much importance to national and international rankings of universities and of individual researchers, as if we are nothing more than our h-index; or if we have properly organised the way our research links up with society's questions. And even more importantly: whether we can still have complete confidence in science.

These are all questions, and they are all good questions, but they should *never* acquire an undermining tone. Because at the same time, things are happening at both national and global level that show how careful we should be of our universities, and how greatly we need their independent teaching and research.

Our own university aims to use its teaching and research to ensure a secure, healthy, sustainable, prosperous and just world. That aim connects us all as a university community, including the students. Many aspects of those ambitions are not only related to hard facts but are also normative, and therefore both important and vulnerable in an academic context: because what is secure?, what is just?, how should historical developments be interpreted?, how sustainable is sustainable?, how do you achieve a balance between sustainability and prosperity?, or between security and privacy? In that sense, the university's research and teaching is not only concerned with 'hard' facts, but is also intended to help politicians, legislators, the judiciary, the private sector and individuals in making well-informed normative choices. Each in their own domain.

Yet it is not only this – shall we say – intellectual, political or journalistic criticism. In many countries around the world, teaching and research are under a much more serious *physical* pressure. For instance, we see with astonishment what is happening in Turkey, a country with which we have many academic links, after the coup last summer: closing of universities, mass dismissal of around 7,000 academics, deans and rectors.

In Iran last week, we witnessed the forthcoming death sentence of the Free University of Brussels professor Ahmadreza Djalali, and this colleague represents so many others.

And in America there is the equally physical ‘ban’ announced by the American president, in contravention of international law, which also affects scholars and students; there is the systematic doubt being spread about the quality of scientific research; and there are – I must add as a lawyer – the undermining attacks by the American president on the independent administration of justice in the US, on judges who are, it must be emphasised, partly elected by the people. When we see the democratic legal system being undermined, we must raise our voices – especially at a university that cherishes the legacy of Cleveringa. Universities with their independent teaching and research are an integral part of the state governed by the rule of law.

At the University we have a strong focus on texts. Therefore in our new *Wijnhaven*, the magnificent building on Turfmarkt in The Hague, which we will officially open on Friday, we display in one of the two lecture halls a crucial text of my distant predecessor Rector Magnificus Gerardus Noodt. He spoke twice as rector, because in those days you were rector for one year.

On Monday 9 February 1699 the audience in the Great Auditorium heard him explain the legal basis of the government system of the Republic. In his speech, Noodt was one of the first to uphold the theory that the government derives its power from the people. The people do not need to accept a tyrant as their sovereign: ‘the supreme power in fact comes directly from the people.’

Even more famous is the second speech he gave as rector in 1706, on freedom of religion and tolerance, based on natural law and the law of nations. That text is displayed in one of the two large lecture halls in Wijnhaven – in large letters in Latin, as the academic language at that time, and also in translation, of course.

Both speeches spread rapidly around the Europe of those days. Now, they are seen as founding texts of the *rule of law* that we know today. This Friday, one of his speeches will be published in a Dutch translation by Elsevier.

The text we chose for the large hall is from the German Minister of Culture, Monika Grütters. Two years ago, she spoke the following words:

‘We need art and culture, audacious, inconvenient thinkers and artists. We need the utopias they design, the fantasy that drives them, their desire for a better world. They are the thorn in the flesh of society that saves our democracy from being put to sleep by our intellectual laziness and political complacency.’

They are texts that supplement each other and are very important for universities.

Gerard Noodt on the limits of the sovereign’s power, whether that is the king, the president, or the government. And Grütters on the urgent need for audacious, inconvenient thinkers. The world’s expectations of our universities are enormous. The questions we must solve are even more enormous. We can’t assume that people will automatically trust us; we have to earn that trust every day, with our teaching and research. At the same time, I appeal – again today – that we should take care of our universities, in the Netherlands and throughout the world.

A final observation. A person at the top of the University sees perhaps more clearly than anyone else how much more collaboration we can achieve than we do at present. We have deliberately chosen to organise our university into disciplines: such as physics, archaeology, history, criminology, political science, biomedical sciences, public administration, biology – thirty in total, which are often further divided into sub-disciplines and units. And all those communities are crucial; I understand that. It is the network of close colleagues, whom you see every day. I sometimes think that if you want to expose the DNA of a university, you should analyse the hundreds of Christmas get-togethers attended at the end of December by colleagues who are so close to one another. And that is excellent, and must not change.

Yet at the same time, I see – and we, as members of your Executive Board, see – the big questions that face us, for which we need much broader collaboration than is currently often shown. In research, and in teaching. Yes, even in teaching! Because

our students are also increasingly asking for precisely that breadth and for a mix of disciplines. Or simply to do something different after their bachelor's degree. What should we answer them: once you've chosen history, you have to stay with history? Once you've chosen physics, you stay with physics? Or once you've chosen public administration, you stay with public administration? Not only the big societal questions, but also our students' dreams compel us to collaborate even better.

And as we are all aware, collaboration starts with getting to know one another. Facing me here, as a sea of black, you form a complete unit; totally different from the multi-coloured picture created by our university with all those disciplines. But may I ask you, at the reception you will soon be attending, to walk up to a colleague you don't already know and start a conversation?

Anyone who does that will be given a research assistant – the deans have promised me.

I would like to thank all those who have been involved in the organisation and presentation of this afternoon.

A birthday is always an occasion for gifts. The University is therefore offering you a gift bag to acquaint you with the world of our University, which you can collect as you leave. The bag also contains the Dies lectures (which you can download as a PDF from the University website).

And with this, I really do conclude this official gathering and invite you to the reception.

Thank you very much for being here today!

