

444 years of teaching: where Leiden can lead

Your Excellency, ladies and gentlemen,

It's 31 years since I attended my first lectures. I was looking forward to studying and student life, but wasn't sure whether I had chosen the right programme. Applied mathematics because I enjoy solving difficult problems and like science subjects (the humanities too by the way) AND because with mathematics it's relatively easy to switch to another science programme if it proves not to be the right programme after all. I had done what our Prime Minister recently advised young people at Lowlands to do: do something you enjoy! Not such bad advice because research has shown that motivation is an important predictor of student success. Together with talent and determination. Not that I had to switch anyway.

Leiden University tries to find a good match between students and degree programmes. Alongside our regular activities for prospective students, we have been experimenting for the last few years with compulsory participation in an activity, generally online, for a growing number of degree programmes. Compulsory matching. We are seeing positive results, such as increased motivation and more of a connection to the degree programme. Leiden also wants to be accessible to students who want to switch programmes. Of the larger universities, we have the most students who have switched programmes. Students who combine several programmes have also discovered that they are welcome here. As the government only funds a limited number of study years per student, this does mean that we are providing a service for which we don't receive compensation. I am pleased to hear that, following the advice of the Van Rijn Committee, this will be compensated after all – although I think it is a shame that this only appears to be in part. This ambition has meant that we are working together more with the universities of applied sciences in our region.

When I did my degree, universities were not equally accessible to all intelligent, talented young people. For students whose parents hadn't been to university, it was a particularly big step. Many dropped out before completing their degree. And – as the Minister already said – first-generation students are still more likely to quit their programme or switch to another one than other students are. But young people from a different religious or cultural background or with a different sexual orientation also have more difficulty feeling at home at university. We have developed a coaching and support programme for these students in recent years. One example of this is our 'Start your Future' programme for first-generation students. We are now starting to see the effects of this policy, but we're not there yet.

Dear students, we are pleased that so many of you have once again chosen our university, and we will do all we can to prepare you for the future. To begin with, by providing good education that focuses on robust knowledge of the subject at hand. But you can also develop other skills alongside the necessary academic ones. The digital humanities, for instance. Or broad skills in online modules and workshops. We are working to improve the accessibility of our wide range of options and can help you find your way here. We are also working more with our alumni and organisations outside the University. All this cooperation means that we can offer you, our students, unique opportunities to further develop in your own specific field of interest. We continue to follow our alumni. Sometimes with surprising results. We now know that 60% of our Russian Studies alumni end up in business.

We provide a wealth of opportunities within and alongside your studies. And then there are the amazing opportunities for personal development outside the University (social, sport or cultural associations). This, dear students, means making choices. I would advise you not to feel overwhelmed by the sheer range of options or by all the fabulous things that you see others doing (on social media, for instance). The main thing is to follow your own path. That might just be the most important skill. Do it pro-actively! Think about what motivates you, where you want to go and what you will need to develop to get there. And don't be afraid to make mistakes: see them as learning opportunities. Start (if you hadn't done already) your future today; think about what you'd like to do this year. Think ahead. Use the options such as the minor during your bachelor's programme to broaden or deepen your interests. And our career services.

Our minister has noted that graduates of universities of applied sciences and research universities are most employable – although she can also see that there are severe shortages. There are staff shortages in not just science and technology but also health care and secondary education. We wonder which skills and knowledge will be needed in society in 10 or 20 years' time.

An article published in the NRC Handelsblad newspaper earlier this year had the threatening headline: 'In ten years' time half of the Dutch population will no longer be fit to work.'¹ The article was in response to a report about the changing employment market.² The message was: existing jobs are changing or disappearing, and new ones are taking their place. And that is happening at a rapid rate. This means that more must be invested in the flexibility of workers and businesses. That is clear. But what does this fast-changing, unpredictable employment market mean for *our* teaching, the teaching at Leiden University?

We can't know exactly which kinds of knowledge and skills will be needed in the future. What we do know, however, is that people with new skills will be needed. And it could well be that new combinations of disciplines will be needed. This requires flexibility from us and the system and room for breadth and modern skills. Topics that, as I already said, we are addressing. However, there will always be a need for people who are also good in traditional, academic skills such as critical and independent thinking, solving complex problems, constructive collaboration and creativity. People who have learnt how to develop themselves. People with academic training therefore, such as the training that we in Leiden offer our students, and have been offering for 444 years already.

For academic training it is essential that teaching and research are integrated. All students here in Leiden or The Hague gain experience of scientific research, led by our researchers. A small number of graduates begin a career in academia. A larger number don't end up in exactly the field for which they were trained, but do benefit from their academic training. This enables them to function at a high level in all sorts of roles in society. I think that this will apply to many of you.

¹ <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2019/02/18/over-tien-jaar-is-half-nederland-niet-meer-geschied-voor-zijn-werk-a3654476>

² <https://denkwerk.online/themas/arbeid-in-transitie/>

It is often thought that more science and technology graduates will be needed in the future than graduates in other disciplines. And it's true that the challenges that lie ahead do have a substantial technical element to them: climate problems, the ongoing energy transition, far-reaching globalisation and digitisation. But if you want to tackle societal challenges you need more than good technical solutions alone. You need to get people's buy-in for new developments, think about how to involve them and convince them of a different approach. We will have to explore the ethical aspects of digital developments and new medical technology. And ensure that the twilight years of the elderly in our ageing society are a pleasant time. The social sciences, the medical sciences and the humanities will all make an essential contribution here. In their research and teaching, our academics (the humanities, social sciences and science and technology) work together to address societal themes. At our Leiden University College in The Hague, we offer a very challenging and innovative Liberal Arts & Sciences bachelor's programme that focuses on global challenges.³ We also offer a number of multidisciplinary master's programmes that focus on problems in society. Examples of this are Governance of Sustainability and Governance of Migration and Diversity. We offer the latter together with Erasmus University Rotterdam and Delft University of Technology. This programme integrates knowledge from sociology, public administration, development studies and urban studies.

Numerous studies have shown that there is nothing that contributes as much to human wellbeing in the long term as knowledge. By training people who are prepared for an uncertain future, we help create a better society. We do this with a lot of effort and enthusiasm, and will also do so in this new academic year.

That is why I pleased to see so many students here today starting their degree programme, proud of the current position of our 444-year-young university in research and teaching. And I am pleased to be able to give us a pat on the back for our strong higher education in the Netherlands. But isn't it time to set the bar higher?

We currently have a large surplus on our budget, and interest levels are at a historical low. Money is available. We should invest that money: in our future. We are considering a future fund. For projects that will be of benefit to our future. Isn't structural spending on education the best contribution to the future? Higher education has benefits for both the individual and society. Economic benefits because it reduces unemployment and strengthens the economy. Social benefits too, however: research by the OECD has shown that more people do voluntary work and that people feel happier. Economic growth and robust societal challenges require more university graduates, not fewer, in both science and technology and in other disciplines. Investment in education, knowledge and innovation. And in clever international students who stay on here after they graduate to make up for the shrinking upcoming generation.

The Minister concludes quite rightly that Dutch investment in higher education is considerable and that participation in higher education has increased drastically in recent decades. The percentage of 25 to 30-year-olds who are graduates has increased to above average. Not an inconsiderable achievement. But the Netherlands does not rank among the absolute top in the world. We are missing a trick, particularly with regard to mature students, accessibility to students whose parents did not study and preventing students from dropping out. I think it would be a good, joint ambition to be part of the absolute top in the world!

³ <https://studiegids.universiteitleiden.nl/en/studies/7021/liberal-arts-and-sciences-global-challenges#tab-1>

*Opening of academic year 2019-2020
By Professor Hester Bijl, Vice-Rector Magnificus
2 September 2019*

Today, over 6,000 first-year students are starting their degree at our university. And over 24,000 students will continue with their studies, bachelor's or master's. Around 4,000 are first-year master's students. Dear students, most of you are, or were, 18 at the start of your degree programme. You'll be 22 or 23 when you graduate. If we assume that you will work a further 45 years after that, and retire when you're around 70, we are somewhere in the year 2070. What will the world be like then? I would love to know, but don't of course. What I do know is that you first-years are starting your degree today and those returning after the holiday who are picking up where you left off will help give shape to this future. By what you did for your degree, how you develop during your studies, and of course in the time after. We provide plenty of opportunities here: to acquire knowledge, learn new things, experiment and find your bearings. At the start in particular, you will have a lot of your plate. Start studying straight away. And take the time to find your way through all the options. You don't have to do everything straight away. And you can choose not to do some things at all. It's about your own development and growth, development and growth that fits you.

And finally, I would like to wish you all – our students, our lecturers and everyone who has a soft spot for Leiden University – a rewarding, inspiring and successful year.