

## Dies Natalis 2022 – Speech by Annetje Ottow

Dear students, colleagues and guests

Today we are proud to launch the new strategic plan for our university, your Strategic Plan, entitled 'Innovating and Connecting'.

Exactly a year ago we took office as the new Executive Board, with a new Rector and President, in the middle of a lockdown, slipping and sliding in the snow. One year later we have a new strategic plan for this fantastic university, a plan that the whole community has worked on, inside and outside the University walls. It truly is a plan that belongs to us all. We are proud not only of the content, the route charted and the ambitions, but above all of the way, we created this Strategic Plan: together.

Together, in many meetings, online and offline, with young and old, students, alumni and our critical friends. What struck me was everyone's engagement and drive: how can we improve as a university, where do our strengths lie and what path should we follow in the coming years? This resulted in wonderful conversations with many perspectives, both open and critical. But always with a warm heart for our university.

It was clear in all the conversations that we cherish our prestigious broad research university, but that this should not be at the expense of the work environment and of the connections between research and teaching, and between our academic and professional staff. Or as someone put it during the consultations: *'We're a really good university, but not yet for everyone.'*

Everyone wants to share their knowledge and skills with others and to channel their efforts for our university and the world around us. This means that we need to be accommodating at times but to stand firm at others.

I would like to invite you to read the results. Today we will highlight a few of the themes.

- I. In the new strategy, we emphasise that with our strong disciplines and fantastic interdisciplinary programmes we can make more connections and push back frontiers. Scientific and societal challenges make this necessary and we in Leiden, with all we have to offer, can provide outstanding added value. Our Rector Hester Bijl will explain more about this later this afternoon.
  
- II. In our strategy we also emphasise our engagement and our connections with the world around us:
  - locally (in our two cities of Leiden and The Hague and at the Bio Science Park)
  - regionally (in the Zuid-Holland region with LDE, Medical Data and our participation in Economic Board Zuid-Holland and Innovation Quarter)
  - but also nationally and internationally.

The question is: how, within this strong ecosystem, can our university contribute to a better world? And what can we learn from the world around us? To answer these questions properly, we will seek to create more strategic connections between these networks and stakeholders and our university in the coming years.

- III. Our campuses in The Hague and Leiden are very important infrastructures in that respect. These campuses are in direct connection with our immediate surroundings: the city, citizens, businesses and social partners there.

In the centre of Leiden, for example, we are therefore strengthening our partnerships with an updated Humanities Campus and Leiden Law Park. This will enable us to make better use of our activities to increase the outreach of Leiden knowledge. The interdisciplinary Museums, Collections and Society programme is also contributing to the further development of our campus in the centre of Leiden.

But programmes such as Local Knowledge Flow and Learning with the City connect the city and University. These programmes focus on bringing together citizens and academics to resolve issues from the city and its neighbourhoods: this is citizen science through and through! In these programmes students conduct research on the basis of isexperiences within projects such as sustainable entrepreneurship, energy transition or social exclusion.

It is no coincidence that the city of Leiden is the European City of Science this year! **'The city breathes science'**, as our new Minister for Education Robbert Dijkgraaf so aptly put it at the opening on 22 January. For us, the title European City of Science is the crowning glory of the cooperation between city, research and teaching, together with all our partners in the city.

- IV. Together with the LUMC we will also intensify our teaching and research activities in Leiden and The Hague. This will make 'healthcare' an even more important theme for our university. All the disciplines come together in this theme to strengthen the collaboration in Life Sciences & Health.
- V. But it is not just important **what** exactly we are going to do, but **how** we are going to do it and how we want to behave towards one another. In all the conversations it became clear that there is a great need to think about our core values and to adjust these to modern times, and to the needs of our university community and surroundings. We chose the following four values: connecting, innovating, responsible and free.

**Connection** soon emerged as a central theme in the discussions. But the drive to keep on **innovating**, both as an organisation and as a teaching and research institution, was also mentioned frequently. **Curiosity and therefore innovation** are in our genes after all. It's no coincidence that we have chosen 'Innovating and Connecting' as the title of the strategic plan and this Dies. But two other core values also guide our actions: **freedom and responsibility**. Protecting our academic freedom is at the heart of what we do, but then with an eye and understanding for all that happens around us and with an appreciation of open debate. Freedom comes with responsibility. This is the Praesidium Libertatis of 2022.

For me, the concept of freedom took on a new dimension when I stood together with Mayor Henri Lenferink and the 3 October Association in the Van der Werfpark singing freedom songs with the people of Leiden. In the midst of all these singing people, I felt what freedom for the city *and* university of Leiden means and always has meant. This celebration stands for the connection that we as a university have with the city and local community, and the importance that we place on this connection. Here in Leiden connection and freedom go hand in hand.

- VI. We will use the four core values to continue to build on a healthy, engaged and learning community. In these digital times, we have learned to value our community more than ever. The small talk at the coffee machine turns out to be a lot more important than we thought. That walk round the Hortus with your colleague, that real meeting at a table that proves to be more than a button to start Teams. I believe that it is precisely because the strategic plan came about in this difficult Covid period that we have been able to appreciate more the small joy of being each other's colleagues, and that we have come to realise the importance of watching out for each other. We have now experienced first-hand how hard it has been (and often still is) for people, both mentally and physically, and how important it is to be there for and keep an eye on one another.

Our university has done a lot for the well-being of our students, staff and internationals, far away from home. In the future, we will continue to focus on well-being and will invest more in a healthy organisation. We cannot do this as leaders alone. We therefore call on everyone to put their shoulders to the wheel. Many of you that we have spoken to in the past year have kept an eye on others. And that is what makes this university so special: we have a warm heart for each other and for our research and teaching. Let us hold onto and cherish this feeling. Of course, there are things that aren't going so well. The workload and a safe environment are high on the agenda. These are matters that we as Executive Board and deans do not want to gloss over but are intent on tackling instead. That is what we are aiming for: a learning organisation where issues are identified and addressed in open discussions, with respect for one another.

Singing last October in the Van der Werfpark, I felt it down to my freezing toes, there on that early Monday morning: Leiden University has weathered many storms and pandemics and is ready to face the future. Our new strategic plan will point us in the right direction for the coming years.

Thank you for your attention.