

OAJ12MP-final speech text

The value(s) of knowledge

Martin Paul M (CVB), Opening Academic Year 2012/13

Welcome, also to our special guests.....

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me share with you some very exciting comments made by the minister of higher education. She stated explicitly that the **autonomy of universities** has **an extremely high value** both for the society and the government. She also praised the necessity and contribution of **fundamental research** for progress. Finally she expressed – also on behalf of the whole government - her **sincerest thanks** for the extraordinary contribution of universities to the knowledge society.

By now you must ask yourself if something strange happened in the Netherlands, while you were away for summer vacation. Wasn't there a certain tension in the relation between universities and the public sector? Wasn't there a sentiment to invest less in fundamental research and wasn't there a certain mistrust in the performance and dependability of the higher education sector?

Well, let me resolve the confusion: I did not cite the Dutch minister of higher education here, but her German counterpart, who has made these statements in the context of a recent anniversary of a scientific institution in Germany.

I chose to cite the remarks of a minister from a neighboring country mainly for two reasons: first to illustrate that higher education policy varies between different European countries and secondly, to express my concern that universities appear to be less embedded and less appreciated in the Netherlands than in other countries within society. Now, it would be too easy to be critical of our government for setting the wrong priorities – they have a difficult task to respond to the current crisis. We as universities must also take responsibility and come out of our comfort zone, especially in difficult times.

Because in difficult times it is even more important to communicate with our environment, both in the private and public sector, and to reiterate our value proposition as academic institutions, but also to define the values that we adhere to.

What is the value proposition of our university? Let me summarize it as follows:

- Educating and training the professionals of the future to build a sustainable and economically healthy knowledge society
- Conducting fundamental as well as applied research whose results will address societal challenges
- Being an economic motor for our region and creating added value together with our partners

Our new strategic program 2012 – 2016, named “Inspired by quality”, addresses these issues in detail – it describes our vision as well as the necessary ways and means to maintain our quality and improve as an institution which at the age of 37 is still young but has made incredible progress in this relatively short time period. It is important to maintain these dynamics by keeping the spirit of a young and innovative university.

But let’s look back on our value proposition. Education and training of professionals was my first point. Let’s examine this in some more detail.

A lot has been said about our slogan Leading in Learning which is catchy but also can lead to misunderstandings as it is to some an arrogant statement. To me this motto does not describe the status quo on which we can rest; no, it is rather an iconic reminder of the daily challenges that we must face if we wish to continue to be an innovator in the learning process and education. In this

context, we will also in the future build on our great expertise in problem-based learning and will continue to invest in its innovation .

But talking about the value of education the question in the end is what is happening to our students after graduation, how are we performing in terms of employability? Just as banks, companies and even governments must show their “shareholder value”, universities should also be transparent to show their added value openly, to our public shareholders. Our research institute ROA has been one of the leaders in assessing the success of our graduates on the labor market. In their graduate survey 2011 they show that roughly 6 and 11 years after graduation 93 to 95 % of our graduates are employed and that 85 % have a job in their field of academic study. Furthermore, 84 to 87 % work at a job at or higher than university level and at least 85 % would choose again for a study at our university. It is very reassuring that our educational programmes provide a safe future for our graduates in terms of employability and skills. And although there has been much discussions about the so-called *langstudeerders regeling*, particularly in these pre-election times, a well-functioning university provides an educational context that helps its students finish their studies in an appropriate time (while at the same time giving them sufficient space for extracurricular activities), Consequently Maastricht University has not only the highest bachelor success rate in the Netherlands but also one of the lowest percentages of the so-called *langstudeerders* in the country.

Now, let’s move to the second part of our value proposition, conducting fundamental as well as applied research whose results will address the societal challenges. A lot has happened in the Netherlands in the last year, *topsectoren*, *innovatieagendas*, preparations for new rounds of European funding such as Horizon 2020, and this against the backdrop of a situation which I would call “the Dutch paradox”. On one side of this paradox is the extremely positive reputation of Dutch research and the excellent performance indicators, with the Netherlands being, for example, in the

absolute world top in publication output per scientist, whereas on the other side the combined spending on research and development in the public and private sectors in the Netherlands is at 1.86 % of the gross national product not only lower than that of other top-performance countries but also lower than the combined average of EU members, which includes, as we painfully know, countries which much lower economic power. It appears that even in times in crisis, other countries invest in research and development, whereas the Netherlands are investing less in this sector. If this is not changing soon, it will without doubt have a negative effect on Dutch research performance. The idea behind the Dutch –Topsectors to cluster research activities around themes where the Netherlands is traditionally strong and to foster a close cooperation between industry and universities is in principle the right way, and as Maastricht University and Maastricht University Medical center we are very actively participating. On the other hand we are worried about the progress in this area. Tax breaks and redistributing funds in the classical concept of “een sigaar uit eigen doos” is possibly not enough to jump start public private collaboration. Again we should look at other countries that provide additional funds for this even in times of crisis.

How is Maastricht University performing as a research university? In the just recently published Shanghai ranking – which has a strong focus on research performance - Maastricht scores in the top 300 universities of the world, in other rankings we are ranking in the top 100 to 200. Eight to nine Dutch universities score even higher – is this disappointing? Not if you consider that basically all Dutch universities are present in the ranking which consists of the top one percent in the world, and not if you consider that we are a young university that has no broad beta faculty. A fairer comparison in this context is our top twenty position in the analysis of the 100 best young universities, which are under 50 years of age where we achieved this position largely because of our international profile (no surprise) but also because of our research performance. To use the potential of our still young university, we have decided to approach research innovation with a truly interdisciplinary approach that ignores the borders between faculties. The first progress surrounding our new research areas **learning and innovation, Europe and a globalizing world** and **quality of life** have been presented in

this morning's symposium. With the further implementation of these programmes we will be well prepared for the coming funding rounds of the European research funding programmes such as Horizon 2020.

Now to our third value proposition: Being an economic motor for the region and creating added value together with our partners. In these days, Maastricht University and the Maastricht University Medical Center are among the biggest employers in Southern Limburg – we should realize that this by itself is already a major contribution to economic stability in the region. On top of that our by now more than 16000 students contribute significantly towards the local community and economy as well and improve the demographic perspectives of Limburg. Even the populist discussion from last year questioning the taxpayers' costs for international students has been turned around by the appropriate action of **staatssecretaris Zijlstra** to ask the bureau of economic policy analysis to calculate the returns of this investment. The study indicates clearly that the costs for financing students during their university time are more than compensated by the tax payments by the more than 20 % of international graduates who stay to work here, leading to a yearly gain of roughly 740 Million Euro for the Netherlands. This amount can be increased even more, if we can retain higher numbers of international graduates and our triple helix activities in the region have just this goal.

That's why we are committed to do even more to contribute to the economic and social well-being of the region. The motto of the day "the art of networking" summarizes this approach. Positive change can be best achieved by partnering and as a network approach in the context of open innovation, a truly content-oriented collaboration of industry, local governments and the knowledge institutions. We, as a network university, must be a trustworthy and dependable partner in this endeavor. The successes of the last year that we have achieved together, the progress in campus development in Chemelot and Maastricht, the increasing of Euregional activities, for example by our joint plans with the RWTH Aachen, our common engagement with the province and the cities of

Limburg together with the relevant industrial players such as DSM in the Brainport 2020 initiative and in the Limburg Economic Development Association are remarkable. And our regional network is growing even further by our increased engagement on the Campus Venlo and in the initiative establishing a smart service valley in Heerlen. As Maastricht University we are still the research university of and for Limburg – a research university with a special attention for education and a trustworthy partner in regional development. In parallel we are improving our international networks, partnering with institutions which show common interests and a common profile, in Europe and beyond. In the end, Maastricht University is both – an internationally renowned research university, but also a world class regional university.

So, in summary, our value proposition seems reasonable and perhaps even more convincing than value propositions from some banks, companies and even – as I dare to say – some political parties. Is this a reason for optimism? Basically yes, but also a reason for concern. Concern that our message still does not come across in an increasing polarized political climate, concern that less and less investment in higher education, research and development will hamper our performance and also the value we provide. And we are concerned that we will lose the race for the best brains to countries with another investment attitude in higher education.

We therefore need to repeat and repeat that we continue to provide the most precious basis for societal stability and economic progress: knowledge as the basis for a healthy society and a healthy economy.

But I do not want to talk only about value, but also about values. Values that our graduates will take on into their future professions, as critical and constructive citizens, academically trained but empowered with the necessary skills to deal with resolving societal challenges, graduates with a tolerant, open and inquisitive mind with sensibility and sensitivity for our surroundings. At the core of this are our institutional values:

Commitment to Innovation

Trust

Societal and social commitment

and... despite all risks and threats that we face today:

Being a challenging yet pleasant place to work and to study

I am convinced that we can master the storms to come if we keep building on this, not alone but with our networking partners, which are here today in so great numbers as we saw during the network plaza this morning. So in the end, this makes me very optimistic – thanks for your support! We are looking forward to a good common future!