

# **"ALMOST FORTY!"**

Speech Opening Academic Year 2015/2016

by Prof.dr. Martin Paul, President Maastricht University

Maastricht, 31 August 2015

Dear Governor Bovens,

Dear Mayor Penn-te Strake,

Dear members of Maastricht University, students and guests,

Almost 40 – with the opening of this academic year we are entering the countdown to our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which we will celebrate on January 16<sup>th</sup> of the coming year during our *dies academicus*. Why are 40 years special? As Benjamin Franklin once said,

- “At twenty years of age, the will reigns; at thirty the wit; at forty the judgment” -

It means that it is a good time to judge our past development, but also to look to the future.

Let me start by saying that, clearly, while the birth of this university was a difficult one, the last 39 years have been very successful and even the founding fathers of the Rijksuniversiteit Limburg could not have imagined that we not only have 16.000 students and are recognized as one of the fastest rising young universities in the world, we also have developed into the most international university of the Netherlands. It should also be said that the process of building up this university has always been an uphill battle, the plans to build up new faculties and new study programs have almost always been met with skepticism, even opposition within the country, claiming that these activities were not needed or even threatening to other universities. But our university has always proven them wrong, building up innovative and unique programs that provided added quality and innovation. If we can learn anything from our own history it is that we must keep up this spirit of being different and not letting affect us by the prejudice of others.

At 40 you also become officially middle aged and the danger is to become complacent and turn into a routine; clearly a danger we have to avoid. Luckily, we do not have to worry that things will cool down too much, because in general Dutch universities get a lot of attention these days and many initiatives, advises and agendas have been launched to stimulate us and our environment, from the top sectors to the new student loan system, from the national science agenda to the performance agreements. In fact it really feels as if the Dutch universities are getting many new clothes. And that is in principle a good thing.

But how does this make us feel – and how do we respond? Let me use the following comparison to illustrate that, let’s keep with the picture of the new clothes and imagine the university is a customer who is getting a new suit and let’s personify all the well-meaning activities by a tailor who is fitting the suit:

When the suit is tried on at the tailor, the customer notices that the arms are too long.

“No problem,” says the tailor. “Just bend them at the elbow and hold them out in front of you.

See, now it's good.” “But the collar is up around my ears!”, says the customer.

“It's nothing”, says the tailor. “Just bend your back up a little.”

“But now I'm stepping on my pants!” “No problem, bend your knees a little and look in the mirror -  
- the suit fits perfectly.”

So, the customer leaves but is barely able to walk, he in fact humbles along on the street. Two people observe this.

“Oh, look,” says one, “that poor cripple!”

“Yes,” says the other one, “he barely can walk - but he has a great tailor!”

Now you are laughing – but who is really to blame here? Is it the tailor who tries to fit something that is not always SUITABLE? Not really, because he has only the best intentions. I am afraid it is more of the problem of the customer, who does not let his voice known. It is our responsibility to voice concerns, concerns when we feel that they affect the way how we function.

Therefore, the Dutch universities must make their voice known more often, be it to caution about the “rat race” to fulfill the performance agreements or to position themselves properly in the agenda making. And they must never forget that in the end, universities are people organizations where students and staff, researchers and educators must stand central. That this has been a bit out of focus may explain the unrest we have seen. As I have said earlier, we must rediscover the concept of an academic community at the core of the university and it is not only our inner community we need to relate to, but also our external community, our partners in the city, in the region and over the border. And bridges need to be built, between these, the internal and external communities. As for Maastricht University and because of our specific history we have over the last years started many activities to build these bridges with initiatives such as the Kennis-As, the Brightlands Campus initiatives, and the project student and the city. There are a number of projects initiated by the university that are already running successfully, such as MOVARE (stimulating healthy eating and sport in elementary schools) and ITEM (a center addressing legal and economic problems in our border region based on our academic expertise). But I also should mention student initiatives such as RAGweek, where money is raised for social goals. You build bridges from both sides and we are extremely grateful that the cities of our region and the province of Limburg are such formidable partners, whom I would like to thank today for the common spirit and support.

Since we believe in the importance of these activities, we will continue and expand our engagement for the community, while not forgetting our core mission, education and research. Our morning seminar gave samples of the many exciting plans that our students and staff have developed to bring community building further and Prof. Leo Penta in a short while will share his experience in community organizing to help us not only understand the complexities, but also to see if we can implement a similar strategy here in Maastricht and even increase our efforts.

Community engagement will also likely be a cornerstone of our new strategic program, which we intent to launch one year from now. I should point out that this will not be an autistic exercise as we would like to work on this with all of you, getting input and ideas from inside and outside the university to make this exercise also a bottom-up process. Please allow me though to take the privilege to kick this discussion off with some initial thoughts. What should be the cornerstones of our strategy?

1. Learning: because of the choice of our “founding fathers”, learning and education certainly should be the first point of attention and we should develop our unique combination of problem based learning and the international classroom further. Add to that “engagement”, the leading theme of EdLab, and we already have a good basis for further discussion. EdLab will be a place where student and staff will have a free space to discuss ideas and implement innovation. The big challenge is, that problem based learning as we know it, has become too much of a routine and is watered down, needs to be assessed and we should make innovative choices for the future. And who knows, maybe we find in the process even a better motto of what we do than “leading in learning”, which anyway, sounds much better if others say this about you, rather than praising yourself. In any case, the quality of education should be a leitmotiv at this university.

2. Research: following the general debate in the last months, as in education we need to give priority to focus first and foremost on the quality of research, not merely on quantity. One of the important discussions will be how we can assess this based on academic merit, attraction of funds, publications and societal impact. These discussions are currently nationwide and we expect the proposal for the National Science Agenda at the end of November 2015.

The general idea behind this major community effort is that, starting from questions proposed by researchers, interested citizens and companies, the National Science Agenda should provide the roadmap in which the Dutch scientific priorities for the next 10 years will be organized in about 10 themes and about 100 research fields. It is an interesting approach, but since there is so far no extra funding for it, it may result in a carve out from needed funds for fundamental research, and let us remember, we must not endanger fundamental and basic research which has in the past brought true innovation, often unexpected. Cambridge University, for example has no research strategy at all and my colleague there argues that brilliant researchers will guide the way wherever their curiosity will take them. For our strategic program, it will be important to address how we are positioning our university between these two poles.

3. Internationalization: according to the Times Higher Education we are the most international university of the Netherlands, and while others are trying to copy our formula, we will invest in keeping this leading position. Internationalization is more than a collection of passports of international students, it is more than just having English language programs to be fashionable, it is in our case the combination of the cultural experience in the international classroom with problem based learning and providing a learning environment to make our students (Dutch and internationals alike) competitive on the European and global workplace. Internationalization, therefore, starts at home and next to our international community also Dutch students should benefit from an international outlook. Maybe we should expand on our language policy in this context. After the great success of our free Dutch language program for international first year students – 85% are taking the course – maybe we should also offer learning a third language to our students from the Netherlands, for example French or German, to also enhance their career chances across the border.
4. This brings me immediately to the next topic, employability – providing a clear perspective for the future of our students. This is belittled by some as un-academic, but in a world in turmoil, we should make sure that our graduates can employ their knowledge and skills learned in Maastricht in a good and productive way. There has been much criticism about the so-called *rendementsdenken*, which I think is only justified if *rendement* becomes more important than quality. But as I believe that *rendement* should be the result of quality, we must address it and be supportive to help our graduates and students to find an adequate job to apply all what they have learned in Maastricht in service of society. And to be sure, employability means also that – with our partners in the province and just over the border we need to engage in creating new employment opportunities in our region, for example through the many initiatives in the Brightlands context.

5. This brings me to the next point: a regional agenda. Our commitment with our partners to develop Limburg further, within the projects of the Kennis-As and Brightlands should remain a key element of our new strategy. We have committed to these multi-year programs because we are convinced that the triple helix approach to bring together the provincial authorities, the economic sector and the knowledge institutions to work together for a better future in our region. There are also plans to introduce a so-called quarto helix approach by the province where social inequality, health and work related issues of the citizens of Limburg will be addressed and as knowledge institution we are happy to participate in the brainstorming process surrounding this idea. This is also in line with – and we have seen this this morning – our engagement for and with our immediate surroundings, the city of Maastricht. Should Maastricht become a university city? What would this mean? When I travelled recently to Göttingen which hosts one of the most respected German Universities, travelers are greeted with the sign “Göttingen, Stadt des Wissens”. Maastricht – city of knowledge would also sound interesting, focusing not on an institution, but on a mission having acquisition and application of knowledge as a central theme. I know that our new mayor is very interested in this discussion and certainly the city must play a role in it and that is why I believe that regional engagement will play an important role in our new strategy.
  
6. With all this talk about community, we must not forget our internal community, staff and students. We must maintain this university as a livable and workable place. While I strongly believe we cannot do it without any focus on outcome, be it study success, or engagement, we must focus also here on quality. Some of the problems voiced in this context, the large amount of temporary jobs, intransparent career options, educational workload, and the quality of education have already been addressed, for example by addressing a new HRM policy that is fair, diverse and transparent and we are looking forward to getting our share of the 4000 additional lecturers that have been predicted to be employed in the Netherlands by our minister due to the additional budgets freed by the *studievoorschot*. If we calculate this down to the Maastricht scale, this should result in 150 new staff positions for education. But there is also work to be done, for example to fight our common enemy, bureaucracy, which can take the fun out at all work levels. To address this issue a commission has been installed which will discuss improvements with the goal to have as little bureaucracy as needed.
  
7. We also had some discussions about valorization. Some think it is unacademic and driven by making money only. This is not the sole focus. Value is something that we must achieve on many levels: value for individuals, value for society and yes, also economic value. Given the fact that we are publicly financed it is adequate to give something back. This can be by inducing social engagement or by stimulating entrepreneurship and in this bandwidth it should be part of the curriculum and also needs to be addressed in our new strategic program.

8. Last but not least, let me address sustainability. The establishment of the student-run Green Office at Maastricht University has been a major success and the concept that universities should not only be promoting sustainability but also living it has been exported from Maastricht to other universities all over the place. As a university we have signed the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative of the Rio +20 summit two years ago. But now it's time to think this concept further and that is why we should also integrate sustainability as a key element in our new strategic program.

Of course these are just some food for thought. As I have said earlier, we would like to have the discussion on the new university strategy as broad as possible and in a way ensuring proper participation by our community. That is why we will – after preparing a first draft in our management team together with our deans – go into a broad discussion internally and with our external partners – what would be the next strategic program of this 40+ university.

Ladies and gentlemen, one thing is clear, it will be once again an interesting year, a year where we can look back at our history, where we can critically assess achievements and improvements needed, but where we also should look at our future, and who knows, maybe we will also change our slogan in this process. Leading in learning is still an aspiration, but as always it is not the motto that counts – it is the content. A few years ago I proposed jokingly “Stay okay” as an alternative motto for the university. But this motto is not only taken by another organization – we should also be a bit more ambitious for our future. Given our past we can afford that. And although we must be grateful for our many new clothes, we should make our voice heard when they are not completely fitting, because as a university we should always be able to walk straight.

So I wish you, I wish us a successful and thoughtful year, a year filled with constructive discussions and a year filled with many new ideas. In brief, I wish you certainly to stay okay, but actually a lot more than that.

Thank you.