

Leiden, 31 August 2020

LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

Brief speech at the opening of the 2020-2021 academic year

Carel Stolker, Rector Magnificus and President of the Executive Board

That magical place that is the *university*

Welcome, students and colleagues,

This is without doubt one of the strangest periods in the history of our university.

In recent years, thinking in terms of ‘disruptive innovations’ has been popular. We have questioned whether we can learn to predict developments that will shut down a whole sector, or cause a whole business sector to disappear. The examples that come most readily to mind are generally technology related, and some of them are developments that were missed completely by companies or organisations until it was too late. The super-fast increase in the digitisation of society and the economy has turned many sectors upside down.

We in the university world have also played our part in these kinds of intellectual exercises. My former colleague Bert van der Zwaan in Utrecht even wrote a book about them: *Haalt de universiteit 2040?* (Will universities make it to 2040?) Our thoughts often centred on the relentless rise of the MOOCs, the massive open online courses. I recall colleagues talking about *shake-outs* among the universities, some of which – it was thought – were bound to disappear. And what if Google or Coursera, the American platform for digital education, were to take over the higher education market?

Come back!

But in all our disruptive thinking there was one threat that never raised its head: a pandemic. It simply never occurred to us. That may have been dumb, because corona is certainly not the first epidemic our university has grappled with. The most serious was in 1635, when the plague broke out, 60 years after Leiden University was founded. *Mare*, Leiden University’s weekly newspaper, recently published a fascinating series of articles on some of these epidemics. There were many victims, and people were fleeing the city, leaving the lecture halls increasingly empty. To avoid any further exodus, the university curators made an urgent appeal to all the professors: ‘Come back!’ The other concern was to persuade the students to return. Most of them had fled to Utrecht, which prompted that city to establish its own university – a third national competitor for Leiden at that time. So, you see, looking back we can say that every cloud has a silver lining.

Corona is, of course, not a ‘disruptive innovation’, but it **is** a disruptive *development*. – a development that in its turn is giving rise to major changes in our society. The virus, that invisible enemy, is without question causing enormous suffering, but it is also bringing us some significant innovations. Digital education has been given an impetus that was totally unexpected: we now have not just a couple of subjects online, but the *whole* university. Even the Open University, the very institution that was founded on the principle of distance learning, is now being rivalled by universities that before corona were wholly dependent on classroom teaching.

Corona is going to drastically change the world of education and the lives of students and lecturers. Indeed, Google has even come up with a plan for awarding university degrees based entirely on digital teaching: ‘Higher education has been ripe for disruption for a long time,’ says Google. That means that soon you will be able to find yourself a job as a project manager with a starting salary of 93,000 dollars, or a data analyst, or a UX designer, with a starting salary of 75,000 – and all based on a degree programme that cost next to nothing. That’s good news for anyone whose childhood ambition has always been to become a UX designer.

Meeting

But still, universities and university education are about more than that. They are about meeting one another, holding discussions in labs, debating in student rooms and at student associations, group study in the University Library and drinking coffee together. They’re about the contacts that students have with lecturers and researchers, about the curiosity national and international students have about one another and about each other’s ideas and beliefs.

In recent years our university has put a lot of effort specifically into promoting this coming together of people. A short while ago a Japanese concern did the exact opposite. It issued three orders to its staff: (i) they were no longer permitted to hang around at the coffee machines, (ii) if they had to move around the building, they had to walk at least five kilometres an hour, and (iii) they were not allowed to put their hands in their pockets. I’ve always encouraged the exact opposite: take your time when going to the coffee machine, preferably with your hands in your pockets, and hang around there as long as you want. And the reason is that that’s where things happen; that’s where creativity and serendipity – that gift of making discoveries as if by chance and gaining insights that you were not looking for – are born.

Universities as magical places, places where ideas are developed or seem to just arise spontaneously – ideas that are going to change the world. The American sociologist Robert K. Merton described the university as a *serendipitous micro-environment*. In his view, universities should be *places of organized scepticism*. In other words, universities are not only the environment where you learn to find solutions to problems, but also places where you learn to look for the problems that match the solutions.

Problem seekers

In short, universities are training grounds for ‘problem seekers’; they provide an academic training for young people to prepare them for society and the world, where they develop an academic mindset - the key focus of our University Vision on Teaching and Learning. Our programmes train our students, PhD candidates and postdocs in a world where failing and starting over are more the rule than the exception. In other words, universities are places of organised doubt.

And in this corona crisis this is precisely what makes us, universities and scholars, so exhausting for politicians and the general public – and at times for ourselves, too. We are men and women not only with insights, but also with doubts. ‘You’re supposed to be the experts, aren’t you?’ society sometimes asks, with more than a touch of despair. Just tell us what’s going on with all those aerosols, whether or not we should be wearing facemasks and what effect warm weather has on a virus. This mandate from society – to make progress, to get on with resolving all the major issues facing the world – combined with the fact that research simply takes a long time means that universities are places where people work very hard. In fact, they work much too hard. One thing our researchers, lecturers and all those – young and old – who facilitate their work know only too well is that the good things in life don’t come to you on a silver platter. Workplace stress is an issue that will be high on our agenda in the coming year.

Education with a capital ‘E’

Finally, I would like to say something specifically to our first-year students. Many of you, forced by circumstances, have not done a jot of work since March. You are eager to get back to work, and some of you have also got used to ambling over to the coffee machine, hands in pockets. But today, you are going to enter that magical place: the university. In a world that has been knocked off kilter by a virus.

There’s one thing we know for sure: crisis or no crisis, universities will always be there, no matter how rapidly the world changes. Because, even though much of what you will learn here will at some point in time become outdated, ultimately that’s not what universities are about, at least that’s not the whole story. American Burrhus Skinner put it so well:

“Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten.”

And this Education with a capital ‘E’, personal development rather than professional training, needs much more than remote teaching alone. We are therefore going to do our utmost to make sure that in the coming year you will have face-to-face as well as online teaching. We are going to make sure that you can meet in person – yes, maybe even with your hands in your pockets – because meeting face-to-face will once again be the core of academic life. This world will return, make no mistake: it will be restored through science, by constantly asking questions, by looking closely at things, by having doubts that verge on suspicion, by being together.

On behalf of our Executive Board and the Boards of our Faculties, I wish you all the very best in the new academic year. May it be a successful and enjoyable year for all of you.

The same goes for all those people who make our teaching and research possible: the janitors, the coaches who patrol the buildings, the tutors and mentors for our students, the students themselves who are having to make enormous adjustments, the study advisers (online maybe, yet still close by), the lecturers and researchers, the programme directors and subject coordinators, the communication and IT staff, the education administration offices and the many crucial people I may not have mentioned specifically.

Together we're going to make this an excellent year!

I hereby declare our 2020-2021 academic year open.

#OAJ2020