

The World Forum for the Culture of Peace, closing ceremony

Peace Palace, The Hague

13 June 2019

'Brief remarks' by Professor Carel Stolker, Rector Magnificus of Leiden University

Ladies and gentlemen,

The beating heart of my university, Leiden University, is the Academy Building. Hallowed ground. It is in the centre of the city of Leiden. It is in this building that our key academic ceremonies are held. One of the most striking things about this building is a large stained-glass memorial window. This window was made after the second world war to commemorate all those who put up resistance to the German occupiers between 1940 and 1945. Among them were numerous Leiden students and lecturers. Ben Telders, professor of international law, was one of them. He is depicted in the middle of the window, in his Leiden cap and gown.¹ He gestures with his right hand and holds a sheet of paper with notes scribbled on it in his left as he speaks to a group of students.

This memorial window, ladies and gentlemen, refers to the two fundamental aspects of peace education: the importance of remembrance and education. Remembrance is imperative because it forces us again and again to reflect on the immense human suffering caused by war. My country, the Netherlands, has been living in peace for almost three-quarters of a century. That may seem a long time, particularly for those of you who come from regions in which war has raged more recently or is still raging now. But although our last war was almost 75 years ago, some people still live with its consequences, many even as second-generation victims. Here in the Netherlands we remember our dead on 4 May every year, and celebrate our liberation on 5 May. Remembrance is essential. It helps us to stay motivated and to do our utmost to prevent war.

However, motivation alone is not enough. This is about more than the desire to prevent war; it is about learning *how* to prevent war. And that brings me to this crucial question: what can our universities, all around the world, teach our students about this? What knowledge do we instil in our students? The obvious answer is knowledge and understanding of the various disciplines that are relevant to the culture of peace, which means subjects such as international

¹ photo (at bottom of page)

<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/nieuws/2015/04/meer-onderzoek-nodig-naar-slachtoffers-wo-ii-universiteit-leiden>

relations and international law. This is not all, however: we also need to teach our students subjects in the social sciences and humanities, such as languages and cultures all around the world and their history. Without this knowledge, international relations are nothing.

Academic skills such analytical thinking, argumentation, reasoning and interpretation also contribute to a culture of peace. But the most important academic skill of all is delayed judgment. This is such an integral part of the DNA of an academic that it is more an attitude than a skill. Reserving judgment, not jumping to conclusions. A university should be a place where you take a moment to think before you speak, before you judge. A place where you consider the other person's opinions, motivations and convictions. Even – or rather particularly – if these ideas differ from yours.

The motto of Leiden University is *praesidium libertatis*: bastion of freedom. Our university, every university, must be a place where all opinions can be freely expressed, even controversial ones. Ben Telders, the lecturer in the memorial window, fell victim to a regime that did not tolerate dissent. He died in a concentration camp.

Our world needs people who are critical, who have learnt to look with an unprejudiced eye. People who can think for themselves, who can deliberate for themselves. People who verify their sources, who want to base their opinions on fact. People who are always prepared to doubt the veracity of what may seem self-evident. Then and only then do you create strong and resilient citizens, citizens of the world who have learnt to fight one another with words rather than weapons. This is what universities all around the world should teach their students.