

Acceptance speech Linda Theron, 26 March 2026

Dear Rector Magnificus Hazeleger, dear All

As you know, 'Connect. Create Change' is the theme of Utrecht University's 2026 Dies Natalis celebration. Likewise, this theme has been the imperative of the resilience research that I have been privileged to lead and co-lead in South Africa over the past 20 years.

In South Africa, as in much of the world, many young people flourish despite exposure to elevated stress and adversity. Deprivation, discrimination, disrupted schooling, and climate-related distress do not tell the whole story of their lives. Alongside these significant challenges, there are young people with stubborn and hopeful agency; families, peers, teachers, and communities who care fiercely and expect much; and spaces and places that promote play, protection, and peace. It is in this caring and connection between young people and their social, cultural, and physical ecologies that resilience thrives.

This honorary doctorate, which I am deeply honoured to receive, is a tribute to the caring and connection between and across systems that epitomises the resilience of so many young people in South Africa and elsewhere. It is also a cogent reminder of the ongoing duty to advocate for policy and practices that strengthen the ecologies that create the conditions that enable resilience.

While I am blessed to receive the honorary doctorate, it belongs equally to the young South Africans who respond adaptively to stress-saturated realities and the social, cultural and physical ecologies that partner in their resilience processes. It also belongs to the many collaborators, students, and funders across Africa and beyond who partnered – and continue to partner – with me in research that champions caring, connection, and constructive change.

I am grateful to my honorary doctorate promoters, Professor Kors van der Ent from Child Health UMCU and Professor Catrin Finkenauer, scientific director of Dynamics of Youth, for their championship of my youth resilience research and their hospitality leading up to today's celebration. I am also grateful that my husband, mentor, and former research collaborator – Emeritus Professor Adam Theron – was included in this hospitality.

Last but certainly not least, thank you to Professor Hazeleger and the University of Utrecht for this great honour and for standing with those of us who believe that when we strengthen the systems around young people, resilience thrives.