



## Speech OAJ Honorary doctorates 2020

Dear colleagues and friends,  
Dear Honorary Doctors,  
Dear all,

On behalf of the Executive Board of Utrecht University a warm welcome to you all; to the happy few gathered here in our University Hall, and to the many joining us in this ceremony through a livestream from all corners of the world, but especially in France and in the United States of America.

In normal times this honorary doctorate award ceremony would have been held on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March, the date of our Dies Natalis, our birthday, in 1636. In March this year we would have sat together in the huge Domchurch with hundreds of academics, students, alumni and other guests who share a special bond with our university. And then COVID-19 reared its ugly head. The pandemic has affected life most dramatically for almost everyone worldwide. Also in the academic world we had to say goodbye – and let's hope that is temporarily – to our routines and procedures, while trying to maintain our high standards in teaching and research to the best of our ability. There was a steep learning curve for many of us. We were forced to innovate in some areas. And some of these innovations are here to stay. As has been said before, we, here at Utrecht University, can really be proud of what we have been able to accomplish in these extremely challenging, extraordinary times.

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary solutions. Since we attach great importance to awarding honorary doctorates – because they force us to think and re-think about our role models, the outstanding academics, outside Utrecht University, with whom we associate or want to associate with – we had to come up with an alternative ceremony, dignified, completely befitting this special occasion.

But before we proceed to the ceremony I would like to say a few words about the intended theme of our Dies Natalis, which was: what does it mean to be a so-called "World-Class University"? Because it is a theme of equal relevance in normal times as in corona times, and perhaps even more in corona times.

The expression 'World-Class University' in the academic world is almost always directly associated with another term, namely 'rankings'. And practically each and every ranking, especially the ones where we, UU, perform so well in, like Shanghai Jiao Tong and the QS ranking are to a very large extent based on quality indicators in the field of research. In recent years these metrics have

increasingly become a topic of debate. For instance, do these impact factors really say something about quality, and if so, is the defined quality also relevant for society, or only for the scientists? Gradually, we are saying farewell to some of these performance indicators. The new Dutch Strategy Evaluation Protocol 2021-2027, by which all research groups and institutions will be assessed in the near future is quite clear in that respect.

A more fundamental criticism of these rankings, for instance coming from the Canadian Alex Usher, is that they give a one sided, distorted view of a university. If these rankings are taken too seriously, for instance, when they become the key drivers in allocation of budgets and careers, they establish a monoculture in which many other important facets of a university, like first and foremost education are to a large extent ignored. Therefore, Utrecht University, has strongly committed itself to the implementation of an Open Science Program. At its core Open Science is about giving back to society and giving greater consideration to society and societal problems as steering elements in academic activity. Open Science is not only about open access publishing and FAIR data, as some tend to believe. It is also about public engagement and citizens science. As such, the real key element of the Open Science effort is the transformation of the system of incentives and rewards. The number of publications and the place of researchers in the rankings will no longer be the sole driver for an academic career. By stressing the relevance of teaching, public engagement, outreach and leadership in pursuing an academic career, we are showing what kind of university we want to be, what kind of community we want to be, and how we see our role for and in society. 'Rewards and incentives' have become a very important issue in corona times. When there are so many demands in teaching, so many problems in accessing research facilities, children or parents that need caring for, then it becomes extremely clear that the 'old metrics' no longer meet the tasks and needs we stand for as university. And especially when there is strong evidence that the academic work of female academics is disproportionately affected by the pandemic working conditions.

The education of new generations, preparing them for the future, was the main reason for the birth of universities in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It is still the primary task of a university. And we prepare our students the best by giving them access to the best available research, confronting them with it, and letting them participate in it. This is what truly defines a research university: outstanding teaching based upon outstanding research.

It is wonderful to see, that for some time now, our university has taken great pride in the quality of its teaching and its role in educational innovation a

national and international level. Furthermore, teaching abilities and qualities are already important, but they should and will become even more important in the way we make academic careers possible at our university.

Our teachers had an extremely difficult time since the start of the pandemic. Almost overnight they had to go online. Luckily we already had a lot of expertise and experience in the field of blended learning. Our Centre for Academic Teaching and all their associates did a wonderful job in helping the less experienced colleagues. But nevertheless, these have been stressful times and unfortunately in the near future stressful times will continue. Not only for academic staff, but also for students and the support staff, who have been working around the clock – some people cancelled their holidays to prepare us for the new academic year. Their dedication is awesome and crucial!

But we have to make sure that the work pressure stays within reasonable limits. Great responsibility rests on the leadership of our university, at all levels, to ensure that people in our community stay healthy. Reduce tasks, reduce elective courses if necessary, do whatever it takes in general to make sure that people stay well. I think the time is now for some firm decisions in that respect.

The quality of our education has come under extreme duress since the pandemic. Education is not only about gaining knowledge. 'Subjectivation', in the sense that students become more autonomous and independent in thinking and acting is also an important purpose of an academic education. And there is a third essential goal for us as well, which is 'socialisation', becoming a part of the society, culture and tradition. These goals, especially the latter ones can only be achieved by meeting each other on a regular basis, in person, on campus. Of course this is also about the community and community building. Therefore we are doing all we can, within the limits set by the authorities to facilitate encounters and engagement. And we have to have an extra keen eye for the well-being of our students in these dire circumstances.

A university is not a standalone entity. It performs its functions in strong connection with its geographical environment. In our case the city of Utrecht, the province and the broader region. They constitute our living labs, as it were. But there is mutual benefit here. Research shows that universities profit from the region, but the region profits from the universities as well, because they are tremendous accelerators for economic and social development.

So, we want to be a university with a head and a heart. A heart for the people in our community, our teachers, researchers, students and all the members of our support staff. We want to have a heart for our alumni and other

professionals by offering them a wide range of courses and other possibilities, in order to empower and prepare them for the role they want to take in society. We want to have a heart for the people in our geographical habitat, the region.

And we also want to do well in the rankings of 'World-Class Universities', but only for as far as they can tell us something about where we stand on the basis of criteria that reflect the kind of university we want to be. We will not get rid of these rankings – there is too much business around them – but we will work to compliment these rankings with criteria and performance indicators that gives a better indication of what a 'World Class University - with a head and a heart' looks like.

This is especially relevant in the field of research. We have a heart there too. The motto of our university is: 'We are there for the betterment of the world'. We really want to contribute to solutions to global challenges, like climate change and social injustice. This means that we, by definition, have to be an international university, in the sense that want to attract, and want to work together with, the best and the brightest from around the world, researchers, teachers and students alike in order to come up with the best solutions available. When we want to tackle global, societal issues we need a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, even transdisciplinary approach. Of course, it is for that reason that we, at Utrecht University, organized our research along these lines.

In that same vein we are always looking for great examples of outstanding researchers, real role models for internationally interlinked, interdisciplinary research as candidates for our honorary doctorates. This year the Board for the Conferral of Doctoral Degrees has, once again, come up with two truly great candidates.

*That is why, with great pleasure, I shall now bring into effect the decision of the Board for the Conferral of Doctoral Degrees.*