

Speech by Rector Magnificus Carel Stolker

Transfer of rectorate to Hester Bijl

Dies Natalis Leiden University, 8 February 2021

Dear friends,

The past year has been an unprecedented experience – in the most literal sense of the word.

The comment I have heard most often this year has been: ‘Bet you never expected this in your last year, did you?’

No, I certainly didn’t. At the Dies last February, which we celebrated in a packed Pieterskerk, the kind of year that actually awaited us couldn’t have been further from my mind.

This year, just being a university has been a Herculean task’, and things are likely to stay that way for some time.

University, nota bene, that proud word derived from ‘universitas’, Latin for ‘the whole’, for the community of teachers, students and researchers.

Or, in the words of George Steiner: ‘an organism aspiring to the dynamic concept of both abstract and empirical totality.’

This community that universities have aspired to become since the Middle Ages, has hung – and sometimes still hangs – by the thinnest of threads.

But, what I also could not have imagined was the unbelievable resilience that we have shown as a university.

When I think of that resilience, my thoughts first go to you, our students.

For almost a year, you have missed out on everything that makes a university what it is.

Your resilience, your high spirits when we did see you, your staying power – are impressive. I also went to mention the student and study associations, the El Cid, the virtual open days: all of you make superhuman efforts to keep our university community up and running.

Our international students, who are spending a lot of their time completely isolated from the world they had hoped to be part of, are also in my thoughts. And then there are the Dutch students whose study abroad plans have had to be cancelled, or who have not been able to find a suitable internship. All of you have had a difficult year.

I also think of you, our staff: lecturers and researchers, young and old. You have managed to keep the University running with your teaching and research for almost a year, in complex and at times hilarious circumstances. An image that often springs to mind is that of the teacher in Twente who was giving an online lesson from her living room and who suddenly had to abandon her screen because her small son was happily wandering around the living room wielding a hammer.

Then there are the many young researchers who have had to revamp, shorten or sometimes even give up their research projects.

Also in my thoughts is everyone whose job it is to support our lecturers and researchers, and the administrators of the faculties and institutes. This crisis has brought us so much closer together. That's something that is largely down to your efforts, Martijn Ridderbos.

And I think of all of you in the LUMC where leading research on coronavirus is being conducted alongside what is at times scarcely manageable care for COVID patients. In a very special and warming gesture last spring, the whole University – arts, sciences and humanities – contributed to the crowdfunding campaign set up by our LUF to support corona research at the LUMC.

Yes, it has been an unprecedented year.

But, on a positive note, this past year has also given us a lot: even if only that we appreciate much more the value of social contact, something we often took for granted. It's something we realise now more than ever before: the last thing a fish realises is that it is swimming in water.

Sharing is multiplying

Not only has this crisis revealed unexpected resilience, it is also shown the power of working together. A common enemy has brought us closer than ever.

And this working together is something that I have seen often over the past eight years. It's something we're getting better and better at, working with one another across the boundaries of faculties and disciplines.

We have several new research programmes that do just that. One of these is Artificial Intelligence, which involves all our faculties. Another is the Museums and Collections programme, in which we connect faculties with the riches of the Leiden museums and heritage institutions.

And there is so much more.

Our Campus The Hague, where interdisciplinary teaching and research and links with the city, are flourishing as never before. This is helped by the strong focus on the DNA of the city of The Hague, the collaboration with the universities of applied sciences. And the partnership with the Royal Conservatory and the Royal Academy of Art is rock solid.

The alliance with Delft and Erasmus entered a new phase last year, and is now being replicated throughout the Netherlands. I talked about that at the Dies last year.

I also think of the developments in humanities and social and behavioural sciences, such as the natural embedding of the KITLV in our research and the institute in Jakarta, the Asian Library, the NINO, the institutes in Cairo and Istanbul, the Africa Studies Centre and NIMAR, our institute in Rabat.

Turning to the sciences: there is SRON's move to Leiden and Delft (a feat, may I just add, in which our new Rector played a role), and the growing cooperation with Naturalis, which has just joined the *Kennisstad Leiden* partnership.

I want to mention the LUF, the Leiden University Fund, and the close partnership that we have shaped, after years of a too distant relationship.

But I also think of our cooperation in the LERU, the League of European Research Universities, in particular with our sister universities in Leuven and Edinburgh.

In the Netherlands, too, we are seeing growing collaboration among universities. The College of Rectors and the presidents of the university boards, formally known as the General Presidents'

Meeting, have been for me a symbol of this collaboration. I am very happy to see all of you here today.

Obviously, we also compete with one another, because we think this makes us better, it keeps us on our toes – and obviously, we want to stay at the top – but we are also getting better at working together.

Nobody ever lost out by working together. Sharing is all too often multiplying. I read in the *liber amicorum* that was so kindly produced for me, a contribution from the CWTS, the Centre for Science and Technology Studies, where an analysis had been made of my Twitter messages over the past eight years. It showed that most of my tweets are about collaboration.

If, as Rector and President, I have reminded you of this time and again, I think it was the right thing to do.

Collaboration has helped make our university a place where the sun never sets. We study and focus on East and West, North and South.

But there is still a lot to be done. One and a half years ago, we sat here in and outside the church with two openings of the academic year talking about some important and continuing issues: the colossal pressure of work, social safety, recognition and rewards, the funding of universities in the Netherlands and the relationship with the UK and with China.

The University's work is never finished – and it never will be.

Giving and receiving support

Dear friends, I have felt in recent weeks that the pride that we as the Executive Board and the Faculty Boards have in our teachers and researchers is also reciprocated, from the whole organisation towards the management of the University, the faculties, the institutions and the support services. It has been wonderful to experience this. When I took over from Paul van der Heijden, eight years ago, I quoted Geoffrey Boulton, former Vice-Principal of Edinburgh University, who once said: 'Sometimes when you are running a university, it feels like you're trying to shift a graveyard; you get so little help from those inside.'

I am very fortunate not to have had that feeling in recent years. Instead, I have felt very supported by you.

And I know that you will also support the new Executive Board: Hester, Martijn and Annetje. Our university, as the books by Willem Otterspeer and Pieter Slaman show, is characterised by harmony and togetherness.

Nobody at Leiden University is greater than the University. When one of my predecessors, Rector Magnificus Anton Kassenaar, once parked his car under the dish of the Gorlaeus Building, the security officer rushed outside and told him in no uncertain terms: 'You can't park there. Move your car!' Kassenaar, somewhat taken aback, replied: 'Do you realise that I am the Rector Magnificus of the university?'

To which the security officer said: 'Sir, you couldn't park here even if you were a professor!'

Why we do what we do

What is important is that we continue to work together. And that we know why we do what we do. Our university mission puts it so well:

We want to help build a safer, healthier, more sustainable, more prosperous and more just world.

We want to be a trusted figurehead in scientific, societal and political debates in the national and international arena. We are a university that has always stood for freedom of spirit, thought and speech, and for freedom in our research and teaching. It is a place of refuge where any question can be asked and answered in complete freedom, in a world where this is so much needed.

We want to be a community that makes a difference for people and for the world.

I would like to close with Clark Kerr, former president of Berkeley. I have said this many times from the lectern, but I want to say it one more time. After all, as teachers, we understand the power of repetition.

Kerr made the observation that of the 80 or more institutions that were in existence in Europe in 1500 and that still exist today in some recognisable form, 70 of them are universities. The other institutions include the parliaments of England and Iceland, a few Swiss cantons and the Dutch waterboards.

This raises the question of what it is that makes universities so durable. According to Kerr, there are three things that have made 'the university' so enduring.

- They are rooted in a physical location: almost all of them are housed in the buildings where they once began. Just think of Oxford, Heidelberg or ourselves at Rapenburg, for example.
- They are largely managed by the academics themselves.
- But the most important factor is: they have remained loyal to their mission – education, research and 'service to society'. In Leiden's case, 446 years of service to society.

I have always found this mission uniquely inspiring, and it is what I have always striven to achieve.

Thank you all very much!

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Dankwoord