Ladies and gentlemen,

How many of you have visited the jewel of our Botanic Gardens – the butterfly house? If you haven’t, I highly recommend you do! You’ll be amazed. Big, small, yellow, green, orange, blue. The colours really catch your eye. In the butterfly house you learn to observe, and you examine and admire the butterflies right down to the smallest details. And there are so many different kinds!

What does our butterfly house have to do with today’s theme of recognising and valuing? What I want to invite you to do today, is to learn to look at our colleagues, university staff, young lecturers and PhD candidates as you look at those butterflies. None of us are the same and everyone has a variety of talents. Talents that might not be obvious right away, but that flourish when you look closer or give them the proper attention.

As universities, we tend to divide everyone into categories, and then subject everyone to the same requirements. Careers follow the same pattern and are always linear. Deviating from these paths is difficult. But if we saw all these staff members as butterflies, with a wide variety of talents and qualities, at different stages of development, wouldn’t our university be much more colourful? Taking all of these differences into consideration takes a lot more time, effort and energy; it also requires guidance and attention.

In a time in which competition plays an important role, the focus is almost exclusively on the individual and on gaining a top spot. Because of the external pressure requiring universities to deliver ‘value for money’, there’s an unprecedented accountability obligation which means we have to prove ourselves time and again.

And we have to start by taking a look in the mirror. University communities are good at innovating and coming up with solutions for the world’s problems, but not so good at modernising their own organisations.

But it’s high time we did so. At a time when the problems of the world are becoming more and more complex, team performance and multidisciplinary collaboration are required.

Within our strategic themes, here in Utrecht we are showing that
multidisciplinary collaboration pays off and leads to new insights. These forms of collaboration – as well as working within the context of open science – mean that we should take a better look at teams and the role of each person within a team, rather than just looking at individual performance. There’s going to be a much greater focus on TEAMS in our HR policy, and on how we view scientific research.

A crucial aspect will be the role of leaders and managers within our university. They steer teams and are responsible for the wellbeing of their team members. Every team member is different; they each have different talents, knowledge and interests. All of them are different butterflies, with different colours. An HR policy that lumps everyone in together and judges everyone by the same standards is poorly suited to such a situation. This puts quite a burden on managers (after all, being a good leader is a job, not something you can do on the fly); in particular, it requires a great deal of time and attention. It also calls for faith in staff members’ potential, rather than looking only at proven results. Perhaps the caterpillar hasn’t yet turned into a beautiful butterfly; are we giving him or her enough opportunities to do so?

But let’s be frank: it’s also asking a lot of our staff members themselves, to perform within a team. With the disappearance of clear checklists (such as counting the number of publications) there will be less structure and less clarity. It also requires staff members to take responsibility for making the best use of the opportunities they are given.

Utrecht University wants to deliver world-class teaching and research, and to make an impact. We want to fulfil our social responsibility and solve tomorrow’s problems! That’s quite a challenge. Obviously, not everyone can be equally good, and choices will have to be made. That’s where teamwork comes in – where different talents are brought together. Our task as a university – to deliver good teaching and research – is one that we can achieve only if we work together. And in doing so, we need to recognise and value EVERYONE who contributes. As board members, we must also provide greater clarity around how everyone’s role can be recognised and valued in this brave new world of teamwork and open science.

We could look at our performance from a different perspective. Our performance in the areas of staff wellbeing, social wellbeing and the wellbeing of academia. How do we deal with workload? How can teams perform the best? Can staff
develop their talents sufficiently? Are we thinking about diversity? What about our staff members’ vitality? Is there enough time for training and professional development?

Of course, we don’t live in an ideal world, but we do need to pay closer attention to this issue and do everything we can to do more. As the Executive Board, we want to provide a framework to tackle this issue. By supporting managers in their leadership of their teams, offering talent development programmes, cherishing and fostering diversity, promoting the valuing of education, setting up vitality programmes and supporting academic leadership.

Courses and programmes are important, but of course they’re not the be-all and end-all. The aim is for us here at Utrecht to have a culture where we value each other and everyone’s talents are recognised. Where everyone feels safe and can be themselves. In the end we are all butterflies, with the most beautiful colours.

Thank you for your attention.