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Opening Academic Year
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Talking about happiness … and the pursuit of happiness

The American Declaration of Independence is a document with roots in the Netherlands and the Enlightenment. It states that it is self-evident that the fundamental rights include the right to life, liberty and … not happiness but the pursuit of happiness. Thus, people have the right to try to be happy, not to be happy, and we should consider this to be self-evident. Everyone can be a fortune hunter, yet we exclude fortune hunters from our country by calling them economic refugees. Are two sorts of rights opposing each other here?

Many disciplines have been studying happiness in the past few years: philosophy, psychology, healthcare, economics. There have been discussions about the nature of happiness and how you can become happy. There is also a countermovement that claims that pursuing happiness makes us unhappy and that the photos posted by others on social media show a bizarre, positive life. But you are that ‘other’. Look at your own Facebook page to see how happy your life appears, to someone else.

So, it’s not a coincidence that, after last year’s ‘the week of coincidence’, the theme ‘talking about happiness’ marks the opening of this academic year. We’re going to consider wellbeing and happiness, work pressure and pleasure, but we’re going to do more than just consider this. We’re going to take action with one another, the entire university community. And that’s necessary. Last year, at the request of the student representatives in our participation council, our university drew up a questionnaire about the wellbeing of our students. Although most respondents were very content, nearly one-fourth of them reported feeling emptiness and loneliness. We as a university take this seriously, and the coming academic year will see a series of activities in response to this. The questionnaire was a study of the wellbeing of our students, not of their happiness; this is an important difference that we must think about carefully. We’re also going to take a look at our staff this coming year. As you experienced upon entering, work pressure is an important theme. How can we find the right balance between ambition and competition, possibilities and limitations, pressure and enthusiasm, work and private lives, wishes and demands, pursuing success and pursuing happiness?
In addition, as I stated here last year, we now have an active interdisciplinary ‘Happiness Platform’ coordinated by Hans Thijssen, who will be teaching an interdisciplinary course on happiness this academic year. The course will hopefully have a great impact; at any rate in a concrete 5 study points.

Our society is digitalising, robotising. We have more friends than ever before, even though they're digital and we've never even seen some of them. In her novel *Fuzzie*, Hanna Bervoerts shows us that this has consequences that we don’t yet understand. For example, she wonders ‘isn’t that what everyone wants, to bring happiness instead of just sitting around waiting for it?’ This is in keeping with the diverse buddy-projects at our university, like the ones for international students, for refugees, for the less advantaged. All of those projects can use volunteers; by helping people, showing them the way and simply being there for them if they need you, you can bring a bit of happiness and answer the question posed by Hanna Bervoets for yourself. Another example is our alumnus Mr Wubben. When he passed away last year, he left a considerable amount of his estate to the Radboud Fund with the stipulation to use the money to support students who need financial aid – just as he himself was supported when he was a student. We are grateful to him for this. Hanna also wrote: ‘happiness is a rocket that begins its descent as soon as you point to it’, thus subscribing to the idea that perhaps it’s all about pursuing happiness rather than having it. I’m curious to hear what she’s going to tell us later.

The VSNU, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands, has chosen the Digital Society as its overarching theme. A good choice because digitalisation is changing almost every domain in our society and it is extremely relevant to study and teach this phenomenon from diverse perspectives. I am convinced that it is crucial to invest in research on this subject; not only new technological issues and solutions, but particularly in the humanities, law and medicine. We are in the middle of a drastic revolution, perhaps just as drastic as the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. A revolution that affects each of us every day, often positively but often not. We need interdisciplinary scientific research, with important input from the humanities, in order to oversee this shift and to develop a way of understanding it. Without understanding, there can be no good answers. Radboud University is part of that changing society and, together with all sorts of groups from the city, the region, the province, the country, Europe and the world, we want to help shape how our society will develop. We do that through education, which has been highly respected for years, research, for which we once again have won noteworthy prizes this year, and definitely through translating our work to society. We are going to demonstrate much of this in the coming lustrum.

A perspective on both the nearby surroundings and the entire world is in keeping with an internationally oriented university that also seeks to be rooted in the local community. It is encouraging to see that many kinds of student activities focus on both. I would like to name two major issues that deserve our attention and that still call for solutions. Locally, but not limited to this level, the gap between the highly and less highly educated; and internationally, the situation in which scientific freedom is coming under pressure. With respect to the second, I think of Turkey because there, so close to Europe, even partly European, we see a significant decrease in freedom. I would like to stimulate the development of think tanks on these themes that, together with others, study how we can best approach these problems.
Starting on 1 October, Nijmegen will be the national education city for one year. Nijmegen was chosen by the National Education Week Foundation thanks to its wide range of educational facilities and the priority that the city gives to the development of young people. A decisive factor was the connection between the education policy in Nijmegen and the theme of the National Education Week 2017: equal opportunities. A justified choice given the tremendous primary schools, secondary schools, the ROC, a progressive HAN and, naturally, the best and broadest university for years. It is encouraging to witness more attention devoted to education, especially if that can lead to even more collaboration among the various educational institutes in the city. I am convinced that all sorts of education must and can be good so that, thanks to that education, everyone can make the best of himself or herself. That is not a matter of course and, unfortunately, not yet available to everyone.

In 2018, not only will Radboud University celebrate its 95th anniversary, but Nijmegen will be the European Green Capital for that year. Radboud university medical center and Radboud University will play a very active role in the programme that has been developed. The university is working in a number of ways on strengthening sustainability, both in teaching and research as well as in our own operations. We would hereby like to warmly invite students and staff to actively contribute to this by sharing your innovative sustainable ideas with us. These ideas (we’ll call them the Sustainability Testing Grounds) can be submitted until 10 October to the university’s sustainability website. The best ideas will be put into practice and will receive a subsidy of a maximum of 7,500 euros. Sustainability will play an even more central role in all of the programmes that we develop. We know that there are barriers to growth, to our planet.

Barriers are interesting places where two or more elements meet, places where there can be exchange, but also rejection. Barriers can exist so that we can learn from one another or fight with one another. Barriers deserve attention, deserve to be searched for, sometimes to be exceeded or to be overcome. A barrier is the place of changed perspective. Let ‘Change Perspective’, the wonderful motto of Radboud University, play a leading role again in this new academic year!