

To the Hilt

‘University at its best. Courage and optimism’. I presented my programme for the 2013 rector elections under that heading. I had just resigned from parliament and was returning to university full-time – my old and only true love.

We already prided ourselves on being a great university - deservedly so. Our research was excellent, our education outstanding. We had a solid international reputation and enthusiastic staff. It was something to build on, but not the core issue of the elections.

That was: Are we more than a university scoring excellent results? Can we, do we want to also excel at how we do things internally? Do we have it in us to combine great results with a warm atmosphere at *KU Leuven*? We do. Undeniably. The two goals are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they go hand in hand. No university can excel when the people inside it are not contented.

To this day our close-knit team of creative, driven vice rectors and academic administrators have put one thing first: the creation of a warm, mutually supportive system of governance at all levels. *As well as* obtaining excellent external results. ‘We are the university’, was the idea that underpinned my first opening speech as newly elected rector. We. Us. All of us. With a strong emphasis on subsidiarity and implicit trust in all who work for *KU Leuven* – at whichever level, in whichever role, everywhere.

A university is not a company. Nor is it a place that randomly encourages participation but rarely co-governance; where an employee’s job satisfaction and happiness ultimately serve trading results – despite the profusion of magic formulas devised to paper over the cracks. Happiness should not be a performance indicator.

Neither is it a university college; where administrators are not elected but appointed; where the staff’s capacity for self-rule is not embedded. Its administrators are managers. But are they also driving forces? Not necessarily.

A university is unique, second to none. Its governance is a task shared by staff and students alike. It is a place where, together, we turn dreams into actions, where differences of opinion are held dear and where the occasional inescapable conflict is solved with determination *and* a profound respect for the individual - each individual, warts and all. Perfection is not a requirement. We turn our back on no one.

As an institution, a university must take an exemplary stance. It must lead the way - bravely so. It mustn’t bow to pressure from outside, not even over difficult issues. Our trajectory is not that of new objectivity and deductive thinking, of abstract plans that mechanically blanket an entire university, oblivious to its people. You do not carpet people with plans. You stimulate and help them pave their own way. We do not wish to alienate, but liberate.

A university is a house with many rooms. It adopts a general, clear course. An idea. A vision. A dream: that of excelling as a university, *and* at magnanimity. It is a dream we share. But we also value the beauty of dissimilarity. No faculty, no department is like any other. Hospitals have their own, specific atmosphere

and character. Research is a mixed bag, education richly coloured. One hundred flowers that bloom in a spirit of community building and fraternity. That spirit has thrived. Never have the ties between the university and the university hospital been stronger, closer. At our satellite campuses too, that unique *KU Leuven* feeling – *Kulak's* hallmark since day one – is growing stronger every year.

That is our university's strong suit. It is a place of unity, not uniformity. Good governance equals magnanimous governance. And magnanimous governance means taking on board major issues, a general vision, but always and invariably also circumstances, people, their longings, their dreams. Consistency means taking a firm stand without losing sight of each individual, also and most of all those who might fall by the wayside. That is how we have grown, day by day (we have the statistics to prove it): gradually, unobtrusively, without feelings of alienation.

One of the core sentences of my programme for 2013 was: 'A university should be a beacon of light for society'. Or, as Disraeli said: 'A university should be a place of light, of liberty, and of learning'. The idea could hardly be more topical! Fewer people fled to our continent four years ago, terror hadn't become part of our daily lives yet. Europe wasn't shaking under Brexit and the post-truth era had yet to begin. Now, more than ever, a university must speak up, map out sustainable perspectives for a society in quest of itself. A university's voice has to sound hopeful within the societal debate. It is a voice with many layers.

There is the voice of the researcher, who replaces false truths with real ones, and proves that in the long run, careful research and sharp analysis outdo pontificating self-righteousness. Who helps people live healthier, more comfortable lives, but also with more depth, with the audacity to be unsure, and a sense of nuance.

There is also the voice of the intellectual, whose broad culture and painstakingly acquired erudition yield broad-mindedness. He/she draws links and is not afraid to take up a brave stance. To find a river's source, you must row against the stream. A university, its professors and rector can rightfully be expected to play that role.

Courage and optimism are two requirements. The courage to increase the university's autonomy through constructive dialogue, on a par with politicians, ministers and their cabinets. We have an impressive record in that respect. Never before has *KU Leuven* been more present in the political and social landscape. We are everywhere, and have direct access to all the political, social and cultural actors that stake out the spirit of the times.

We also have excellent contacts with other universities. For the first time in history we presented an honorary doctorate together with our sister institution *UGent*: to Angela Merkel, a major symbol if ever there was one. The notion of 'university as a beacon of light' has also strongly influenced the profile of the rector at other Flemish universities. Last year, for example, the universities of Antwerp and Brussels elected highly communicative rectors who are not afraid to take part in the societal debate and do so with conviction.

Next to courage, you also need optimism. Ours has spurred us on to bring about important - albeit internally highly controversial - reforms in our educational/research policy.

Education is our own again. To the surprise of many in The Netherlands and Flanders, the old peer-review system - based on external reviews – has been cast aside. The system had its uses, but it had also had its day. An entirely new model, backed by *KU Leuven* and Minister Hilde Crevits, was introduced. That

of the institutional review. Today each university can develop its own educational vision, provided it is also able to sustain its quality. Ours is such a vision. That of the *disciplinary future self*, a model in which expert knowledge and a broad education go hand in hand. This year it has already yielded a fantastic institutional review, as well as animated discussions about education at *KU Leuven*, increased unity and a deeper appreciation of the educational aspect. It is a vision we will keep polishing up, rest assured. It certainly looks like it is here to stay. It has the requisite qualities, and elegance. The final outcome? More peace of mind and less red tape for all.

Our research policy too has been exploring new avenues, such as making project proposals less of an administrative maze. We may be moving steadily up the international rankings – however relative – but we also boast a well thought-out system of early stage financing for young professors. As the most innovative university in Europe, we recently laid the foundations – outside the traditional funding channels – for giving all three groups the oxygen they need to support more experienced researchers who might otherwise temporarily slip through the net. The University Hospital has been our experimental garden for future growth. Sufficient support, sufficient comfort, sufficient core funding increase each researcher's chances, and quality of life. That core funding will be one of our focal points.

Within the scope of these elections I would like to ask you to allow me to stay the course that was set four years ago, together with you. It marries respect, trust and consensus-based governance with excellent ranking results, growing international prestige and the continuous growth of *Leuven Research and Development*. The secret behind our formula? The conviction that trust trumps control, that dialogue beats a hearing, and that a face-to-face encounter is more credible than a nameless plan.

As rector I pledge total availability. Every member of the university can make an appointment for a chat, to make suggestions or voice criticism. If appropriate, it should be possible to arrange that appointment within a week – possibly early in the morning, I must admit. As I have been doing these last four years, I will attend PhD ceremonies, funerals and jubilees, student congresses and songfests, conferences and debates, appear in the media and on the political stage. I will defend our academics and their academic freedom tooth and nail, also and most of all when I disagree. I will not yield to external pressure when members of *KU Leuven* find themselves entangled in delicate procedures: legal protection is inalienable.

Some occasions call for silent diplomacy, others for valiant action; some call for a listening ear, others for a chat, some for thinking, others for action. But always in the service of our fabulous *KU Leuven*, which deserves the complete, unconditional dedication of its rector and his team. Sounds romantic, does it? At peak moments our university must be able to fuse romanticism and reality. Maybe not always. But often. More often than we dare dream. What we dare not dream, can never become reality.