Good afternoon,

“Icons don’t just exist – they grow over time.” This was said by the architect of Rotterdam’s magnificent Erasmus Bridge – completed 20 years ago and named after our university …!

Ben van Berkel was the architect – he understood and expected that his design would become an icon of the Rotterdam skyline. Today its silhouette dominates every postcard and picture on the web. No wonder: I too think this beautiful bridge is a remarkable piece of architecture.

More importantly, the Erasmus Bridge is an essential link between the South and North of Rotterdam, crucial in the current upswing of the city’s fortunes. It brought the people on both sides of the river closer together and opened up the South of Rotterdam for new investments, ideas and people that benefit the entire city.

Today, I want to stress the importance of making connections and of working together.
I first want to mention Professor Jean Lipman-Blumen, an expert in leadership and organisational behaviour. She was, in the late eighties, the first academic who explored the importance of and the opportunity inherent in connecting. She [very] clearly demonstrated the social dialectics of the inherent co-existence in diversity and interdependence. Once you accept this as reality, you really start to connect.

Just like both parts of Rotterdam have benefitted from the Erasmus Bridge: north and south are completely different and diverse but they are both better off with their connection and collaboration. They strengthen themselves and each other using the bridge.

This is how I see the parallel dialectics with our academic community. To contribute and connect to the needs of the society outside, we have to cross boundaries by working together. It takes all disciplines to find answers for future societal challenges.

Perhaps this is difficult to imagine after the fact, but the plan to build a bridge between the North and South of Rotterdam was first met by a lot of scepticism. Nobody wanted it. There was no need, the bridge would be too expensive and it would impede the free flow of ships on the river. Thankfully, courageous leaders within the municipality persevered and the bridge was built – and 20 years later, it is a huge success.
It’s an inspiring example. Here at Erasmus University, we are also starting to build bridges and we must continue doing so: between schools and faculties, between researchers, lecturers and students. I’m happy to see that more and more researchers and students are connecting with people from other disciplines.

I’d like to present two examples of co-operation within the university:

First, the Erasmus Initiatives. At last year’s Dies Natalis, we introduced these three new multidisciplinary research and education centres: Vital Cities & Citizens - today’s theme -, Dynamics in Inclusive Prosperity, and the third one is Smarter Choices for Better Health. These Initiatives help us to streamline scientific endeavours towards social and economic impact. Making science work for society.

Today, we are very glad to say that all three Initiatives are well under way. We see research themes being defined, funding being found and talented researchers being appointed.

Within ‘Vital Cities & Citizens’, there are no less than 23 research projects starting this coming year. Researchers from different disciplines and faculties will work together on themes like the cultural literacy of young citizens, the effects of a troubled childhood and the organization of diaspora communities, especially from Africa.
As part of ‘Dynamics in Inclusive Prosperity’, research will be conducted in how to successfully implement the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.

And finally, ‘Smarter Choices for Better Health’. This Initiative is also making good progress, with four lines of action, focusing on topics like reducing the inequality in health care, controlling costs and preventing disease. For example: can we reduce obesity levels by changing people’s behaviour?

Today, we want to introduce the new Community for Learning and Innovation.

The world is changing fast, leading to shifts in the study choices and behaviour of students. University education is not limited to national borders anymore – it has become global. We have to distinguish ourselves more clearly and add more value.

Just notice the changing labour market and the importance of life-long learning. We must train students for future professions and disciplines which may not even exist right now. Life-long learning will become ‘business as usual’. And finally, new technology makes personalised education possible, meeting the learning requirements of our students.
In view of these developments, we needed a joint effort to further strengthen the combination of online, blended and on-campus education.

That’s why we’ve set up the Community for Learning & Innovation. It’s a bundling of forces in the fields of internationalisation, online education and innovation. The new Community stimulates knowledge-sharing – helping faculties, lecturers and students to translate their ideas and requirements into projects. Bringing people with inspiring ideas together. Together, we’ll work on the professionalization of lecturers and on modern facilities, like a state-of-the-art studio.

I would also like to highlight the Student for Students Project, for students who have innovative ideas about improving the quality of education. This new Community offers them a platform and infrastructure. After all, designing the education of tomorrow calls for strong involvement and contribution from students. Students for Students is inspired by the Erasmus Anatomy Research Project, which was started in 2003 by students of Erasmus Medical Centre. Nowadays, this project offers both high quality education and research.

So if you are a student and you want to contribute to our education, please do!
In concluding, I would like to share another quote from the architect Ben van Berkel on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Erasmus Bridge: “If nobody would use the bridge, it wouldn’t be a real success. It was the people that made it big.”

So let us, the people of Erasmus University, make new icons for Erasmus University. Let’s make Erasmus University famous for connection and co-operation. We all should become a connector, and establish collaborations beyond the rivers that divide our faculties and disciplines. We should make connections happen. We should use bridges, and cross disciplines – and invite others to cross to our disciplines. Open up blind spots and share. Be brave.

That’s Rotterdam: don’t just talk: do it!

It is, therefore, with great pleasure that I now declare the Academic Year 2017-2018 officially open. I wish all our students and academic staff every success in their efforts in both building and crossing bridges.