

Welcome, everyone,

It's a pleasure to welcome you to this Dies Natalis, a day when we look back over 450 years of history, and at the same time bring together a community that is building the future.

In this anniversary year, I have moved from the oldest university in the Low Countries to the oldest university in the Netherlands. Looking back to 1575, we can see that the birth of this university was closely bound to the position of the university in Leuven at that time. Leuven was under Spanish rule, under the authority of the Catholic church. That is precisely why there was a need here for a university dedicated to education in the spirit of the Reformation.

I have already discovered that Leiden and Leuven differ in many ways even today: for example, in management style, in culture, in regulation and in funding. Yet if you look beneath the surface, you also find much in common: an inspiring academic tradition, strong roots in the local community, a commitment to progress and the conviction that knowledge is a public good. That is why I feel at home here. And it is a feeling I wish for all of you: students, colleagues, donors, supporters, partners and everyone gathered here today.

I welcome you all, and I invite you to make welcoming others a daily practice. A university that strives for excellence must be welcoming: to students taking their future into their own hands; to PhD candidates finding their way; to colleagues arriving from elsewhere; and to staff who may wonder whether they are seen. A welcome may seem like a small act, but it can make a huge difference in building trust.

Academia under pressure

We are living in a time when much of what used to seem self-evident is under pressure. Slower economic growth, a resurgence of nationalism, international instability, calls for strategic autonomy and tougher migration policies are putting society on high alert. In this climate, universities feel the impact of anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric. Stagnating productivity and political paralysis constrain our budgets and room to manoeuvre. In several countries, this is leading to cutbacks, higher tuition fees, reduced internationalisation, diminishing authority and, in some cases, tighter control over research and teaching.

Yet, I remain positive. Strong universities continue to be the foundation of broad prosperity, not only in economic terms but also culturally and socially. That so many cities and regions continue to fight for their own full university says a lot: universities are still seen as places of the future, of knowledge and of public value. And encouragingly, this vision is also reflected in the new coalition agreement.

History also reminds us that universities have never stood still. They have repeatedly had to rethink their role and how best to fulfil it. We are in such a moment again. I have every confidence that, through our collective effort, we will continue to earn and strengthen public trust. Let me illustrate this with three examples.

Example 1. An eroding position

Universities have never held a monopoly on the production and transmission of knowledge. There have always been parallel knowledge traditions: in churches and monasteries; in guilds and salons; in societies such as the Royal Society; and later in think-tanks and industrial labs. Edison, Darwin and, more recently, tech pioneers like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates worked mainly independently.

What feels unsettling today is the sense that the university's dominant position is under pressure. GenAI is opening an immense window onto knowledge. Online learning platforms, MOOCs and podcasts challenge the idea that universities alone provide access to high-level knowledge. Tech companies invest heavily in their own research, at times rivalling ours. Strategic knowledge institutions such as TNO, Deltares, ECN and CPB (or in Flanders IMEC and VIB) are taking more central roles. All this contributes to the impression that both attention and resources are slipping away from the universities.

But that view is too simplistic. Universities are not so much losing ground as shifting their place in the knowledge landscape. They are less the peak of a hierarchy and more the heart of a network; less a gatekeeper of knowledge but still a vital source of it. They remain the primary home of research with a long time-horizon – research for which there is not yet a market and ideas for which there is not yet a stakeholder. If application-oriented institutions build bridges, universities provide the pillars on which these bridges stand. Together, they strengthen the knowledge system.

In discussions with government and other stakeholders, I encounter strong recognition of universities' unique contribution. This recognition is genuine, but it is not a guaranteed right. It requires universities to articulate our mission clearly, not by focusing even more on application and impact, but by explaining why curiosity-driven research is vital for socio-economic progress.

The shift in the knowledge landscape is not a tale of decline, but of transformation. I see this reflected in discussions on the next European framework programme for research and innovation, Horizon Europe 'bis'. There is a growing emphasis on universities as co-architects of innovative ecosystems: ecosystems like those that are developing here around the Key Region, the Space Campus and the Leiden Bio Science Park.

Whereas universities once tended to be seen primarily as suppliers of intellectual property, European policy documents now reflect a different reality: universities are increasingly seen as the trusted backbone of these ecosystems. As talent hubs where researchers, entrepreneurs and experts meet. As guardians of fundamental knowledge, ensuring that expertise is retained when the economy contracts. These are precisely the roles that we at Leiden University recognise, embrace and will continue to fulfil alongside our partners in our knowledge ecosystem.

At the same time, this development makes one thing abundantly clear: the greatest risk for universities is not fading into irrelevance but being burdened with expectations so high that they collapse under mission overload.

Example 2. The pressures of democratic erosion

Over time, Western democracies have developed mechanisms to limit power, protect pluralism and safeguard the independence of such institutions as the justice system, the media and universities from shifting political majorities. In recent years, these mechanisms have come under pressure in several countries, tilting towards majoritarian rule or more authoritarian states. Elections are still held, but democracy becomes reduced to following the majority, with less concern for institutional balance and independent judgment.

Such developments rarely occur suddenly and in isolation. We see this in several European countries, each in its own political form. What connects these contexts is the pattern: rather than a dramatic rupture, they emerge through small shifts that, together, alter how institutions function. We also see this across the Atlantic, where justice, media, science and even election procedures are becoming politicised. This reveals how vulnerable earlier safeguards can be.

Formally, the rule of law, elections and academic freedom still exist, but their taken-for-granted nature is weakening. Autonomy requires more explicit justification, expertise becomes politicised, and criticism is more readily dismissed as ideological. In such a context, universities, dependent on institutional autonomy, inevitably become a focal point.

Knowledge does not emerge from consensus or hierarchy but from doubt, scrutiny and disagreement. That approach faces increasing scrutiny – not through open condemnation but through administrative reforms, stricter frameworks, greater substantive control over research and teaching, and funding tied more closely to what is deemed politically or economically useful.

But here too, universities are stronger than they sometimes think, particularly now, with a new government and the coalition agreement improving our prospects. And importantly: democratic erosion not only complicates our mission, but also underlines its importance.

We do not respond to such pressure by surrendering autonomy or academic freedom. We respond by making clear that these are essential conditions for scientific progress. And as university leaders, we must protect these conditions internally as well. Excessive internal control undermines not only the academic environment but also our external credibility. Nor can we address this pressure by suppressing internal dissent or concealing uncomfortable opinions. We must allow space for respectful disagreement. And we cannot retreat from difficult debates and adopt a ‘wait and see.’ Staying silent simply confirms existing power relations.

Example 3. The ‘useful’ university

Funding authorities seem primarily interested in a ‘useful’ university, and some question whether investment in the humanities and social sciences will deliver the intended returns. We are far from what is sometimes called the humanities apocalypse: the wholesale dismantling of the humanities. But concern is growing. We invest in the markets that drive society, but do we invest enough in the society that has to support those markets?

Let me offer a few rhetorical questions, as a political wake-up call.

As China emerges as an economic and scientific superpower, do we not need *more* understanding of its language, culture and society, rather than less? As democracies face erosion, should we not intensify our efforts to understand why this is happening and how to respond? If the energy transition depends on behavioural change by citizens and businesses, is it wise to constrain the disciplines that study human behaviour?

Space is becoming a new battleground for geopolitics and commercial activity. Should we not increase our focus on space law? If algorithms shape what we see, think and buy – and influence decisions about work, healthcare and justice – can we afford to reduce investment in ethics and critical social sciences? At a time of growing inequality, is scaling back research on trust, cohesion and solidarity prudent, or simply short-sighted?

If language is perhaps the last vestige of human magic, should we not cherish and deepen it, rather than reduce it to a technical challenge for machines? And as we seem once again to edge dangerously close to repeating past mistakes, is historical awareness not more important than ever? For these and many other reasons, weakening the humanities and social sciences is not a neutral policy choice.

Leiden University represents a different choice: a choice for a resilient society, aligned with Europe’s values. We are a university of exact and biomedical sciences; but equally, and with conviction, of psychology, archaeology, humanities, social sciences and political science. We cherish our unique programmes, not as relics from the past but as a foundation for the future.

This choice carries responsibility. These rhetorical questions show how crucial the human and social sciences are. We must not only ensure their continued existence but must also shape them so they can fulfil that crucial role: sharp, relevant, connected and engaged with society. If we succeed, we will contribute not only to knowledge but to a society that understands more clearly, acts more wisely and lives together more harmoniously.

In conclusion: pride

The risk is not that the university as an institution will collapse tomorrow, but that we fail to prepare today for a world in which our licence to operate is evolving. Universities are excellent at forecasting the future, except when the subject is themselves. We produce scenarios about climate change, technological disruption and demographic shifts, but rarely turn that lens inward.

I am not overly concerned about the university's future. But neither will I lull myself into thinking that things won't get that bad. Thinking about the future is a form of intellectual self-care. What do we actually want to preserve, when it comes down to it? 'Everything, all at once' is not an answer, let alone a strategy. Let this speech be an invitation to take our future into our own hands.

Let me end where I began, with my journey of discovery. Newcomers often see things differently. Those who have worked passionately in an organisation for years may first see the problems: the workload, the complexity, the inertia, the scarce resources. There is nothing wrong with this: a healthy amount of concern is a sign of commitment, and it fuels critical reflection and initiative.

But newcomers see something else as well. I see a university sometimes described by outsiders as 'rather introspective', but which is in reality open and enterprising. I see intellectual depth and social engagement. I see a community capable of critical thought without becoming detached. There is always room for improvement, but there is also much that is good.

For me, being part of this community is a privilege. I am proud of what we achieve. Pride is not complacency, nor is it self-congratulation. It is the courage to recognise what is valuable: what we achieve together, what we do well and what we want to develop further. Those who only see shortcomings become discouraged. Those who also see what is good, gain courage. And courage is precisely what universities need, today and tomorrow.

I wish you a warm welcome to this Dies Natalis.