Radboud University
95th Dies Natalis
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Rector Magnificus Han van Krieken

95 years

Today we celebrate the 95th anniversary of the Radboud University. I’m sure that those who founded this university would be proud to see what the Radboud University has become, and, maybe more importantly, has achieved for the Catholic Community. Because that’s why the idea of a university had arisen. The Roman Catholic community in the South of the Netherlands felt second rate, not having the same opportunities as others. The founders had the vision, that through education (and not protest, actions or even violence) they could achieve the emancipation that was needed. And indeed, that was achieved. Perhaps the 4 Prime Ministers that came from this university could be seen as an example of that success.

Does this history still have a meaning today? My answer is a whole hearted yes. Although the Netherlands is much more a meritocracy then it was a hundred years ago, there are still communities who can benefit from access to higher education, communities where a pathway into higher education is still characterized by frontrunners. Radboud University is still one of the Dutch Universities that has the highest number of first generation students, meaning, students who come from a family in which no others have a university background. Does that mean that we are a welcoming and open university where everyone feels at home?

No, we are not yet, and we want to be just that. Radboud University indeed wants to be the place where everyone with the talent for academic thinking feels at home. Regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion or political views, students should receive the education that brings them forward in our society. That was very well seen by the founders of Radboud University: emancipation through education enables individuals to develop themselves, and, indeed give back to society what they have learned. Giving back has always been in the genes and memes of our university and our students, and I am proud of that. Giving back by serving is possible and done in many ways, and I notice in the students of today, that this is still important to them.

But are we welcoming enough? I recently talked to parents of a student of our university at Radboud Invites, a day when thousands came to see what happens at our beautiful campus. These parents spoke Dutch well, but I could hear it was not their mother tongue. Upon my question where they originally came from, they did not want to disclose that: they wanted to be Dutch. They were very positive that their son was studying at Radboud University, but they had a message for me. Their son was interacting well with Dutch students, but he still felt like an outsider. Dutch students were friendly and helpful, but he had no Dutch friends; his friends were all from the community of the internationals, or as these parents indicated: the others. They asked me whether students from Limburg and Friesland could be friends with each other, and what their son could do to really feel like part of our community. I said yes,
they could, but I still need to find out what their son could do to become the friend of a Dutch person.

Recently, I chaired a meeting on how to become an inclusive university with students and employees of our university, with a very diverse background, it was a meeting with a very open but critical spirit. Many examples that were mentioned included a lack of openness, and of a welcoming atmosphere. The time was too short to come up with solutions, but making the problem clearer is a start. If any of you have suggestions, I would be happy to receive them. Interestingly enough, after the meeting, our community of Roman Catholic students asked why they were not invited, and I had to admit, that I had indeed invited the organisation of Muslim students, but not the Catholic students: maybe my blind spot, feeling that at our university they did not need to be part of the discussion, but obviously that was a mistake of mine.

As said, education is a route to emancipation, but does that mean that emancipation is a success if very large proportion of the population gets a university degree? I think not, but there is a strong tendency to have as many people as possible in university, even if this could mean lowering the quality of education. I believe that this is the wrong direction to take. For many reasons. The most important is, we should not only value academic thinking, but also the practical and vocational skills that are needed in our society. In fact, talents of people are very diverse, and it is a pity when our society does not value the talents that are not academic. In the Netherlands we have great Universities of Applied Sciences and also great institutions of vocational training. These institutions bring fantastic potential to the young and we should be proud of that. We should be proud of well-educated and happy hairdressers, nurses, engineers, physiotherapists, doctors, art-historians and the like. And maybe we should be less proud of unhappy university students who make their grade but cannot do what their real passion is.

Today we honor the people who have used their talents and abilities to change their environment, research area or society as a whole. Our attention goes to two special students, a special employee, a writer, and three researchers who have reached beyond their fields and are world renowned. We celebrate excellence. Not because it is only excellence that counts. But we admire excellence, because it inspires us to make the best of our talents. I was recently pointed to the possibility that praising successful individuals may give the unwanted signal to those who are less visibly successful. The signal that they do not count. In a time of loneliness, fear of missing out, burn-out, in all, a sense of loss of well-being, that would of course be the wrong signal.

The signal we want to send is that it is great to enter the unknown, to think and change your mind, to interact with others and that there are individuals of whole different background who can inspire us. Radboud University wants to be the place where everyone is welcome, feels at home, so that talent can flourish. Getting the best out of yourself is not always easy, often a struggle, but mostly rewarding.

I hope this afternoon will indeed inspire you, to change perspective, with trust, a feeling of community, with curiosity, with respect to individuals.