The university ecosystem
Rector's speech on the occasion of the Dies 08-05-2026

This spring, Radboud University presented its new strategy, *Connected for Impact*. Our mission was, and remains, to contribute as a knowledge institution to a healthy, free world with equal opportunities for all. This mission, formulated six years ago, was rooted in our Catholic history of emancipation; we have revisited it and infused it with concrete ambitions. One of our key ambitions is the pursuit of excellence in five thematic areas in which we wish to distinguish ourselves: the functioning of the brain, values-driven AI, foundations of space and matter, sustainable health, and inequality and emancipation. Ambitions that fit our identity and are of value to us; they are, quite literally, 'waarden-vol' ('valueful': valuable). In this context, we are focusing on developing interdisciplinarity in our education, in keeping with our traditionally broad range of programmes. We want to bring our beautiful green campus to life, among other things by providing more student housing; we will collaborate more actively within our regional, national and international networks. And we want to become a more resilient and agile organisation so that we can stand firm in a future that is as yet unknown.

To make these ambitions a reality, the university is committed to connectedness: *Connected for impact*, as we have coined it, because we are and will remain an international university. Connectedness as a key concept in our strategy was partly introduced by Professor by Special Appointment Carmody Grey, who holds a teaching and research remit in Integral Ecology; she is affiliated with the Laudato Sí Institute, established within Radboud University and named after Pope Francis's encyclical on care for humanity and the world. According to Grey, connectedness extends beyond merely establishing loose connections. More than that, connectedness aims to actively build a network of sustainable connections within and beyond our university community. But in fact, the whole world is an ecosystem.

At an inspiring strategy meeting last year, Carmody Grey described the integrated ecological system as a thin but densely woven web of threads stretched across the world. I imagine it as a moving, breathing fabric of natural and human connections. Translucent almost, and fragile as a spider's web; you could pull it apart in an instant. Yet also sturdy, with many solid points where human intervention has given rise to buildings, organisations and industries — places we need, but which can also obstruct our view of nature and one another, and undermine our solidarity.

And more recently, a second membrane has been superimposed over that moving, breathing fabric: that of the information we exchange via information technology and artificial intelligence — a buzzing, flashing and crackling network that never stops and demands ever more of our attention. Sometimes it seems as though real life is taking place within that information membrane, as though we, as human beings, live there. Yet at the same time, we remain physical beings in a physical environment, and we must treat that environment — and one another — in a far more sustainable way. After all, everything is interconnected: challenges in the fields of health, climate, the economy, society and technology are interlinked and call for a holistic approach, a broader perspective that takes into account different interests but also a common interest that raises questions about social justice and human dignity.

That entire ecosystem — moving and breathing; vulnerable and strong at the same time — evokes a strong sense of responsibility; within that system, we are dependent on one another and need one another. Put simply, we do not live solely for ourselves, nor do we *learn* solely for ourselves. Based on this ethical compass, we encourage scientific research with a lasting impact and train students to

become inquisitive, critical and engaged individuals, with their sights set on the world and equipped with new forms of scholarship and *literacy* for the world of tomorrow that we wish to impart to them. We consider sustainability literacy to be essential; that is to say, students learn to recognise that every discipline is relevant if we are to take the United Nations' broad sustainability goals seriously. We consider AI literacy to be equally important, which is why we invited Pim Hazelager, Professor of AI, to deliver last year's Dies Lecture. It is essential that students learn to be aware of the influence, the possibilities and the undesirable aspects of AI in every discipline. In the future, we will no longer be able to do without such forms of literacy, regardless of the scientific expertise in which you are trained or work.

That choice is what defines us as Radboud University: a broad-based university that wishes to remain so, not because we have historically grown in this way, but because we need the integrality of perspectives within that ecological network of knowledge. It is also for this reason that, to this day, our educational programme has always included courses focusing on ethics, philosophy and societal orientation. Students learn to work from a multi-voiced and multidisciplinary perspective. In this way, study programmes can also equip students with reflective literacy. Because what they will need most of all in the future is the ability to make concrete connections between different disciplines and perspectives. And sometimes that simply means acknowledging that disciplines do not yet understand one another, and accepting that perspectives appear to be mutually exclusive. That is precisely where the challenge lies: to hold the middle ground and remain firmly rooted, creating space for one another, listening and arguing in a way that is clear and understandable.

Maintaining a broad outlook in these times is a challenge for universities, now that politics and the business world often focus more on technology and economics than on people and culture, and now that fewer students are finding their way into the humanities. We will need to make efforts in the coming years to enable the various academic disciplines — which are so relevant to one another and essential for an integrated perspective — to connect, particularly in education. Study programmes will need to engage in more exchange and actually make space in their curricula to allow their students to be introduced to other relevant areas of expertise. Because we are going to simplify the organisation of education, this can actually happen. After all, just like the wider world, our own little world — the university — is an ecosystem of relationships; we need one another, and we are becoming increasingly aware of this.

Not to mention the fact that we are also connected to other networks in science, education, the business world, our region, and across the globe. Increasingly, our scholars and their students are working in Living Labs alongside partners in our local community, such as the municipality, NXP, Alliander, OnePlanet, Johnson & Johnson, and the agricultural sector, to address scientific and societal challenges. For example, we are committed to promoting sustainability in the semiconductor industry, tackling grid congestion in the energy sector, innovating in health technology, ensuring the responsible use of AI by public authorities, and strengthening sustainable and effective agricultural techniques. We will soon hear about an example of such a Living Lab in Hans de Kroon's Dies Lecture.

Of course, we cannot do this without the involvement of other parties. Fortunately, the new government has committed itself to allocating more resources to research, education and impact. We are in engaged in discussions with the municipality regarding more student housing and the active promotion of our beautiful green city as an attractive home for students and scholars from near and far. This is urgently needed, as we are committed to growth and development, and we aim to bring together a larger, also international, group of people from diverse backgrounds, beliefs and disciplines, to learn from one another and develop new knowledge.

None of this is smooth and effortless, because with all these different people, the wider world is also increasingly entering our university ecosystem. It requires effort from us all to keep a lively conversation going on our beautiful campus, even when we disagree. It is precisely because of our university's origins that maintaining a middle ground is so important. Yes, we too have had to deal with intense tensions over ideological differences, and no, these tensions are not yet resolved. Now more than ever, we must be firm in our conviction that, as a knowledge institution, we stand at the heart of society, and that the quest for knowledge is one in which everyone of good will is welcome to participate.

Our academic freedom goes hand in hand with the responsibility to keep an open mind and not to rule out certain perspectives in advance. Academic leadership requires open dialogue with sound arguments. If that is not possible here, in our university ecosystem, where then? Everyone in our community is accountable for this, in a subsidiary capacity, because we are all masters of our own literacy and responsible for our own role in the ecosystem. Let us hold each other to account on this, whilst ensuring the safety of everyone on campus. There is no place for exclusion or incitement to hatred and violence, nor for anti-Semitism, Islamophobia or other forms of discrimination. The university is a privileged place for the collective pursuit and sharing of knowledge. Our behaviour in this regard should serve as an example to ourselves and to those around us.

At the start, I mentioned that our strategy aims for excellence in thematic areas where we wish to distinguish ourselves — integral ecology was not mentioned amongst those five themes, but you will now understand that this theme is actually an overarching one with a comprehensive perspective. That is why we have chosen this as the theme for our Dies Lecture this year. Plant ecologist Hans de Kroon will conclude our meeting and aims to illustrate how the physical ecosystem of our own region poses questions to our university ecosystem, and vice versa. Many disciplinary perspectives are needed to understand something as seemingly simple as a bird and an insect on the agricultural soil of the Ooijpolder. And this research would not be relevant, nor indeed possible at all, were it not for the involvement of a great many people and organisations in and around the Ooijpolder. Each contributing from their own expertise, their own experience and their own dignity.

It is a thin, flexible, vulnerable yet strong network that connects our university with the world around us — an ecosystem of scholars and practitioners, of nature and artefacts, information and digitisation, with potentially far-reaching implications. Literate in connectedness to make a real impact, so that we, as a university, connected to our rich tradition, can offer a coherent and hopeful perspective on the challenges of our time.

As the Executive Board, we recognise that this is indeed a challenging time for our university ecosystem, with many staff and students feeling more pressure than before. We must all continue to work hard, while continuing to listen to one another to ensure that we do not lose sight of each other as we navigate all these transitions. As the Executive Board, we too must set an example in this regard and we are committed to fostering connection, innovation, and reflection in our own actions. By engaging more frequently with the university organisation and entering in dialogue with staff members and students. By hearing where people see opportunities and what we need to take into account during these challenging times.

I wish us all an integral, hopeful outlook on research and education in the coming years from our wonderful Radboud University.