

SPEECH opening of the academic year 2022

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Universities know no boundaries

Welcome ladies and gentlemen!

You probably noticed it as you entered the church: British artist Luke Jerram's touring artwork 'Gaia, the earth in its beauty and breadth' is impossible to miss here in our beautiful Pieterskerk and it couldn't be a better match for today's theme of PEACE AND JUSTICE. A fitting symbol for this opening of the new academic year.

On behalf of the Executive Board and the deans, I would like to welcome you all to this opening of the academic year! It's a great pleasure to finally be able to welcome you all to our Pieterskerk today.

Welcome to our President of the Senate, Jan Anthonie Bruijn; welcome to you Minister Wopke Hoekstra: we'll be hearing more from you soon.

Welcome to Mayor Lenferink from Leiden, Mayor Jaensch from Oegstgeest and Mayor Visser van Katwijk and to the aldermen of Leiden, Leiderdorp, The Hague and Oegstgeest.

Welcome to the members of our Board of Governors, our colleagues, lecturers and researchers, our staff, students, alumni and emeriti.

A special welcome to our students: it's wonderful to finally see you together here in such large numbers!

Welcome to everyone who is celebrating this opening with us today, be it here in the church or watching the livestream at home.

Welcome to the ambassadors and other representatives of the many befriended countries who have their embassies in The Hague. Most of this

afternoon will be in Dutch, but a simultaneous translation in English is available for all our guests, staff and students who are not Dutch speakers.

It genuinely is a great pleasure to welcome you all, and I feel a huge sense of gratitude that so many of us are here together today. It is something I have sorely missed in the past few years. I don't know about you, but here with you in this beautiful church I can feel a great sense of unity. It's a very precious feeling. However used we may have become to online meetings and working from home – and yes, that does have its advantages – nothing beats experiencing and sharing things together. That alone is reason to feel pleased and proud.

Being together is what we do in turbulent times. Fresh in our memory is the coronavirus crisis that held us in its grip for the past few years, and then there's the climate crisis and the war in Ukraine, which as yet has no solution. It's no coincidence that we chose Peace and Justice as the theme of this opening ceremony. Crisis and conflict have entered everyone's sitting room in Europe – no one has been spared.

For me, the central question today is what we as an academic community, as universities can – or even must – do and what we really stand for in the complex challenges of these times.

[silence]

The story I want to tell today is a story about BOUNDARIES:

As manifest as BOUNDARIES are in a time of war – when they are attacked, patrolled, defended, contested and violated – boundaries in whatever form are absent in our university world. In our world we push boundaries, we remove them and we see them disappear. Researchers and students speak the same language: the language of knowledge and knowledge transfer through teaching and research. We are able to find one another across boundaries, all over the world. During the COVID pandemic, boundaries in science seemed to disappear completely; we managed to speed up processes and work together even more, albeit online.

This also applied to a great extent to Leiden University. Our researchers, lecturers and students come to Leiden and The Hague from all corners of the globe. Our researchers and students travel the world to pursue knowledge and

gain experience abroad. In the Netherlands the internationalisation of universities is often treated as something negative, but today I want to show how important internationalisation and international collaboration are for universities, for knowledge development and ultimately for society as a whole.

On our campuses in Leiden and The Hague we have researchers, lecturers and students from all parts of the world. We acquire knowledge not only by learning about cultures but also by working with other cultures and countries. International collaboration, learning from one another, connecting worlds – these are quite expressly an important part of our Strategic Plan. Students learn from students from other countries to see things from different perspectives. It is this kind of interaction that forms the basis of mutual understanding, an understanding that we desperately need in times like these. It also deepens our knowledge. Students are the leaders of the future. They must be capable of preserving this globe of ours for the future. When I look at our students sitting here before me, I truly comprehend how great our responsibility as a university is to equip you for an uncertain future.

Connecting worlds – this is something we do very literally. I myself travelled to Indonesia this summer, with the knowledge mission organised by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and accompanied by Minister Robbert Dijkgraaf. These proved to be a few intensive and inspiring days of knowledge exchange between Dutch and Indonesian knowledge institutions and organisations. In his speech at Universitas Indonesia, Minister Dijkgraaf emphasised how research and teaching are a crucial part of foreign relations and consequently of foreign policy. International collaboration in research and teaching, Dijkgraaf said, is now more urgent than ever. Only by working together can we respond to global challenges and only through international knowledge collaboration – just as during COVID – can we find the solutions we urgently need.

That makes our role so relevant. Today's theme of Peace and Justice is inextricably linked to these global challenges. Climate problems will only increase the number of conflicts in the world. Drought, extreme heat and flooding will disrupt the whole world and refugees will seek a place of safety.

This is a process that started a long time ago. Climate change has often been the cause of major conflicts in the world, something I believe we here in Europe are not sufficiently aware of. In his book *De klimaat Generaal* Tom Middendorp (former General of the Royal Netherlands Army) describes how

WATER – usually the lack of it, but flooding too – leads to conflicts in the world. Defence and warfare cannot therefore be considered in isolation but have to be tackled and resolved in a holistic approach that examines all different aspects of conflict. Middendorp notes that there is a strong link between defence and the environment.

This brings me to the multidisciplinary approach we take at our university. The study of and collaboration between different disciplines at this fantastic, broad university helps us address complex global challenges, particularly on themes such as: climate, biodiversity, water, politics, international relations, law, governance, psychology, migration and human rights. You need multidisciplinary knowledge to see and study problems and their causes in their context. Regardless of whether this be history, law, psychology, political science, languages and cultures or the natural sciences. This is our strength in Leiden and The Hague. And with our Interdisciplinary Programmes we can also offer important knowledge on the topic of peace and justice, war, defence and climate change. We furnish students with this knowledge too. Our students are hugely engaged and also feel it is their responsibility to make a contribution. Let's make use of this generation's strengths!

But we do much more than that, and this comes from a deep sense of responsibility. We aim to ensure that the knowledge garnered within academia is channelled to where it can lead to breakthroughs. We do this in various ways. We join forces in many different fields on our campuses. We conduct research into areas such as EU foreign and security policy and the role of the UN, the EU and NATO. We also focus on topics such as crisis management, peacekeeping and the responsibility to protect civilians. Our university can play an important role in these areas.

This brings me to an initiative at our university: The Hague Diplomacy Platform. Based on the conviction that diplomacy has an increasing function in society, we have created a platform that translates and intensifies academic insights on the role of diplomacy. We want to reach all kinds of target groups: stakeholders and politicians, for instance, but also students and young people.

This leads to what I want to say to our keynote speaker today, Minister Hoekstra. We are not only pressing for the knowledge universities possess to be used in policy development and implementation, but we are also pushing for the realisation that our position makes us eminently qualified for diplomacy. Our neutral academic practice, based on knowledge and facts, can

be a crucial factor in international relations. And we bring together different worlds: the worlds of students and young people, and of policymakers, researchers and people from all around the world. We already have extensive experience and a long history of international collaboration – the world of academia, as I already mentioned, is a world without boundaries.

We truly believe that universities can contribute to breakthroughs and we are willing to accept this responsibility. When our university had to halt our institutional collaboration with Russian universities because of the invasion of Ukraine, it hurt us. It goes against everything we as Leiden University, as a bastion of freedom, stand for. Fortunately, we have been able to keep in touch at an individual level with the researchers we have been working with for years, be they Russian or Ukrainian. We believe in the power of this international collaboration. At the same time, we are not naive and are fully aware of the need for guarantees of academic freedom.

This is important, particularly in times of war. Universities are the institutions that can keep the dialogue going. Universities are needed because they provide the world with data, they contribute to mutual understanding and help provide insights into one another's world. I remember within a few days of war breaking out in Ukraine a meeting being held on our campus in The Hague about the Russian invasion. Researchers from different faculties explained the developments as they stood at the time. The room was full and there was huge interest online. It was a very charged and emotional meeting. This shows the deep involvement we as researchers, lecturers, students and staff feel with what is happening in the world. At the same time we are capable of taking practical action. In no time an emergency fund for Russian and Ukrainian students and staff had been set up by the Leiden University Fund. This fund is mainly supported by our university's many committed alumni.

At these kinds of junctures in history, when peace and justice are under threat, the University shows that it is a living institution, a practising community. And that fills me with enormous pride and gratitude. It also fills me with the conviction that we should never rest on our laurels. In our Strategic Plan we have set out four core values: freedom, connection, innovation and responsibility. We keep these alive, day in and day out. We do that by pushing boundaries.

This brings me back to the beginning. Because these four core values are inherent to pushing boundaries: breaking down boundaries means freedom

and makes room for connection and innovation but it also brings responsibilities. That is what the University does and that is what you too can do as an individual.

It helps to be part of an institution that can help find solutions for that beautiful globe hanging behind you. Our knowledge helps to resolve conflicts because we push boundaries and speak a universal language. And this language is more essential than ever: it is what forces us to keep the conversation going.

Thank you for listening.