

Opening Academic Year 2023-2024: Imagination

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15.30 hrs

Martinikerk, Groningen

Welcome to the Opening of the Academic Year 2023 to 2024.

This is a special moment for me, to be able to speak to you at the Opening of the Academic Year for my fifth and final time. Each time, this has been a special event for me, full of hopes and expectations for the coming year; it's the moment we get together, back from summer holidays, and hopefully well rested and in good health. This event, in this magnificent church, also brings us together with representatives from across the whole university and their direct networks and partners. This place invites us to reflect, to think about the year to come, and to use our imagination.

For me, today is also a moment to reflect on the past four years. In my first opening speech, in 2019, I referred to the Apollo mission, which was then celebrating its 50th anniversary. The moon landing in 1969 is still seen as one of the most significant moments in the history of mankind. But it also marked a period of exponential growth in much bigger and smarter computers, which has led to new and incredibly powerful technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning.

Today, the concept of ‘Moonshot thinking’ refers to a concerted approach to solving huge societal problems, for example the work on vaccines and prevention of Covid-19. It can lead to radical solutions that may employ disruptive technologies. As a university, we must foster imagination so that transformative ideas arise and can change the world of today for a better tomorrow. We must perform ambitious and innovative research in areas where we can make true breakthroughs.

If I walk in the countryside and stray into philosophical thoughts about our great university, then I think of the strong community of students, teachers, researchers, and professional staff, who all have a joint goal and a shared passion. I see people like Professor Marleen Kamperman, from the Zernike Institute for Advanced Materials. After my talk, she will tell us how she finds inspiration in the natural world to make new polymers, for example, by imagining how the super glue of geckos can help to make sensitive robots.

As your rector, I hope I have been able to empower people to excel, by creating excellent conditions and the right environment – and by *Making Connections*.

Four years ago, I imagined a university where:

- We respond to a complex, fast-changing world by performing cutting-edge research,
- Where we inspire our students, staff and stakeholders to take action,
- Where we make an impact on the challenges confronting society, and

- Where we train our students to become agents of change, and to develop 21st century skills and mindsets.

Over the past four years, I have met many students and researchers who want to make a real difference, who want to contribute to problems with wider societal relevance. Our alumnus of the year, Takudzwa Mutezu, is a wonderful example of someone who is making an impact on society by her fight for nature conservation in Zimbabwe, as you will learn later this afternoon. And by setting up four new interdisciplinary Schools in our university, I am certain we have made an important step towards our goal of societal relevance. I expect the Schools to catalyse collaboration, help pioneer innovation, and enable transfer of knowledge across many diverse disciplines.

The university – it is what we make of it together! Our foundations are *you*, our students, teachers, researchers, and professional staff. Our basis is being interested in others, seeking to build relationships with each other, *Making Connections*, our strategic theme of the past years.

But this concept of academic community has been fiercely challenged over the past three years by the worldwide pandemic and all its consequences. After just six months in my new position, I discovered that nothing could have prepared me for such an event, nor the rest of the university, especially not our students and PhD students; nor our young international researchers or our teachers. Covid-19 has fundamentally challenged our way of working and accelerated all forms of blended learning, which is an approach that can provide the flexibility needed for the future of education.

But the lack of social connections during the pandemic had a major impact on the mental health of many people, in particular, that of students. I hope that the learning environments we are currently building will also promote better resilience in our students and help prepare them for today's challenges and a successful tomorrow.

Today sees the official start of our 410th jubilee year, which will be marked by many events and celebrations. So I am extremely happy to see that our university is once again operating as an open academic community. But, at the same time, we have recently seen considerable turmoil and some difficult periods, with demonstrations and sit-ins. These made me wonder if we were still connected and whether we, in the higher echelons, had shown clearly enough that we had heard the worries and were open to dialogue.

But there are also hopeful signals: students and staff who are thinking about internal democracy, about academic and personal safety, and who will go to the barricades for this. Actions that take courage and a strong sense of involvement. The university cannot survive without people who are continually revamping our ways or seeking new paths. We must all trust that we can – *and will* – solve these problems together. Or, as John Lennon sang:

“You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one”

On a different line: being a rector is to work as part of a large team. I am grateful to my colleagues, Jouke de Vries and Hans Biemans, for making our triumvirate into such a good collaboration, to the College of Deans for their continuous support, to the Board of Trustees, and to the administrative directors, the faculty boards and the university services' management.

My final words of gratitude go to the students and staff. It has been my great privilege to have been your rector for the past four years. I hope you will go forward with pride in our university and celebrate its long history with respect for all it has witnessed in the past 410 years.

My heartfelt thanks to you all.