

Speech by Professor Huibert Pols, Rector Magnificus Erasmus University Rotterdam

Opening of the Academic Year 2016-2017, Monday 29 August
2016

Education, mobility and openness of mind: in the spirit of Erasmus

Ladies and gentlemen,

2016 is a special year: it is 550 years since Desiderius Erasmus, our namesake, was born in Rotterdam. After he died, he was buried in Basel, in Switzerland, where I was this spring, together with a delegation from Rotterdam. We were attending a symposium on migration with various scholars from this university and we were reminded of Erasmus's words of this topic: He said that education and learning, combined with mobility and openness of mind, are the best means of guaranteeing social cohesion. A statement that has not lost any relevance over the centuries.

Social cohesion has already been mentioned this afternoon, in the contribution by our guest speaker, Minister Ploumen. In Erasmus's time, the differences were huge: between rich and poor, between beliefs, ideologies and populations. Over 500 years later, there are still huge gaps in social relationships; between the highly-educated and the low-skilled, between the privileged and the disadvantaged. That is why it is important, now more than ever, that the university contributes towards the search for answers to these societal needs. Not only by mobilising our mono-disciplinary knowledge but also by linking together the various knowledge domains. I see it as

one of my most important tasks as rector to facilitate this process within Erasmus University.

To achieve this ambitious goal at Erasmus University, we need to educate students to be 'citizens of the world' - to quote Erasmus. World citizens; well-rounded people with open minds who are capable of connecting insights and perspectives. I'm talking about so called 'T-shaped professionals' who combine in-depth knowledge of their own field with the skills to collaborate with experts from other disciplines and other cultures.

Collaboration is the norm for students, lecturers and researchers at Erasmus University. They are prepared to use this collaboration to contribute towards the great social challenges of this age. And that is why we are also focusing on students with societal skills, an example of which we just saw in the Student in the spotlight. From this podium I want to challenge all students to follow this example to branch out and broaden their horizons.

Making connections is also the guideline for a new educational vision. 18 Years ago in my inaugural lecture as new professor in Internal Medicine and Clinical Endocrinology, I discussed the role of the physician-scientist. That is why I am proud that today we are on the verge of developing a new concept: the 'artist-scientist'. This academic year, we are starting a new double degree programme within the Rotterdam Arts & Sciences Lab. This partnership with Codarts and the Willem de Kooning Academy Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences combines the forces of science and art. The new Double Degree is a five-year programme in which students combine two bachelor programmes. Courses in fine arts and performing arts, and academic education augment and enhance each other.

Philosophers at our university have also seen the importance of broadening horizons, with the philosophy double degree starting last year. This program is for ambitious students seeking to expand their academic horizons. I am particularly delighted that this approach has proven to be successful. It demonstrates again that students feel the need to broaden their repertoire. I would like to offer my compliments to all those in the Philosophy faculty who have made this considerable achievement happen.

While many programs have been changed, one foundational principle has remained the same and will continue to be so for the future. At the core of all Erasmus University's academic programs is the quality of education. Our students have the right to an excellent education that – again in the spirit of Erasmus – will prepare them for the challenges in our society. That is why this university is investing millions of euros in improving education during the next few years. This is our own money that Erasmus University is going to invest before government funds are released to us via the student grant advance ('studievoorschotmiddelen'). Our programmes will be able to intensify teaching by appointing more lecturers, but also by improving study materials and student support. We will also soon be presenting plans for a Centre for learning and innovation. This will be a new university-wide centre for lecturers to improve the quality of their teaching, and to innovate in education.

At the beginning of this speech, I referred to the lessons we learned from Erasmus: that mobility and openness of mind are the best means of guaranteeing social cohesion. Unfortunately, people don't always choose mobility these days. Large numbers of refugees seek a safe and better life here in Europe. Last year, we – Erasmus University – offered shelter to over 200 refugees in our sports centre, an

act of generosity for which the Erasmus Sport team rightly received a Top Support Award.

But our commitment doesn't stop there. We are currently working hard on an initiative to help refugees to participate in our society. Eventually, we want to enable 50 refugees to become students here; to start and successfully conclude a programme at Erasmus University. We also participate in the Scholar at Risk Program, employing two courageous scholars who suffered from attacks and a lack of academic freedom. Here, they can pursue their career in a safe and free environment.

Ladies and gentlemen, this university has many plans and many wonderful ambitions. Let's get started as quickly as possible.

Therefore, it is with great pleasure that I now declare Academic Year 2016-2017 officially open. I wish our students and academic staff every success in their efforts in building bridges and having a positive impact on society, wherever we can.

Thank you for your attention.