

The big questions call for collaboration

Brief reading on the occasion of the 441st Dies Natalis of Leiden University

8 February 2016

Our world seems to be facing ever bigger questions. These are the big questions that we've been looking at for some time: health, poverty, climate change, energy, pollution, inequality, and the position of women and children. But this - by now familiar - list is constantly being added to. A few years ago the global financial system narrowly managed to avoid a total meltdown; terrorists attack places that we would never have expected; war is being waged on Europe's borders; the Arab Spring had turned into a hell; and the most recent challenge - an enormous influx of refugees is shaking the foundations of the European Union. This afternoon we have seen something of this uncertainty in the 'dramatic part' of this afternoon's programme, with our Professor Petra Sijpesteijn and our dual students at the Royal Conservatoire.

And all these changes take place at such a rapid pace. Twelve months ago, when our University embarked on its anniversary year, nobody would ever have expected that today we would be facing a refugee crisis. And this is probably the most alarming idea of all: not knowing what our world will have to face, and how rapidly our world can change. Less than a month ago we had never heard of the Zika virus; today it is a global threat, and a whole continent of pregnant women are living in a state of dire anxiety.

And while all this is going on, the Dutch government is asking the country's citizens, companies, societal organisations and scientists, with almost cheerful detachment, where universities in the Netherlands should focus their scientific research.

This question generated 12,700 suggestions for the National Science Agenda.

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The Agenda itself raises a lot of questions: Why citizens? Why national in an environment that is so international? How can you contemplate 12,700 suggestions? Who is going to carry out this so vital fundamental research? What is left of that so lauded professional autonomy of scientists? Haven't we got anything more worthwhile to do?

These are typical responses, and it's quite understandable the Dutch universities **have** chosen to play their part in this Agenda. It may not be such a bad idea to involve the general public in the scientific enterprise. This kind of process can broaden the support for scientific research; it might strengthen the links between universities and the rest of society. As we all know, support for what goes on every day at our splendid universities is by no means a given.

And, who knows, maybe that *one* question is still on the shortlist: 'Can we halt global warming by painting all our roofs white,' was a question posed by one of our fellow citizens.

The results of the National Science Agenda are not so surprising. They encompass almost all the major issues that I have just mentioned. Not the refugee crisis, because that came along after the Science Agenda. The Agenda does cover the banking crisis...

And maybe we should also consider that the process itself may be more important than the outcome.

And it's a good thing that it is a two-way process. Society feeds the scientific world with questions, and the reverse is equally true; science creates order and strives to provide answers. As an example, we are enormously proud of the courageous role played by our Leo Lucassen from the Institute for History over the past year. With his expertise he was and is able to contribute facts and scientific insights to the at times over-heated public and political debate on the refugee crisis. It is impressive how he has dealt with the tensions over the past year, and is still continuing to do so.

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What are we going to do in Leiden? **More** than ever we are seeing scientists and lecturers engaged in working together across the borders of their institutes, their faculties and even their universities. This is happening not only in research, but also in teaching, and the reason they look for opportunities to collaborate is because they know that they cannot succeed alone.

There is rapidly growing collaboration in Leiden between our faculties, for example between our medical faculty and the science faculty – as we can see in the new Pharmacy programme. There are many other examples from other faculties that I could mention.

But it is not only collaboration within the University that is moving ahead rapidly. Partnerships with companies on the Leiden Science Park are transforming Leiden into a hub for drug development. These partnerships will be given an added impetus with our new science campus, the first phase of which will be opened this year.

And only today, Minister Kamp has opened the new Biotech Training Facility, a new training centre, on the Leiden Bio Science Park, bringing together teaching, research and entrepreneurship in one location.

And then we also have our partnerships in The Hague, where we have the benefit of working in a motivating and inspiring environment stimulated by the city council of The Hague. Our campus there is home to specialists in public administration, international law experts, economists and political scientists. The humanities has a strong presence in The Hague with its highly successful International Studies programme, and another key institution is our University College with its Global Challenges programme.

Campus The Hague will increasingly become the driver for collaboration with TU Delft and Erasmus.

The cooperation between the three South Holland universities is also expanding rapidly. This alliance puts us in an excellent position to be able to address all these major problems facing our world.

Medical Delta is one example of such cooperation. The highly successful joint bachelor's programme in Clinical Technology is another offshoot of this alliance, and the first treatment centre for proton therapy in the Netherlands that we are building together in Delft.

Our students, too, benefit from this alliance. Many of the minors at our three universities are open to students from all three institutions, which seems to be a great success. New minors are being developed jointly, and we have set up the Centre for Education and Learning, where we work together on innovative teaching methods and new forms of online and blended learning.

This subsidy of 6.5 million euros provides the opportunity for 90 new PhDs to gain work experience in a challenging and international working environment for a period of two years. This is something we could never have achieved as an individual university.

And another example of collaboration: public administration specialists and sociologists from Rotterdam, historians from Leiden and the ISS in The Hague are starting a master's specialisation in Governance of Migration & Diversity for all our students.

Working together

My colleague Willem te Beest says that working together is 'the most difficult way of working'. And yet it goes on all the time, at all different levels. Not because the government dictates that it should or NWO or an Executive Board; it happens where lecturers and researchers look outside and see a world seething with unanswered questions and unmet needs that they want to address. Working together is a matter of trust and friendship.

We cannot deny that we live in a highly competitive world, where universities compete with one another for the best researchers, the most motivated students and the always scarce research funding. In this world of ultimate competition we cannot survive if we do not pool our resources. But at the end of the day it's *not* about winning *that* race. It's about making the world a safer, healthier, more sustainable, more prosperous and fairer place to live.

And to do that, what we need is cooperation within 'a structure where there is room for chaos,' as Ida Gerhard put it so aptly: a structure, within which there is room for chaos – in other words, the university.

This brings me to the end of my reading, and to one of the pearls of the medieval university: the beadle, the bearer of the staff.

I now come to the final part of my speech and to one of the pearls of the medieval university: the beadle, the staff bearer.

May I ask our beadle to come and stand beside me?

This is the last Dies Natalis when the procession of professors will be led by Willem van Beelen. He had performed this duty 27 times - as far as I know without missing a single occasion. Willem has guided the good and great of the world - Nelson Mandela, Queen Beatrix, Ban ki-Moon, presidents and prime ministers, our present king and queen – and he had done this with the dignity and calm that are so typical of him. Not only this, he has also announced 'Hora est' thousands of times, to the relief of many a PhD candidate and examination committee. He has instructed these thousands of PhD candidates in the rituals of PhD defences in Leiden. He has assisted rectors and vice-rectors, and has rescued many a hesitant young professor from imminent disaster.

The University Library has recently compiled an inventory of all our professors since 1575, but as yet there is no such list of the beadles. I feel that that's quite an omission, because from the very earliest days of the university the Rector has had a beadle, for minor and administrative tasks, as Willem Otterspeer has written. Our first beadle was Claes Claeszn. Buyzer van Zonnevelt. He elevated his name to Heliopedius, but was also known as Claes Chitchat, most likely because he talked so much.

The oath that the beadle swears encompasses obedience to the Rector, loyalty in carrying out his duties and the obligation to report anything that might affect the 'rectitude' of the university. And not only that, he also had to 'supervise the lessons of the professors diligently and carefully' and if a professor was absent from his lectures, the beadle was required to make a note of it.

In 1604 the university senate issued a more detailed instruction. Every Sunday and on public holidays one of the beadles, because there were always two, would guide the Rector to church and back home again; twice a week he would report to the Rector to see if he was required to carry out any specific tasks for him. Beadles were not allowed to leave the city without the permission of the Rector.

At academic ceremonies, the beadle - wearing an academic gown and bearing the staff as a symbol of academic solemnity - was required to lead the procession of Rector and professors. At PhD defences the beadle had to be present in the room, and it was he who showed the visitors to their places. He saw that the professors received a copy of the propositions in good time., and made sure that a bible, the *corpus iuris* or whatever other book was needed was available in the room.

Very little has changed in the wondrous halls of tradition and innovation that universities have been for so long.

Beadles were certainly busy, as they themselves have said. At the start of the seventeenth century, Rector Golius had two teaching remits, which meant that he gave lectures twice a day. The good Rector therefore had to be brought to the academy twice every day. Beadle Pancras asked for a separate payment to cover these additional duties. His request was not honoured.

The beadle is the university's most visible official. There are certain agreed customs whereby if a board of a study of student association is visiting another university, they are allowed to 'pinch' particular items. And there is a definite sequence of importance for these items according to their prestige: the board's medal, the visitor's book, the beadle's staff - or even the beadle himself! That has never happened to you - nor would we let it happen!

Willem, today we are saying goodbye in a small way, but at the end of the month we will be doing that for real. Beadle, a position imbued with decorum, but above all a position that requires the holder to have concern for other people, often nervous people, old and young. They might be PhD candidates, a newly appointed professor, an honorary doctor, or the Rector. You have fulfilled all the many centuries-old tasks of the beadle brilliantly, 'loyal to your duties' as the statute of 1604 prescribes.

All universities have a beadle, but Leiden has Willem van Beelen. However, I have to take issue with you on one point where you have not kept to tradition: you don't live in Leiden as all your predecessors have done, but in Katwijk. I was looking at the Wiki page for Katwijk this morning and saw that you are not mentioned there. It does mention Esther Ouwehand, from the Party for Animals, and Dirk Kuit. We will have to do something about that - maybe the Mayor of Katwijk will be able to assist us here.

When you retire at the end of this month, you will be presented with a portrait - as tradition dictates - and that portrait will have a place in the Academy Building.

Willem, we will be saying farewell to you at the end of the month, but for now, on behalf of the whole university community, I would like to shake your hand and express our heartfelt thanks for all that you have done for our university.