

Speech Wilco Hazeleger, Opening Academic Year 2025 (English translation)

Beste mensen, *dear all*,

Today I will speak to you in Dutch. Of course I would also like to welcome our international students, colleagues and guests here today. We are and remain to be part of the global endeavor of science and scholarship. Welcome. My speech will be available in English after the Opening of the Academic Year.

Today, I have the honor of addressing you for the first time as rector at the Opening of the Academic Year. It has been more than five months since I started as rector of this fantastic university. Of course, I already knew that the UU is fantastic. I had already experienced that as Dean of the Faculty of Geosciences. Nevertheless, over the past few months, I have also gotten to know new sides of UU, and above all, a lot of new people who make the university what it is.

I have made an introductory round of visits across many parts of the university: from practical rooms to study associations, and even student houses. Time and again, I met people who are proud of who we are together. I spoke to highly engaged students from study associations who really make our university a community, and other—especially international—students who feel truly at home in Utrecht because of this. A place they affectionately called ‘cosy’. I spoke to researchers who show that science matters, from studies of experiences at the Legal Aid Bureau in the neighbourhood to research into crops that are resistant to climate change, and of course I spoke to the administrators who make it all possible and the members of the student and employee participation that really makes a difference. We really do team science.

That is science in action: knowledge that does not end up in a drawer, but is shared, tested, and put into practice. And that addresses the question behind the question. This is also the science we want to practice at Utrecht University: for society, and especially with society. It is more than just communicating how fascinating science is, and it is also much more than applied research. It is based on fundamental research, but it is also about reciprocity between the university and society.

The role of the university in this is unique. We have a disciplined approach to studying and testing, we share our findings, from local to global, and we always remain open to criticism and act on it. Science is never finished. That openness is the promise of *open science*. It is something we should strive to be world champions in in Utrecht, and we are already well on our way.

By opening our doors to society and practicing open science, trust in science increases. That is not to say that trust in science is low. In fact, according to recent research by the Rathenau Institute into trust in institutions, science still ranks proudly at the top when asked about institutions that people trust. But here too, inequality is increasing. People with higher incomes, higher levels of education, and progressive political views have more trust. Lower incomes, conservative and less educated people have declining trust, especially in the approach to complex social issues such as inequality and democracy.

This presents us with an important task. Education and research at a university are not separate from society, nor are they neutral or impartial. We make choices and must continue to do so. We must open our doors even wider to society as a whole, not with a warning finger, but with an open attitude and an inviting perspective on the future.

What we are and want to be is also in line with the European ideal. We are guided by a shared identity of freedom, equality, open and democratic institutions, with attention for everyone. The university is one of the institutions in society that wants to and can contribute to this, and that comes with responsibility.

The situation in the world, and in Gaza in particular, requires us to act with a moral compass. There is great human suffering. As an academy, we have a duty to provide space for dialogue and for research that contributes to understanding and to solutions that do justice to peace and justice. This requires openness, even when it is difficult. It requires us to continue to meet each other in dialogue, with respect for differences. But it is also clear when there is genocidal violence and a line has been crossed.

The call by demonstrating students and staff has been heard by me and my colleagues. We have effectively stopped or suspended all institutional collaborations with Israeli parties and will not start any new collaborations; a boycott is in place until further notice. I also welcome the call by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to exclude Israel from the European Horizon program, even though this has not been followed up.

Nevertheless, I do not wish to prevent collaboration between individual academics. Such collaboration is valuable and fits within academic freedom, which is at the heart of an open scientific community. How and with whom we collaborate always requires careful consideration. I can inform you that a committee has been set up to advise the Executive Board on cooperation with partners in countries where there is armed conflict.

The vision on collaboration and Open Science is part of our new Strategic Plan, which Anton discussed at the beginning of this meeting. This university policy means that we will be investing in a number of projects that contribute to that dot on the horizon. Our words and ambitions are thus being translated into concrete actions, because despite budget cuts, we will have to continue to invest in high-quality education and research.

The first project focuses on collaboration with society, which I would almost say is obvious. We have asked our Vice-Rector for Research, Ted Sanders, to make it clearer how we are making an impact at Utrecht University and how we can strengthen that impact. We are starting locally, on our campus at the Science Park and in the city center, and will build this up to the city and region of Utrecht, to Europe, and to the world. In addition to direct impact, this will also increase our chances of obtaining external funding, particularly from Europe, which will focus on both fundamental research and innovation in the near future.

We make an impact not only through our research, but also – or perhaps even more so – through our education. We educate people who will make a difference in society, as evidenced by the student awards presented earlier today. We want students who study or plan to study in Utrecht to be fully aware that we do not just think about society here, but are part of that society.

This is also part of our updated educational model. This model focuses on personalization and socialization of students, in other words, the development of students in the context of their environment. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration is of course very important in this regard, and we give students plenty of room to do this. Resources have been set aside to support all study programs in offering education according to this model and to support the lecturers. All our programs will be undergoing a thorough review in the coming period. In this way, we are investing in the future.

Because despite the fact that we are facing budget cuts, we will continue to do so: invest. One does not exclude the other. We will continue to invest in what is at our core: high-quality science and excellent education.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish you, our students and colleagues, an inspiring new academic year. I look forward to getting to know you even better in the coming period and to working with you to increase our impact on society through our education and research. We are at the beginning of a new year, full of opportunities and challenges. The wind may not always be favorable, but that is precisely when we can show how strong the university is. Next year, we will celebrate the university's 390th birthday and our 78th lustrum anniversary together with UMC Utrecht. In line with my remarks today, the collaboration with the city and region will be central to the celebrations.

And then, after the university song, I can invite you all to drinks in the Pandhof. Our beadle, Judith Jens, will lead the procession from the Domplein to the Pandhof. Today is her very last academic ceremony of this scale, as she is retiring. Judith has been our beadle since 2019. During that time, she has guided thousands of PhD students and new professors in the University Hall and led the procession here almost ten times during the Opening of the Academic Year and the Dies, including placing this chain of office around my neck. Judith, we will miss your calm and dignified style, your overview, but also your collegiality and humor behind the scenes. Thank you, Judith!

And now I hand over to the student choir Medusa with the university song, and I invite you all to sing along at the top of your voices.