

Dies Lecture by Rector Magnificus Professor Huibert Pols

103rd Dies Natalis Erasmus University Rotterdam

Tuesday 8 November 2016

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues and students,

When mountaineer George Mallory was asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest he replied: "Because it's there".

The question I want to ask you today is: Why do we want to climb the summits of science?

I hope that you agree with my answer: we climb the summits of science not just because they are there, not just because there is a question, a riddle, an enigma that challenges our intellect, but because it is the answer we seek, the answer that counts.

Like that other mountaineer Edmund Hillary said: "The complete climb of a mountain is reaching the summit and getting safely to the bottom again."

That is our challenge, as a university, as a community of scientists and students: we do not only seek knowledge but we also bring it back to earth.

We make science work.

For colleagues, consumers and patients.

For science, society and economy.

For our future.

This interconnection with 'earth', with our social environment is – literally – the foundation of our University. 103 years ago the powers that agreed to establish an Handels Hoogeschool in Rotterdam – now Erasmus University - did this to enhance the entrepreneurial spirit of the city and port of Rotterdam. As one of our founding fathers said: "to create a laboratory where many talented people can work together."

And together – the city, the port and the university – we have flourished.

Together we make it happen...

I don't think it is an exaggeration when I claim that being socially, economically and politically aware is the essence of that success.

It is part of our DNA: the double helix of science and society, theory and practice, knowledge and experience.

And we all know that the DNA double helix is stabilized primarily by two forces: bonds and interactions.

In our university the stabilizing bonds are the bonds inside every department and inside every faculty. The stabilizing interactions are the interactions between all these professional groups.

I am convinced that the bonds are essential to strengthen the interaction: we all need a foundation, a 'homefront' to nurture our identity, our courage, our self-esteem. But what we need to grow, to test our wings, to conquer the world, is interaction, crossing boundaries and borders.

And this interaction is essential.

Because – as I said a few years ago: scientific progress is made in an international arena, in which cross-pollination occurs between different disciplines, and in which scholars engage each other in academic debate with open minds that are free of dogmas.

In short: in this day and age science is no longer the individual pursuit of knowledge but it's a team effort, a team sport. And to be a success we have to play well together and play well with others. Because we don't need our name giver Desiderius Erasmus anymore to be aware that the world, our world, is much bigger than this campus.

Everybody here who knows me, knows that this is my challenge, my goal as rector magnificus.

I want us to connect and to make connections.

Together with my colleagues in the Executive Board and the college of deans we want this university to be a linchpin in the future of our society.

We want our research, our education, our university to matter, even more than it does now.

That is why I present to you today our Erasmus Initiatives: ambitious plans that will help us to streamline scientific endeavours towards social and economic impact.

Not because the subjects are there, but because society needs answers.

The chosen subject for our Erasmus Initiatives are: Smarter choices for better health, Vital Cities and Citizens and Inclusive growth. I will tell you more about the first two; the third one looks very promising but is still under construction. More on that one next year. A cliffhanger indeed!

The first Initiative 'Smarter choices for better health' is chosen because health is our dearest possession and the easiest to lose. But governments and health institutions struggle with increasing demands and decreasing budgets.

That is why we have to come up with smarter choices for better health.

Choices that are not only based on medical solutions, but also – more and more – on economic principles.

Choices that are also – more and more – about smarter financial choices, better use of scarce resources and mechanisms to lower inequities. And that is why our university, together with Erasmus Medical Centre, is in a unique position to contribute. Together we have one of the largest groups of top class researchers on the cutting edge of health economics, behavioural economics, public health and global health.

The same goes for the second of our three Erasmus Initiatives: 'Vital Cities and Citizens'. It is a fact that the world's population is becoming increasingly urban. Over 50 percent of the world population is living in urban areas and this figure is projected to reach 66 percent by 2050. And millions of these citizens will live in so called megacities: cities with a population of more than 10 million citizens. How will these transformations affect urban life? What will this new city life mean for inclusion and tolerance? How can we nurture social cohesion and creativity in these megasocieties?

Erasmus University, both city based and urban connected, can play a unique role by researching the central question: How can cities and citizens all over the world enhance their vitality and quality of life in times of rapid urbanisation? We will

concentrate our work on three interlinked themes: migration and diversity; security and resilience; and culture and creativity.

Yes, to answer these questions, to make a success of our Erasmus Initiatives, we will have to put our minds and hands together. Only an interdisciplinary approach can make a real impact, only together we can reach the summit and come back with relevant answers: knowledge, tools and evidence that can be used in practice.

Relevant answers for science, for our society, for our future.

The key is in the connection: within the Erasmus Initiatives our researchers have to generate and spread new, multidisciplinary knowledge, they have to connect with other research groups and with external stakeholders.

Yes, these Initiatives will ask for a profound investment of us all.

In research, in education, in working together.

And of course in financial resources.

The Executive Board will invest 4.2 million euros in each Erasmus Initiative over the next four years: that is 12.6 million euros in total. I'm delighted that our enthusiasm is shared by the faculties involved, they will add to our initial investment.

With these Initiatives, we are cooperating with the Erasmus Trustfonds to gain significant extra funding through their endowment fund. For the past two years, the University and the Erasmus Trustfonds have been working together intensively to prepare for launching a campaign which will be the first of its kind in the Netherlands. This campaign will create a significant fund to support research excellence and future leaders whose work in the academic sphere can help solve great societal challenges, answers to some of the questions I posed a few minutes ago.

And what will be our value as a university or our reward?

We will ensure and enhance our future as a university in a working environment, closely connected to the challenges of our changing society.

We will build bridges between disciplines, between researchers, between people.

Not in one day of course.

Our Initiatives are an ongoing process.

The plans we have now are just the foundation, potential building blocks for the new strategy of this university.

To build the Initiatives into a real 'earner' we count on your cooperation, your ideas, your input.

You will be the driving forces to make these Erasmus Initiatives into a success.

For our university, for our society, for our future.

Today, across the Atlantic, the American people are choosing their new President.

They have to make a choice between 'Stronger together' and 'Build The Wall'.

Here, for our university, I think the choice is clear: our Erasmus University will be stronger if we work together, not by building walls.

Because that strength is what we need to ensure a future in these changing times.

And nothing fits more in these academic surroundings to illustrate that than by quoting a Nobel Prize Winner, Bob Dylan:

For the times they are a-changin'

Thank you for your attention.

And now I'd like to welcome to the stage ms. Neelie Kroes, alumna of this university and Chair of the Public Policy Advisory Board of Uber.