

Maastricht as an academic musketeer in Europe.

The significance of the regional impact of universities and the importance of collaboration with the public and private sectors.

Joost van den Akker, Regional Minister of Economic Affairs, Province of Limburg

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Dear President, Rector, Vice President Timmermans, Governor and Mayor, dear ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour and very special occasion to speak to you today. Fourteen years ago, I attended the opening of the academic year for the first time. Here in the MECC, with as keynote speaker former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. In an era of an optimistic and enlarging EU, I was about to start European Studies; barely refreshed from the INKOM and some days of scratching chewing-gum at the pavements in Venlo hoping to become a prospective member of Saurus rowing association. As luck would have it, I obtained an entrance ticket and listened to Kohl's *Begeisterung* continuing to believe in Europe. He described how, here in 1992 he and his fellow government leaders had brought about the Maastricht Treaty after extreme effort. Back here at the MECC, he could proclaim that it had been a success. "This Europe is especially your Europe," he impressed and inspired the students.

Since 2004, a lot has changed. Maastricht University is firmly established in our province - this Brightlands region- up to Venlo but also abroad with the Brussels Campus and institutes in cooperation with Aachen University.

At the same time that Helmut Kohl passed away, the belief in Europe revived after the election of French President Emmanuel Macron. Maastricht embraces the historical boundary between the Latin and the Anglo-Saxon cultures which so much characterise our European diversity. Discovering the city, today's new students may have come across the statue and recently exposed monument dedicated to count *D'Artagnan* – the leading French musketeer of King Louis the 14th who fell at the siege of Maastricht in 1673. Determination, courage, fairness, loyalty and being honourable are some of his features. The pedestal inscription "One for All and All for One" was attributed by Alexandre Dumas' novel. Those are actually terms that perfectly apply to our university.

Determined to be leading in problem-based learning, brave to set-up competing studies such as the Science Programme and University Colleges, fair to its students, staff and neighbourhoods, loyal to the city and its partner institutions, and offering several honours colleges to excellent academics.

Maastricht has revealed as an academic musketeer in Europe.

1. Brightlands' mission to address challenges of society

Universities should care about what is happening in the world around us and in our region.

Events do matter to us.

How can we understand and learn from the current challenges of society? Over the last decade, Limburg's entrepreneurs, academia and the province have joined forces to boost academic knowledge and its application in new products and services. With our partners the UM, MUMC, DSM, Zuyd and APG among others, we have invested more than four hundred million euros in the development of our Brightlands campuses in Maastricht, Geleen, Heerlen and Venlo. This volume of investment is rather exceptional for a regional government. But at the height of the economic crisis, we deemed those investments indispensable in order to strengthen our economic and social structures.

The impact of the university on this region is significant and undisputable. A recent study estimates that the overall turnover thanks to the university is €1.1 billion euros. 17.000 students, more than 5.000 employees and about 1.500 indirect jobs contribute to the extremely low unemployment rate of 3.8 percent in Limburg; lower than the national average. These figures reveal that the collaboration between the public and private sector has been quite successful: apart from the students, 12.000 people work at our campuses, which count almost 300 companies.

What is the next step for our Brightlands campuses? This summer our national government has outlined its new mission-driven approach to address societal challenges and economic chances. The activities at Brightlands perfectly connect to these future four missions, contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals:

1. *Energy transition and sustainability* - which form the current core task of the Chemelot Campus and site in Geleen on chemicals and biobased materials. Since the transformation from the Dutch State Mining industry to sustainable biochemicals, this area is characterized by energy and climate change.
2. *Agriculture, Water and Food* – which are at the heart of healthy nutrition and plant breeding at the Greenport Campus in Venlo, for instance with the newly launched academic Chair in Youth, Food and Health.
3. *Security*, particularly cyber security is tackled at the Smart Services Campus in Heerlen, with techruption, artificial intelligence and blockchain as new tools of data science to tackle the opportunities and threats of digitalisation.
4. *Health and Care* are coped with by intense cooperation between the Health Campus here around the corner. Last week, I visited two unique top-level institutes. I am very much impressed by the revolutionary research on regenerative medicine, multi-model molecular imaging and the nanoscopy of cells.

The research, development and education at our four campuses should enable technological breakthroughs, connected to the European Commission's Horizon Europe programme. Internationalisation is of paramount importance, not just for tomorrow's *avant garde* in science, but also because it offers huge economic advantages to this region and our country. Rightly so, our cabinet considers that internationalisation carried out by knowledge institutes is key to achieve these goals; particularly to support innovative small and medium sized enterprises.

That is exactly what we have been doing here in Limburg at our Brightlands campuses. I am very proud of the academic staff, students and stakeholders who have put so many efforts to build this unique alliance of cross-border knowledge. We will need each other's commitment to carry out our missions: One for All, and All for One. In the end we prosper more if we open up borders and free trade relations, also with China, Russia, the US and the UK. Yes, Great Britain remains located just across the Channel, Deal or No Deal. What other message should be sent from the city where the Euro was created, the internal market to be completed, fostering free trade, freedom and democracy, stability and prosperity on the European continent?

2. International students and English study programmes

Talking about internationalisation, indeed, we are now engaged in a debate about education and the net financial effects of international students and whether that's profitable for the Netherlands. An argument often heard against offering more study programmes in English, is that it supposedly leads to our own Dutch-speaking students being crowded out by foreign ones or not.

However, from time immemorial, the Netherlands has been a country with leading trade relationships, discovering the globe and willing to work in other languages. We're even good at it! And we have to keep it that way. Why is that?

First, because also Dutch students benefit from English taught education, not the least because the larger variety and availability of subjects, literature and staff. And by the way, no one is obliged to study in English. At this University, also across the Netherlands and Flanders, there is a wide variety of Dutch-spoken programmes to choose from.

Second, if you then opt for English taught programme, it prepares you for the international market. It enables us to cooperate in networks of research and development, which occasionally take place in English. Also at our own Brightlands communities many businessmen and women, academic staff and students are using English as their working language.

Finally, because it makes our institutions accessible and attractive for the best international staff and students. They also contribute to the high rankings of Dutch universities worldwide.

In The Hague some are fighting a rear-guard battle. It's not the question whether we should limit the number foreign students or English spoken study programmes, but rather to ensure that we win the battle for talent in this cross-border region. Therefore, European universities should provide uniform access to higher education. I favour an offensive academic community that shifts borders, builds bridges across nationally-tinted sentiments, and is ready for a world that is simply interdependent. An academic community that makes optimum use of that situation, and hence remains open to Dutch and foreign citizens.

Being a pioneer once, other countries are now taking over one of our core commercial qualities, namely the ability to speak foreign languages. We might even be taken over by the French! In an era that even President Macron speaks English without reservation, should we retreat behind the Dutch Water Line?

3. Maastricht as a European University

Precisely President Macron launched the idea of creating some 20 'European Universities'. A network across the EU, strengthening strategic partnerships between higher education institutions by 2024. These bottom-up networks will enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of European universities. I am convinced that Maastricht can be one of these European Universities. Not because it is based in the most European city of our country but because its international oriented study programmes, networks and diverse major European student population.

President Macron, be most welcome to Maastricht. Experience the *musketeer's mentality* of this knowledge crossing borders. Please don't stop at our fortresses like d' Artagnan, but make your camps at Brightlands here in Maastricht, Heerlen, Geleen and Venlo.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are a European University. Together with the city, we are working on Europe. We can bring this Europe to The Hague. As an academic musketeer. I wish all of you a very fruitful academic year. *En garde!*

Thank you very much.