'The happiness of the people is the highest law: no member or any part of society may in this respect be favoured by any special law to the contrary.'

Ladies and gentlemen,

‘The happiness of the people is the highest law’; this is stated in Article 1 of the Constitution of the Batavian Republic in 1801, let’s say the predecessor to our Constitution of the Netherlands.

The theme you have chosen for this academic year’s opening is no small thing. Happiness. Not only the highest law but also a theme that affects everyone.

Being here, in this place, at this moment in time, at the opening of the academic year, makes me think of the beginning of my own student days, and the University Library in particular. The sense of happiness that I experienced as I walked into that place, a place where I could always go to find the answers to my questions, and where, by looking for those answers, I would find myself in narrow side paths that led to knowledge I wasn’t looking for. For me, that felt like immeasurable wealth. To be honest, I’m a little bit jealous of all those young first-year students for whom that feeling of happiness awaits.

Happiness. Everyone is chasing it, consciously or otherwise. For themselves or for others. As a parent, what they most want for their child and they will say ‘as long as they’re happy’. There is a happiness industry worth millions. Every self-respecting
publisher has a bestseller in its collection that has the word ‘happiness’ in its title; the magazine Happinez, with a circulation of almost 295,000, is bigger than the paper version of the Volkskrant, one of Holland’s leading daily newspapers. So, we have plenty to talk about this afternoon.

But first, I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak to you here at Radboud University Nijmegen.

A university with a rich tradition of being the motor behind the emancipation of ordinary Catholic people, many of whose sons and daughters in the 1960s and 1970s were the first in their families to go to university. A university that still, to this day, admits many students whose parents have not had a university education. Because out of all the comprehensive universities in the Netherlands, you still have the highest percentage of first-generation students, no longer from Catholic backgrounds, but many from further ashore.

I would like to take a moment to reflect on this. Because choosing emancipation and betterment is a choice that no university makes lightly. It has to do partly with circumstances; the location and character of the university. A Catholic university in Nijmegen simply attracts many Catholic students from the south.

But it’s also a conscious choice, a choice upon which the University bases its policy and distinguishes itself. By attracting more first-generation students. By appointing more female professors than average. By organising a series of lectures for asylum seekers in Heumensoord, as you did last year.

In doing such things, you show that you care about more than the number of scientific publications or the study success achieved by students. And that you look further than returns on investment. That you see the person behind the student - or worse still behind the student number. And that you also care about students’ well-being.
The Rector Magnificus spoke beforehand about your latest achievements in this area: the survey on student well-being, and the Happiness minor that you will be offering next academic year. I am certain that with both these things, you are doing the students a great service. With the results of the survey, you can work towards an even more pleasant university climate. And I dare say that the Happiness minor will become one of the most popular subjects you offer.

Of course, you have academic motives for offering the minor; you don’t need to attract students. But the minor can also bring with it a welcome side effect: by specialising in the subject of Happiness from philosophical and psychological perspectives, students will become more aware of their own pursuits of happiness. And by being aware of this, they can give direction to those pursuits. And that, in turn, can contribute towards the happiness of these young people as they seek their place in society.

The minor is therefore a good example of education that focuses on more than just the dissemination of knowledge and skills, but also on development in a wider sense. To education.

As you probably know, over the last few years I have devoted much time and effort to education that looks further than today’s and tomorrow’s labour market. In my vision, education is more than simply a conveyor belt of employees. Education takes place in a community of students and teachers in which you can develop and be yourself, but also where collective values and a sense of social responsibility are learned.

Somewhere you indeed also gain knowledge and skills, focused on gaining a rightful place in society and not just a good job.

I am happy to be here today, in Nijmegen, at a university where I clearly recognise elements of that vision.

You therefore seem to be just the right community to further explore the relationship between happiness and education with me.

Let me illustrate this with a quote: ‘What bothers me is that everyone wants to climb further and further up the ladder.’ Close quotation marks.
These were my own words, from an interview with the Volkskrant two years ago. I am quoting myself not because it was such a brilliant statement, because it wasn’t. Political competitors and the odd columnist still plague me with it - at least with their interpretation of my statement: as if I was trying to deny young people the right to continue studying.

I am quoting myself because that one sentence caused such a commotion and even anger, while the sentence is still solid as a rock. Certainly when you hear the context:

‘What bothers me is that everyone wants to climb further and further up the ladder. With a pre-university diploma, a Dutch VWO, everyone wants to go to university. They feel an MBO diploma, for vocational education, wouldn’t be good enough, even though it’s also a good diploma. It is more important to get the right student in the right place.’ End of quote.

This quote is all about what I now call the ‘narrow concept of happiness’ in education. Individual happiness. That of school pupils or students. Or, in this case: the parents?

I recently heard a Norwegian colleague illustrate this with a decidedly poignant example: ‘An unsuccessful lawyer is better than a successful plumber.’

It’s a quote that conceals a world of unhappiness. Of always having to be on your toes so you don’ fall flat on your face. Of always being at the bottom of the class. Of not being able to play with your friends because you have extra lessons. And, once you’ve finally become that unsuccessful lawyer, of not being able to see your children grow up because you have to work late night after night. Because, in fact, you can’t keep up with the pace.

Until recently, this is what it was like in South Korea. School pupils were pushed into achieving results that were beyond their capacity. Children worked their entire school career towards a single central examination that would determine the level of education they could then follow. On the day of the exam, other pupils from lower classes came out to wish them luck, and planes were grounded so the final years pupils would not be disturbed on that important day. The results were positive: South Korea was consistently at the very top of all manner of rankings that compared educational performance.

On the other hand, no other nation had as many unhappy students. South Korea was struggling with a shockingly high number of suicides among its young people, deaths
that were related the psychological pressure of being successful at school. That pressure was immense because family honour was at stake, and poor results sometimes involved financial sanctions.

The Netherlands scores well when it comes to educational achievements. Not as well as South Korea, or other top achievers like Singapore, Hong Kong or Japan, but certainly by European standards. At the same time, research carried out by organisations including UNICEF and the WHO has shown that Dutch youngsters are some of the happiest in the world.

So, it is possible.

It is tempting to think that this concerns a cultural phenomenon, that it can’t be changed. That it’s not just coincidence that the lands of the Tiger Moms are consistently the world leaders when it comes to educational achievements, but that it is culturally determined. And that we, here in the Netherlands, maintain the balance between happiness and achievement as matter of course.

But appearances are deceiving. South Korea has now also come to its senses, and education has just one aim: to produce happy citizens.

While in the Netherlands, the pressure to achieve is becoming greater. Take shadow education, for instance, whereby primary school children are given extra preparation for their secondary school transition tests, because their parents want them to be recommended for higher rather than lower levels of secondary education, even if the latter is more suited to the child. Homework institutes are flourishing because parents don’t want their children to drop a level after the first year of secondary school, even if it suits their academic ability better.

And it happens here too, at university. A recent study showed that more than one in three PhD candidates at the universities of Amsterdam and Leiden are at risk of becoming depressed. The pressure to achieve also plays an important role here, in particular the pressure to publish.

The balance between performance and happiness is a fragile one. Before you know it, the balance tips, like it did in South Korea, and we’ll be paying the price of
happiness for a slightly higher place in the educational achievement rankings. I find it too high a price to pay.

(adempauze)

That takes me from the 'narrow' to the 'wide happiness concept.' The purpose of education, you see, encompasses more than the development of individual students. Education also has a social purpose, and that is where the broader happiness context comes in.

I began this speech with Article 1 of the Constitution of the Batavian Republic from 1801. 'The happiness of the people is the highest law.' The happiness of all the people, in other words. Not just of one person, one individual, but of everyone.

In her book ‘Not for Profit’, philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes the danger of education that focuses on achievements, usefulness and results. She illustrates a quiet takeover in education, one that has taken place stealthily and silently. Arts and Humanities have made way for more ‘useful’ subjects.

'Distracted by the pursuit of wealth, we increasingly ask our schools to turn out useful profit makers rather than thoughtful citizens. Under pressure to cut costs, we prune away precisely those parts of the educational endeavour that are crucial to preserving a healthy society.'

Nussbaum describes a worrying development, one that I also see and which I have recently resisted. I’m talking about the power that students see as future employees; as production factors in the service of the Netherlands as an organisation. They think that Knowledge and Expertise should be a fast-track to the Checkout, while what a healthy society needs, says Nussbaum, is ‘thoughtful citizens’. Citizens that have developed broadly, think critically and are able to reflect. Citizens who have empathy and can place themselves in each other’s position.

In Nussbaum’s healthy society, students learn not only ‘useful things’ but are educated to become fully-fledged citizens; the leaders - value carriers - of the future.
In fact, Nussbaum presents us with a fundamental choice: do we want a healthy society? Or do we want a society in which usefulness and returns on investment are the governing factors, and in which everyone is continually competing? Like schools in South Korea, where the price of a place at the top is unacceptably high and sometimes even costs human lives?

In your company, here in Nijmegen, I think this is a hypothetical question. We probably all agree that we would choose Nussbaum’s healthy society, with all the responsibilities it involves.

Because if we made that choice, it would have consequences for education.

And then education would not be a competition. Not a race to the top, with winners and losers.

So, university is not a wholesaler supplying the labour market with as many students as possible in as short a time as possible.

But nor is university a supermarket where students, in the search for happiness, simply do a couple of popular subjects, those displayed at the checkout at eye level.

If we opt for a healthy, happy society, we are all obliged to meet certain requirements:

- Managers are required to formulate a clear vision on which they focus their management. So that they offer balanced programmes of education, taking into account happiness, from both a narrow and a wide perspective. In which there is room for self-development and social significance, but in which the labour market perspective also plays a role.

- Teaching staff have a central role in the learning community that is a university. It may be expected of them that they take their position as tutor seriously. Not only with regard to content but also on a personal level. That they support students in their development as ‘thoughtful citizens’, and that they do not look away when they see things that signal all is not well with a student.
• Students may also be expected to act as committed members of that educational community and to behave accordingly. That they feel responsible for their fellow students and act in accordance with their position as ‘value carriers’ of the future. That they make well-considered conscious choices with regard to their studies and are not distracted by short-sighted motives such as making a lot of money.

And you may expect of our politicians that we create the conditions with which you are able to maintain the balance between performance and happiness.

That’s easier said than done, I hear you thinking. A politician is just a passer-by, while we are here to stay. You’re right.

And that’s why I respect all of you - managers, teaching staff and students - who continually remind my successors of the fragile balance that we cherish. The delicate balance of high-quality education on the one hand, and happy students on the other.

Dear all,

Don’t allow what happened with Article 1 of the Constitution of the Batavian Republic to happen again. ‘The happiness of the people is the highest law.’ That statement did not stand its ground for long; the Article was amended after just four years. In 1805, it made way for something more modest: ‘The happiness of a nation’s people is mainly promoted by the wisdom of the laws it makes for them.’ It did, however, remain Article 1 of the Constitution.

At least while it lasted. Because the concept of happiness has now completely disappeared from the Constitution of the Netherlands. Article 22 comes the closest. It states: ‘The Constitution shall create conditions for social and cultural development and for leisure activities.’
So, the term ‘leisure activities’ is included in the Constitution, but ‘happiness’ no longer. It’s high time this was given some consideration in a next revision of the text.
Thank you for your attention.