



Opening of the Academic Year

Koen Becking, September 5th, 2016

‘Towards a University of the Southern Netherlands (USN)’

A very warm welcome to this opening of the academic year, and a special welcome to your excellencies, minister, ambassadors, bishops, representatives of the province, deputy mayors, members of our supervisory board and our colleague, the president of the University of Liberia.

Last but most certainly not least, a warm welcome to all researchers, teachers, support staff, and students. In this opening of the academic year, this beautiful tradition, our students feature prominently. It is for you, our students in particular, the generation of the future, that today I will talk about our upcoming lustrum next year and the importance of our still relevant slogan Understanding Society, the crucial role of the humanities for science and society, and also about the inevitable need to join forces in the region to solve so called ‘wicked problems’. In this regard, I have important news for you, so don’t fall asleep.

There is no reason to fall asleep whatsoever because our program today consists of the attendance and keynote speech by minister Dijsselbloem. A man who knows so much about wicked problems himself. As president of

the Eurogroup and as minister of Finance. Like the universities you are confronted daily with complex societal and economic issues that need to be addressed. And it is for this reason that I am delighted that you are here with us today to share your experiences and insights with us. Of course, your agenda is full, in these days ahead of Prinsjesdag of your cabinet and with the upcoming elections.

And yes, we are very curious what you will have in your briefcase for the so important domain of research and teaching. Will the next government make research and education a key-issue? We understand that you cannot say much about it right now, but I would like to give you some advice today if you allow me to do so.

In short, in the next 15 minutes I have news for the students and employees. News of importance for the Netherlands and especially for the south of the Netherlands, as well as for the minister and for politics.

In May of 1926, governors Van Gils and Thomas Goossens of the Roman Catholic Leergangen – later to become Fontys University of Applied Science – invited Martinus Cobbenhagen to discuss the foundation of a commercial college in Tilburg. The rest is history, eighty-nine years of it, with a 90-year lustrum coming up next year. A historic occasion that we will celebrate extensively together.

Cobbenhagen would have been proud of you, our present generation of students. It is a conclusion I draw from a text that he wrote - which can be read in a collection of essays that we have published this year – and which includes a veiled reference to the eternal student. It translates as follows: ‘Those who are studying should be well-aware that being a student should

not become a kind of profession, but it should entail being active in day-to-day commercial practice.’ Outreach avant la lettre maybe? At this university, one would think eternal students are a dying breed, as I am sure our students here would agree. Or wouldn’t you?

Cobbenhagen also wrote, and I’m quoting once again in translation: ‘What a person is, is higher than that which he knows. This should not be forgotten in assessing the chances of success in practice.’

The search for meaning is an eternal one. In the ninety years that have passed, our student population has grown from a hundred-and-fifty to thirteen thousand, and our societal role, inspired by our religious principles, has likewise evolved, a role that is expressed in our slogan Understanding Society. It is not for nothing that ours is pre-eminently a university of the humanities and social sciences.

Why take you on this stroll down memory lane, if not for the purpose of arriving in the here and now.

Gene Block, Chancellor of UCLA and professor of neurobiology, in the Dutch financial newspaper *Financieel Dagblad* was recently quoted as saying that more than ever now, the undervalued humanities are necessary to solve the world’s problems. Block is particularly worried about the worldwide marginalization of the study of philosophy, literature, religion, art, history, and linguistics. He correctly identifies a very sensitive issue, and like us, he believes that societally complex problems are best addressed by intelligent combinations of hard sciences and humanities, alpha, gamma and beta. It is no wonder, therefore, so Block observes, that the best universities in the

world, such as those of Cambridge, Harvard, Yale and Tokyo, are precisely those that also have the very best faculties of both hard sciences and humanities. Having both of these strongly represented is the best way to ensure broadly trained students that can bring about social and societal innovation, students that can effectively apply technology in a complex social environment. The work done by Professor Volberda of Erasmus University Rotterdam tells us that successful innovation is twenty-five percent technology-driven and seventy-five percent socially-driven.

Universities these days are subject to great changes. What was it again that we were put on this earth for, ladies and gentlemen? This is something we need to ask ourselves continuously. It is something that society continuously demands we should ask ourselves. The debate on the issue seems to have gone silent again, but we have long since ceased to be the ivory tower we once were. The ivory tower that rector of Utrecht University Bert van der Zwaan reminds us of in his 2016 Dies speech 'was the source that in freedom could produce scientific daydreams of black holes, of the inside of the earth, or the human brain, even if the work there was poorly remunerated and conditions often were very bad.' (...) 'Nowadays', he continues 'we operate at the very heart of society, we are flooded by students, and we are confronted with a government that is increasingly withdrawing, also financially.' Utrecht University, like many others, wants to be an outward-looking organization, wants to know what is going on in the world and what the demands of society are. And like Utrecht, we have also included in our strategy this close connection to the world around us.

Smart combinations of disciplines, Schools and even universities in intelligent ecosystems, such as we are currently developing in the city of

Den Bosch around Data Science, these combinations are the way of the future to tackle so-called 'wicked problems.' It is no coincidence that innovative, internationally-oriented programs like Global Law, Global Management of Social Issues, Data Science, and our newly-created University College are attracting so much interest from you, our students. With the exception of Data Science, which by its very nature already is at the forefront of interdisciplinary developments, the appeal and scope of the first two examples would become even stronger by more emphatically including technological innovations and hard sciences.

Admittedly, the humanities partly have themselves to blame for the current situation. From my own personal observation I have concluded that there has been, also on our own campus, too much resistance for too long against educational innovations, against adopting true widespread interdisciplinary approaches, against e-humanities. But we are on the right track now. The new initiatives I just mentioned are examples of this.

Urban economist Ed Glaeser's work has shown us that the power of a geographical region lies in knowledge institutions, as is the case in Silicon Valley, which shows us the way of the future in having superb educational institutions and by continuing to invest in its schools and universities.' According to Glaeser and I agree fully: 'The single best way to create a smart city is to create schools that attract and train able people.' Education is a prerequisite for economic growth.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think we ought to take a step forward and follow Block's example. I think we ought to take a step forward and actually put Glaeser's research into practice in the south of the Netherlands as well. I

want to take a step forward and heed the desire at the political level and in society at large to join the forces available in our region, and to bring about more and better connections between them. These ideas and desires are palpable, and I am convinced that there is wide support for them at this university and that great urgency is felt with regard to their realization.

What if we had a chance to take an extra step forward in the development of our sciences, and to give further substance to Understanding Society, by joining the forces in the south of the Netherlands in a big way?

I would advocate more smart combinations to be forged from the institutions of higher education in our cities and in the south of the Netherlands at large. With smart combinations in higher education we would have improve our research and teaching, access to funding, we would seriously rise in international rankings, we would be far more efficient with our public means and our international outreach and attractiveness would benefit enormously. Companies would be more interested in our collaboration with hard sciences and the humanities, but also the universities of applied sciences will be able to work interdisciplinary on wicked problems.

In short, what I am advocating is a University of the Southern Netherlands with various campuses. A lively, innovative ecosystem of the universities, the universities of applied sciences and other knowledge institutions. It is for this reason that I invite all our colleagues and administrators to seriously investigate the great opportunities that we have.

Your Excellency, I would like to cut to the chase and get straight to the point in view of the formation of a new cabinet in the spring of next year.

Investments in research and development, from government as well as business, have been declining for years. This is slowly killing this country's economic and innovative power. It is a trend that needs to be reversed.

1. Firstly, we need to invest in research itself, which first and foremost means making more room and money available for young researchers. After all, they are the talents of our future.
2. Secondly, we need to invest in research infrastructure. Investments should in my view be divided over the clusters currently emerging in Dutch higher education. The cooperation of the universities of Leiden, Delft and Rotterdam, both the Amsterdam universities, the technical universities. To be able to demand a sufficiently big piece of the pie in this clustering, serious cooperation in the south of the Netherlands is essential. Hence my plea for a University of the Southern Netherlands. It will make new and extra investments possible. Investments that in turn will make it possible to improve research and education and solve societal problems.
3. Thirdly, I think we need to invest in internationalization. International alliances for regional and global issues. To go into any detail here would make my speech too long, so for more information on this I refer you to our Strategic Plan.

Investments can be theme-driven. At our university, three themes are clearly emerging: those of data, health, and the resilient society. We consider to choose these themes in our new strategic plan and in line with the National Science Agenda. Today, the Dutch universities will launch a

plan for The Digital Society. In the years to come, the Dutch universities, together with knowledge partners, government and companies want to be at the forefront of digitalisation. As a pioneer in people-oriented information-technology. This ambition is closely connected to the National Science Agenda and the call by the Dutch employers to invest substantially in digitalisation.

Here, combining social and technological innovation is an absolute necessity. It means you need to invest in both types of innovation, which means that we need to build a fully-integrated ecosystem in the south of the Netherlands to realise these high ambitions.

Cooperation, cooperation, cooperation. I can't say it enough. The power of cooperation in Brabant is what laid the groundwork for the success of Brainport, for instance. The foundations that were born from cooperation are foundations that can be built on, also in the years to come.

In the speech I held at the Cobbenhagen Summit a few years ago I said 'it is clear that our enterprising Brabant region is successful in many ways, a case in point being our cooperation with the business community, knowledge institutions and local government. 'Of course we should enjoy our successes, but we should also stay alert and not lose momentum. I have noticed that many of you feel the need to boost the region's power once more. Many initiatives are being put in motion. I truly believe that in the near future this region can make much more of a difference in Europe and throughout the world. Being highly entrepreneurial, this is a task that many of us take seriously. I am availing myself of the opportunity to bring forward the need for a much more focused and comprehensive strategy for the region on education and innovation. As Glaeser points out, investments

in all sectors of education are the best way forward to improve the economy.'

What I envision is a university with different campuses and an international focus, firmly embedded in a strong region of the country, with a crisp and clear, sharp profile.

That is why I would like to end this opening speech today with the concrete proposal for the foundation of the University of the Southern Netherlands. An international network university with campuses in Brabant and Limburg. The Universities of Applied Sciences will be fully part of this ecosystem. The research conducted and the educational programs and courses offered will be geared to each other, and facilities can be shared.

Ladies and gentlemen, on October 1st I am starting on my second term as president of the Executive Board. Having absorbed, in a manner of speaking, the university in my first term of office, I would now like to share with you my conviction that we can make something really great happen here in the south. It is an inspiring idea, the necessity of which is plausible considering the choices that need to be made in the light of the higher education strategy, for research, education, for funding and for rankings. A necessity as well for you students, I already addressed you specifically at the start of my speech, a necessity enabling us to give you and future generations the best than can be offered. And since we are lucky enough to have the minister here with us today, he can take the idea with him to The Hague, together with the urgent call for more investment in education and research. The realization of these ideals would allow us to truly make the digital society, where people really matter, a reality, and to do even more to

meet the great human challenges of energy, climate change, water, health care, urbanization, data, and so on.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.