

Opening words

Welcome to our new President of the Senate, Jan Anthonie Bruijn, welcome to you, Minister Ingrid van Engelshoven, welcome to the Commissioner of our Province of Zuid-Holland, Jaap Smit, to our mayors Henri Lenferink from Leiden and Paulien Krikke from The Hague – our second city – and to the municipal executives of our municipalities.

Welcome to the ambassadors and other representatives of the many befriended countries who have their embassies in The Hague. This afternoon will be in Dutch, but a simultaneous translation in English is available for those of you who are not Dutch speakers.

Welcome to our Board of Governors.

And welcome to you all: colleagues, lecturers and researchers, our staff, students and alumni. And outside this church, at the alternative ‘second opening of the academic year,’ just around the corner at Het Gerecht, our colleagues are preparing to open the academic year.

Yes, that is rather special. Today in Leiden, for the first time since 1575, we have not one but two openings of the academic year. Around the corner ‘The True Opening’ is taking place, a cry for help from a large section of the Dutch academic community who are gathering under the banner of WOinActie. They are concerned about the choices that politicians are making, and are defending the future of this wonderful university – and others – and of its students and staff. You, dear Minister, will undoubtedly say something about this shortly.

And I would now like to address those of you in the church. A particular welcome to the students and board members of all the fantastic associations that we have here in Leiden, to the first-year Augustinus and Quintus students and to the members of Young LUMC. And welcome to the students from our Leiden Excellence Scholarship programme. The headsets with the simultaneous translation are obviously for your use too.

And welcome to everyone who is watching the live webcast of this afternoon and anyone else I haven’t yet mentioned.

Today we will listen to music from the Leiden Student Orchestra and Collegium Musicum, led by their new conductor Gerrit Maas. We’re glad to see you here!

We are opening a new academic year here. And we are doing that in the year in which we turned 444. A year that we are celebrating with numerous activities for the residents of Leiden and The Hague. And these are set to continue over the coming months. Hundreds of residents of Leiden and The Hague have already joined in the celebrations. It began with our professors giving lectures to 1,600 schoolchildren, and in the summer, more than 500 people took a guided tour of our Academy Building. And from today there is an exhibition in City Hall in The Hague about 444 years of Leiden University and 20 years of Campus The Hague – I would like to invite the Minister to take a look, given that she has been so involved in the expansion of the Campus.

Welcome speech at opening of academic year 2019-2020
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2 September 2019

We expect around 6,000 first-year students, about the same number as last year. And to give some colour to these numbers, I will mention a few degree programmes: Public Administration 220 students, International Studies 500, Law 900 (including fiscal and notarial law), Medicine 300, Philosophy 125, Chinese 60, Japanese 90 and Korean 70 first-year students. Art History 90, Linguistics 80, Archaeology 110, Anthropology 150, Psychology 500, Information Science 180, Physics 90, Mathematics 85, Bio-Pharmaceutical Sciences 314 and Biomedical Sciences 68. And many more programmes that I won't mention here.

A warm welcome to all of you. Some of you are here, today, in Pieterskerk, the very place in which our university was founded on 8 February 1575.

And then I come to you, Minister.

We are pleased that you have accepted our invitation and are here today as our guest. As Minister you are *our* woman in Cabinet. Furthermore, we here at this university share a history with you: Leiden University is your alma mater, and as an alderman in The Hague you were closely involved in the successful expansion of our Campus The Hague. Our relationship can withstand the odd knock therefore – and that's a good thing.

Over the last year, government policy, which is still hard to fathom, has met with a lot of resistance from academia.

The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), NWO, the broad and young universities –all have called the government's policy hasty and insufficiently grounded in evidence. What is more, instead of leading to more collaboration, this policy threatens to put pressure on the growing collaboration between the technical, broad and young universities and our mutual appreciation for one another.

And that makes this day more charged for both of us than it would normally be. But we can take that here in Pieterskerk, with our 444-year history.

But let's set those feelings aside for now. Because this autumn you as Minister hope to publish your Strategic Agenda, in which you want to call for broad scholarship. And that is something that we in Leiden and The Hague obviously like to hear.

We're looking forward to hearing what you have to say. We are glad that you are here. I will now hand over to you.

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Closing words

1. *The world needs us*

The world needs universities more than ever. That is certainly not the first time that I, as Rector Magnificus of this university, have said this in this spot. Of course, every generation of academics will have felt that they are in the eye of the storm. But now it seems more serious than ever. Our country, our continent and the world face challenges that may even directly affect our survival. Challenges that can only be solved with the contribution of researchers from all the disciplines that together make up our Dutch universities.

‘We want to help save the world,’ some even say. And these are often our students, PhD candidates and young researchers. But equally, all those lecturers and researchers who are employed by universities – the engines of academic research and teaching. Regardless whether this means broad, young or technical universities.

2. *What has gone wrong?*

However, the Dutch universities have not managed to bring into the political spotlight how crucially important good teaching and research are to our society and the world. The national and international figures show how well our country *is doing* but not how well *we are coping*.¹ And somewhere a price is being paid for the discrepancy between the quality of what we do in the Dutch universities and the money that we are prepared to pay for this. A price that is mainly paid by the academic staff of the Dutch universities.

In addition, universities have to contend with the hardly inspirational image of spendthrift and money-hoarding institutions for whom enough is never enough, who do more or less what they want to do and who are much too preoccupied with competing with one another.

Instead of investing in good teaching and research, the dominant feeling among politicians in The Hague at present seems to be that universities could be run that bit more efficiently. And of course, it’s *always* possible to work ‘that bit more efficiently.’ But at some point there is a limit. Then you’ve hit a wall and are exploiting people.

Recently, I have often thought of a story that my father once told me: on a farm a calf was born, and the farmer’s son picked it up and carried it around the farm. He did this day after day, until his mother asked him why. He answered: ‘If I pick up the calf and carry it around the farm every day, I’ll be able to carry a whole cow around the farm in the future.’

At *some* point, he won’t be able to, of course. What I also find so apt about this story is the motivation and ambition of that young lad, which is comparable with the ambition of our lecturers and researchers. But there are limits.

¹ See the recent *OECD report* (2019): https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/benchmarking-higher-education-system-performance_24be98b1-en

We very much hope that politicians in The Hague will more readily admit that the limits have been reached and exceeded in many places. And we are mainly looking at the humanities and the social sciences, including law, economics and so many other crucial disciplines.

I believe that this relates to not only workplace stress but also a call for *recognition* and *appreciation* of the importance of the social sciences and humanities. And, I would like to add, not just as auxiliary disciplines to engineering and science and technology – something along the lines of: ‘there are also ethical and behavioural aspects to the robotification of society and we need scientists and social scientists for these,’ as I have heard that bit too often recently – but as disciplines in their own right.

It was no coincidence that the humanities took a prominent position in the opening procession of our university 444 years ago. The theologians led the procession followed by scholars of law, medicine and the humanities – it would seem there was little difference.

3. *Collaboration*

I think that we – the politicians in The Hague, with you as Minister, and the Dutch research universities and universities of applied sciences – should join forces much more often and should have more appreciation for one another. That also applies to us, the Dutch universities, therefore. Perhaps we should move towards a kind of social contract. Our country has what it takes to build on its present position among the top in the world in teaching and research. You just said such lovely things about that. And that will only be possible with intensive collaboration between politicians in The Hague, research universities and universities of applied sciences, and secondary schools. Wim van Saarloos, the President of the KNAW, called last week for a research pact according to the German example. He said:

‘Because unfortunately, there is a widely held feeling in the Netherlands that our academic system is beginning to grind to a halt, and that these are not good times for academia. The Dutch code words are generally workplace stress, proposal stress, WOinActie, Van Rijn Committee and a lack of peace and confidence... And that is despite the extra investment in research from the present Cabinet, as envisioned in the government agreement from about two years ago.’²

(And I would like to add, I’m bound by honesty to say that this was almost entirely due to D66.)

Collaboration between academic disciplines *within* the universities, *between* the Dutch universities (take the Gravitation Programme) and *with* the regions and cities. Many point quite rightly to this.

I’m pleased that we as a university, in Leiden and The Hague, have, in the last academic year, been able, by using ‘central money,’ to achieve collaboration between the faculties over the full

² Wim van Saarloos, *Ontwar de Nederlandse knoop*, Jaarrede KNAW 2019, p. 2.

breadth of our academic research. The same applies to our collaboration with Delft University of Technology and Erasmus University Rotterdam. The three of us determined a new strategy this spring, in close collaboration with the big cities in Zuid-Holland and the province. And together with the two medical centres, the LUMC and Erasmus MC, we are investing extra funds in solving medical-technological challenges, under the flag of Medical Delta – and a firm new strategy there too.

And in 2016, our LUMC Campus The Hague started as a partnership between the LUMC, the hospitals in The Hague and the Municipality of The Hague/GGD Haaglanden to create added value in care, education, medical training and patient-related research in the region of The Hague. It is also working intensively with the first-line care groups in The Hague and The Hague University of Applied Sciences.

The recent report of the Advisory Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (AWTI) does grumble about the Dutch universities being unable position themselves,³ but they should come and look at the universities sometime.

And in our teaching, you also see more and more programmes in which lecturers from very different academic backgrounds have sought each other out: between the universities of Leiden, Delft and Rotterdam, for instance, in joint programmes, but also in The Hague, with broad new programmes such as Urban Studies, Management of Sustainability and Security Studies.

4. From thinking in balance to thinking in hybrids

The challenges that we as universities face are often related to striking the right balance. The balance between research and teaching, between national and international, between competition and collaboration, the balance between the humanities, social sciences, medicine, and science and technology, between curiosity-driven research and more applied research, between digital and face-to-face learning, the balance between a focus on the city and country and a more global focus, the balance between permanent and temporary positions, the balance between broad and narrow. I have stood here more often and spoken about this balance in recent years.

But perhaps 'balance' is no longer the right word. We are increasingly starting to realise that what might at first sight appear to be opposites are not this at all upon closer inspection. Instead, we are seeing hybrids appear, smart and often innovative combinations, hybrids that are more interesting for the future than the rather digital thinking in terms of balance: a bit less of that and a bit more of that. There is much more that can be said about this, but now is not the right moment.

5. And now the students

³ *Het stelsel op scherp gezet. Naar toekomstbestendig hoger onderwijs en onderzoek*, AWTI 2019.

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Because, dear students, I am returning to you, our students, our first-year and returning students, inside and outside this church. You have chosen to study at a broad university. And there are three aspects to this: your academic development, your professional development and your personal development. Vice-Rector Hester Bijl has already said a lot in this regard.

But perhaps I might add a few words. Nowadays, we often talk about student stress and having too many choices, and last week the Social and Economic Council (SER) said that young people nowadays 'feel compelled to do everything at once.' The report was written together with the SER Youth Platform.⁴ And it's true: times were very different when I – and the Minister and many others here in the church – was a student.

What I would say to you: make sure you enjoy your studies and student life in the fantastic cities of Leiden and The Hague. Try not to feel overwhelmed! Because remember that life doesn't end when you graduate, but instead begins once again. Because then you carry on your way, as a graduate, with one or two degrees in your pocket. And the Dutch for graduate, *afgestudeerd*, is actually a really strange word: *afstuderen*, literally *finished studying*.

At 23? Of course you haven't finished studying at 23 because that's when life begins again, with new chances and new dreams.

But now luckily you're here, with your lecturers and all the other employees of this university who will make studying easier for you, and for all of you I am only too pleased to open academic year 2019-2020.

⁴ SER, *Hoge verwachtingen: Kansen en belemmeringen voor jongeren in 2019*, Den Haag: 2019.