

Dies Natalis 31 januari

2020

Many thanks to our organist for today, Mrs Schuit. She will also accompany the departure of the cortege at the close of this ceremony.

On behalf of the Executive Board, President Martin Paul and Vice President Nick Bos and myself, welcome Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, in particular professor Carsten De Dreu, who's our keynote speaker today, the Governor of the Province of Limburg, Theo Bovens, our mayor of Maastricht, Annemarie Penn te Strake, our two honoured guests, professor José Maria Peiró and professor Kathryn Shaw, and professor Carel Stolker, President and Rector of Leiden University. A warm welcome as well to the members of our Supervisory Board, students, alumni and of course, members of our staff: a heartfelt welcome to this academic ceremony, in which we celebrate our university's forty-fourth birthday.

Just like every autumn, last year we once again gathered together in a small group to come up with the theme for the next Dies Natalis. In addition to a topic, which this year is 'academic leadership', a catchy punchline is also needed to put on the invite. Something like 'Just do it' from Nike—something inspiring, catchy, that would make you all want to fill up this hall on this last Friday afternoon of January.

I did my best to contribute during the brainstorm session and I came up with a great suggestion, a real statement, about which I could immediately imagine the conversations around the coffee machine. 'Have you heard about the new Dies theme? What do you think of it??' Unfortunately, it didn't get the approval of the group. I was told, 'That's really going to ruffle some feathers, Rianne.' 'We don't think this will be taken well by the academic community ...'.

Anyone who is involved in the university world for a while can witness a number of 'strange ways of doing things', to say the least, especially for those who have worked outside academia. For example, for those who want to build a career, the most important thing is to have a good H-index, at least for several academic disciplines. Excelling in research is priority number one if you want to climb the ladder. You also have to acquire a lot of grants, be good at teaching, provide inspiring leadership, sparkle in media appearances and more. The latter aspects, are however, less evaluated when determining career steps.

There is also a belief that accepting a position as dean or rector magnificus means that you are actually saying goodbye to your scientific career. Academic leadership? Someone has to do it, but not me! There is also this assumption that a university is best served by a rector magnificus from within its own ranks (whoever thought of that ...). Department chairs MUST be professors. And someone who is very good at doing research, who builds up a research group, must also lead that group as

manager. As a scientist, you are often put in charge of a team without getting a significant amount of training or guidance—if any—and sometimes without you even being happy with it.

I fear that everyone here knows someone who is in a managerial position, but is not fully capable of managing. And you can't (always) blame the person. That lies with the academic community—for example with its HR policy, which is not yet as developed within academia as it is in business. I don't say that to accuse anyone, because I know how hard many people work to keep all the balls in the air, both in our HR department and in the many departments throughout the university. However, when I say that the system could use an update - I'm not referring to our computer systems - but rather to the system that we are all a part of—everyone here today and the many colleagues and students that we work with but are not here with us. And that's good news—because we can all change that system together. Cause we are the system.

With this in mind, I invested a great deal of time and energy in the past year in the project 'Room for everyone's talent: towards a new balance in recognising and rewarding academics'. I'll admit, it's not the punchiest punchline, but you immediately understand the direction its heading. And that's not just what I want, but also what the other thirteen Dutch universities want. And not only the Association of Universities in the Netherlands, the VSNU, supports this, but the European University Association also backs it. As do the organisations

that provide research grants in the Netherlands, such as NWO and ZonMw. Last November, we presented our position paper to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, who also expressed her support for this new direction, in which I wholeheartedly believe.

That day, we had a symposium in Rotterdam with breakout sessions, one of which was about leadership in academia. A parallel was drawn with the football world, in which there is also the assumption that those who excel in their profession are automatically a good leader—as if only the mastery of one's very specific area of expertise is important. And a distinction was made between management, which is primarily about checking and accounting for processes (which we academics love....), and leadership, where inspiration and vision are crucial. And of course within the university we just expect everyone to magically possess all of these.

One of the conclusions of this session was that young academics should be encouraged a lot more and supported in their development towards becoming a leader. And also that the HR policy of universities urgently needs to be professionalised, so that it becomes easier to support and train good leaders, as well as to 'deselect' non-functioning leaders. Because non-functioning leaders, we can be very brief about this, make things difficult for the colleagues around them, and ultimately for the university as a whole. And we do this with

respect, cause you are not a loser if you are not a talented leader but excel in other domains.

At the same time, of course, our non-scientific staff, which we call support staff, also needs good leaders. A colleague from the UK, from the London School of Economics and Political Science, explained in Rotterdam how that distinction between academic and support staff is no longer made there. That makes you think, 'Why are we still doing that—especially at a young, dynamic university like ours? Shouldn't we also be able to change this, assuming all staff works for the same purpose?.'

And if you now say, 'This all sounds reasonable and great in theory, Rianne, but how are you going to implement all that in practice?'. Then on the one hand you are right, because I realise that the university's administration must set the course and above all set a good example. So we are going to support young academics who want to take on a managerial role to prepare themselves and we will assist them with the challenges they face. We will encourage our mature staff to do the same and to reflect upon their leadership style. We will ensure, with the consortium that I mentioned earlier, that academics can also build a career without excelling in research alone. We will diversify career paths, include ways to evaluate team work, and find a better balance between quantitative and qualitative measurements of assessments. But (with a capital B), on the other hand, I also want the ball to bounce back to you.

Because I, and we as the administration or we and our HR department, cannot do it alone. What we need is a culture in which quality is recognised and appreciated in every possible domain (being research, education, impact, leadership and for those in our medical hospitals patientcare). But also a culture in which the lack of quality is freely discussed and dealt with. Within the UM, our six deans, chaired by myself, will lead the necessary change process and will present our approach to our community within a few weeks time. This includes dialogue about the proposed changes in the position paper but also concrete steps. One will be for sure career paths for those who stand out in innovation of teaching in all six faculties.

I will now tell you what my proposal was for the punchline of this Dies ... 'Academic Leadership: Does it exist at all??' Okay, okay, I now also see that it's a bit of a punch in the face and it doesn't do justice to the many colleagues who actually possess it naturally or through development. But, I hope you understand that I really just wanted to shake the tree. Let's discuss it together, all of us. Let's change the system together, all of us. Because we are the system. And this system definitely deserves an update.