Speech by Rector Magnificus Han van Krieken
On the occasion of the 99th Dies Natalis

Opportunities on a volcano

A speech on the 99th anniversary of our university feels rather special. Not quite 100 yet, but still special. Equal opportunities have been an important theme in the past 99 years, and they still are today. After all, our mission, as Radboud University, states that we contribute to equal opportunities for all. Later today, I will have a chance to ask Souha Kanj about the situation in her homeland, Lebanon. Are there still opportunities there, let alone equal ones?

In addition to teaching, research, and sharing knowledge with society, Dutch universities have had a legal task to focus on their students' personal development and promote their social responsibility for a long time. A few years ago, the latter concept was further defined as meaning that the institution, or its representatives, must refrain from any discriminatory actions or words. This is a rather narrow understanding of social responsibility and says nothing about personal development. Before the summer, the Education Inspectorate invited me, in my role as Rector, to reflect on this aspect of Dutch law: How does Radboud University put it into practice? I did not find this to be an easy question, and what follows is my attempt at an answer.

In our university's ambition document, entitled 'A significant impact', we have set out a clear course with a strong emphasis on formulating and defining our social task. To give you an example, our philosophy students are already invited to consider sustainability issues from their discipline's perspective. An invitation that we will, as announced last year, soon extend to all our students. In addition, in 2020, we launched a programme for promoting our students' wellbeing, including a plan to guarantee that personal development is an important aspect of every student's study programme. Furthermore, in our Diversity, Inclusion and Equality programme, we work with our students and staff to make sure that our university doesn't just refrain from, but also actively combats discrimination. Is this enough?

Last year, at the Dies Natalis celebration, I expressed my concern about the term 'Dutch Only', which was being used by some student houses when recruiting new tenants. To me, this was a form of discrimination, coming from of our own students. How can we do something about this? It is still happening. By contrast, we have the massively positive responses of our students and staff, as well as of local residents and businesses in Brakkenstein, to opening parts of our campus to asylum seekers (see Gelderlander article).

As mentioned in 'A significant impact', we give form to our social responsibility by contributing to equal opportunities for all. But how do we do this? Over the past 99 years, Radboud University has, through its study programmes, given many people a real opportunity to engage at various levels in society. Today, as then, our university continues to play an emancipatory role, among other things, by training a remarkably
high number of ‘first-generation students’. Did you know that to this day, more than half of our students come from families where neither parent has completed a university programme? But our responsibility goes further still. Last year, our Faculty of Arts launched Letterprins (Letter Prince), a free game, based on scientific insights, that invites children to enjoy reading through play, especially where this is not self-evident in their home situation. This creates opportunities. Hopefully, it will allow us to help reduce the gap in society between people with different levels of education. For secondary schools and other interested parties, we have developed the Demos game, which gives insight into the workings of our democracy. And here is another, very different example of how our research contributes to bridging gaps: in the Ooijpolder, our researchers have joined forces with farmers and nature conservationists to create a sustainable nature, agriculture and livestock-farming programme.

Right now, however, there are many other opportunities in which Radboud University can play a role. So much is happening, in the Netherlands, in Europe, and around the world, that you can hardly keep up: climate change, war, mutual distrust, growing poverty. It looks as if everything is going wrong at once, which can feel overwhelming, and I hear that even optimistic people are more concerned than ever all around me. Are we nearing the end of an era, a tipping point, disruption? Possibly; when you’re in the midst of it, it’s rather hard to tell. History teaches us that such periods can be confusing for the people living through them, but that they are just as often not perceived as such. The expression ‘Dancing on the volcano’ comes from 1830, a year of revolution in the Netherlands, including the secession of Belgium. For most people, however, life in 1831 was not very different from life in 1829. Twelve years later, the poet Heinrich Heine added to the quote... “but we do dance”: it was a year of peace and great technological progress. This volcano metaphor has since often been used in art, and it seems very applicable to us today: we are reluctant to let go of many of our achievements and luxuries, while at the same time knowing that things must change if we are to stop the depletion of the Earth’s resources. Changing our lifestyle, the way we eat, how much we travel, these are hard things: we really do seem to be dancing on a volcano that is about to erupt.

Or can we see our current time as one of opportunities? The opportunity, for example, to reflect on the values that matter to us: the value of work and how it can drift into excessive work pressure, the importance of relaxation and how it can drift into hedonism, taking good care of yourself and your loved ones and how this can drift into egotism or discrimination. At Radboud University, we have, this past year, led a broad dialogue on our identity and core values: connection, curiosity and reflection. Based on this, we can now make clear statements, such as “we do not train students for the market, but to get the best out of themselves”, “we focus on studying the unknown, driven by our curiosity, not by corporations and governments”, “we care more about people than about the organisation.” And although this is all much easier said than done, I believe that working and thinking from these values is a source of incredible opportunities!
Today, we are celebrating our university's anniversary; it is a day of celebration, and we shall dance on a volcano indeed, the volcano of a fermenting society. And then, we will roll up our sleeves and get to work on the many opportunities this bubbling volcano is offering us!