Lifelong learning

Ladies and gentlemen,

Exactly one year ago, I was formally appointed Rector Magnificus. Since that day, I've had the pleasure of discovering the veritable treasure chest that is Utrecht University. Despite having been under the impression that I knew the university well, I must say I was overcome by a mix of wonderment and pride during my 'introductory period', as I received tours of our buildings, equipment, facilities, plants and animals and – most importantly – met the fascinating, enthusiastic and driven people across all layers and parts of the organisation. I also became familiar with many preconceptions and – in some cases – misconceptions about Utrecht University. One of these misconceptions concerns our designation as a 'research university'. According to some, this qualification means research is our absolute priority and takes precedence over education. Let me take this opportunity to clear up this misunderstanding. The designation should mainly be viewed in an international context: we are a higher education institution whose activities are rooted in research, which also forms the basis for our education. This stands in contrast to other higher education institutions that operate on a different basis.

This cross-pollination of education and research is crucial to us. Its importance was further underlined in a Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences position paper published last December under the title Balancing act or duet? According to a quote from this paper, 'this cross-pollination helps students develop an inquisitive and critical attitude. These are crucial academic skills in all our students' future professions, both within and outside of the academic world. The aforementioned cross-pollination thus represents a crucial part of universities' contribution to society.' End of quote.

However, this cross-pollination is currently under pressure. In response, the Executive Board has prioritised efforts to safeguard it for the future. We are currently re-examining the aspect of academic career paths – and, more specifically, their initial phases – as part of the Open Science programme overseen by Frank Miedema and Anja Smit. Amongst other key questions, we are assessing whether these paths have become overly compartmentalised. The aspects of remuneration and appreciation are also being reassessed within the context of the VSNU and LERU. The aim is to ensure that career advancement is no longer purely dependent on individual research results.

I feel lucky to serve as Rector of a university that has devoted so much attention to both the quality of its education and the career paths of its employees over the past decades. My predecessor, Bert van der Zwaan, played an especially active role in appointing professors with a proven track record in education and the organisation of teaching. But let me be absolutely clear: as mentioned, the cross-pollination of education and
research is key at Utrecht University. We stand by the principle that any successful academic career at Utrecht University requires an ongoing commitment to research.

As such, the theme of this Anniversary Day is 'lifelong learning'. This theme is certainly open to interpretation, which is no coincidence. I expect some of our colleagues at the Faculty of Medicine will have thought: 'They must be referring to us!' And yes, they are certainly part of this. The main focus, however, is on two major interrelated issues: how do we prepare our students for their post-academic lives, and how do we help those already fully engaged in society expand their knowledge and skills?

Ever since the introduction of the Bachelor's-Master's structure, we have emphasised our broad Bachelor's programmes, our focus on academic development and our unique, interdisciplinary profile. The question is whether we are actually living up to this ambition in practice. Bachelor's students still make limited use of our optional course profiles. A project group headed by Arjen Vredenberg is currently working to address this situation. As part of the current debate, we are also questioning whether our education should shift its focus to personal growth and development and whether we should reassess the role of the university and – more importantly – the role of academics in broader society. We must equip them with the tools they need to capitalise on and safeguard their professional and personal autonomy in the outside world. If nothing else, this should help reduce the alarmingly high burnout rates we are seeing in some sectors. What is therefore the university's real purpose? A group of like-minded thinkers headed by Wim Kremer has been exploring this question for some time now. In addition, a group of young academics united under the name 'Ochre' will be initiating debate on this matter over the coming period. I expect to be hearing a lot more from them in future.

Whatever the outcome of this ongoing debate may be, I feel we should be aiming to prepare our students for their sixth job as well as their first. I'm quoting former Harvard president Drew Faust here. As you can imagine, I expect any reference to Harvard – which I should point out was also founded in 1636 – will lend me some extra credibility. With the half-life of knowledge continually shortening due to the speed of social and scientific developments, we must offer graduates – the professionals in the field – the tools they need to keep up. As recent Statistics Netherlands figures have shown, over half of all Dutch citizens take part in some form of work-related education. This is important to both the professionals themselves and society as a whole. Herein lies a clear public mission. Despite having been prioritised for decades in numerous coalition agreements, the notion of lifelong learning is yet to be fully embraced by our universities. This is definitely set to change in future. The issue has been a key topic of debate within the VSNU, which should lead to some important initiatives by the middle of the year.

Thankfully, we ourselves have already made important strides over the past few years. Naturally, some faculties and departments were already engaged in long-term initiatives we would now refer to as lifelong learning, or – as some now call it – lifelong development. Our School of Governance has gained especially significant experience in
this area. In 2016, Utrecht University set up a lifelong learning programme in an effort to stimulate these developments across the organisation. This can't have escaped anyone's attention. Eline den Boer and Cecile Cappetti oversaw numerous initiatives aimed at putting the necessary infrastructure in place and rolling out existing plans. We now have a clear picture of the related educational costs. In view of the developments outlined above, the Executive Board feels any teaching activities in relation to lifelong learning should be carried out as a part of our lecturers' normal duties rather than being added to existing workloads. To this end, Wieger Bakker was recently appointed Dean of Lifelong Learning. In addition to developing a richer and more varied range of programmes, he will be acting as an ambassador for the issue and advising both the overall organisation and the Executive Board.

We have seen lively debate on the issue of lifelong learning, resulting in a remarkable new initiative: the Anniversary Day Dialogue. The idea is to lend our Anniversary Day theme broader significance and effectiveness by discussing the underlying ideas with relevant internal and external stakeholders and linking them to specific actions on the day itself. The very first Anniversary Day Dialogue took place this morning. Let me take this opportunity to thank all the alumni, social partners and employees who took part in our first Anniversary Day Dialogue this morning for their valuable contributions.

Education for life, and more specifically lifelong learning, has consequences for our lecturers. We are continually striving to find the most effective teaching methods for our specific students. We are dedicated to quality, both in the Netherlands and beyond: 'Open minds, a better future'. In preparing people for the future, it is obvious that we educate and teach in English as well, that we build upon our international networks in research and education, and that we invite our most esteemed international colleagues to share their expertise and their knowledge with us. It is therefore with great pleasure...

(Introduction of Sari)