

SPEECH EUROPE HUB EVENT, BRUSSELS, 19 FEBRUARY

Prof. Annetje Ottow, President of the Executive Board, Leiden University

Dear Lina Gálvez, dear Federica Mogherini, dear Members of the European Parliament, dear Colleagues, and dear Students,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you, in the heart of European democracy. A great opportunity for us all to discuss how we can narrow the gap between academic research and policy making in Europe.

Let me first thank you, Lina, and the Science and Technology Panel of the European Parliament, for hosting this event. I would also like to thank the colleagues from the Europe Hub for all their hard work. We are very grateful that you have made this event possible.

And a very warm welcome to our own Leiden students. I hope that your visit to Brussels inspires you and fans your so-called European Flame, although I am sure that those flames are already burning brightly inside of you.

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This year, Leiden University celebrates its 450th anniversary. A milestone that we are obviously very proud of. 450 years of scientific discoveries, of educating many generations of students and nurturing our incessant drive for innovation.

Yesterday evening, we celebrated our anniversary with a large group of Leiden alumni who live and work here. I am quite proud to share with you that we currently have over 1.500 alumni working and living in and around Brussels.

From the very beginning, our University has been an international institute with a global scope. For centuries, people from Leiden have travelled to the four corners of the world, in search of knowledge and new insights. We have established many research hubs and partnerships in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

Nevertheless, our heart is firmly based in Europe. For me personally, Europe is a part of my identity. I was raised here in Belgium, went to university in Leiden and then London. I spent many years as a practicing lawyer in Brussels, and later moved to the Netherlands to become a Professor of Public Economic Law. I feel very fortunate that Europe provided me with all these opportunities. I believe Europe has given us all many things to be grateful about.

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Our presence here today is obviously not coincidental. As a university, we want to take our responsibility and contribute to the European Project with our research and education. That is why we have created the Leiden University Europe Hub: a place where scholars and students from various disciplines and backgrounds come together to discuss, research and offer solutions for the complex issues that Europe currently faces.

For the Europe Hub, we chose four specific themes, or societal challenges, to focus on:

- Europe in the world;
- Energy, Environment and Health;
- Trade, Markets and Digitization;
- And The Foundations of European Integration.

The Hub builds research networks in Leiden and beyond, develops new curricula around European challenges, and organizes public events.

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One of the core foundations of Europe is the value we all ascribe to science. And this is more important than ever: we currently live in a world where facts are often mixed-up with opinions, even by some world leaders. Our European universities have to counter this development by holding up a mirror to society and our decision makers.

Yes, we have the obligation to refute certain political claims or discourage particular choices. We can do this by providing the proper facts and figures, and by thoroughly researching the often highly complex societal transitions we are currently experiencing.

Europe is reaching a tipping point, and we have to choose our path now. Do we want to provide hope, and strive for a future that is fair, democratic, healthy and sustainable? Or do we go down the road towards isolation, thereby breaking down the multilateral order, forgetting about equality, the environment and our respect for the rule of law?

I obviously choose the first path, and I assume you do, too. It is therefore of paramount importance that Europe keeps investing in research, innovation and education.

More and more European decision makers agree that we need to become more autonomous as an political and economic bloc. Our fields of industry should become more productive and

innovative, and a lot greener. We need, in essence, to invest more strategically in our future.

This will not be an easy feat. As the European Competitiveness Compass rightly states: “For European researchers and entrepreneurs, the route from discovery and patenting to the market is littered with barriers”.

But I am convinced that we can overcome these barriers. And, honestly, I think we need just to. Investing in fundamental science, in collaborative research, and in international cooperation, is the only way forward.

Let me illustrate this point with a slice of Leiden history. Some hundred years ago, Nobel Prize winner Heike Kamerling Onnes was a professor of experimental physics at Leiden University. He was the first person to liquefy Helium by creating temperatures in his laboratory just above absolute zero. By doing this, he discovered superconductivity.

Now, a century later, all quantum computers operate at that temperature level. Thanks to Kamerling Onnes’ discovery, we have these invaluable quantum computers with superconducting qubits at our disposal.

And the search goes on. Current young academics in Leiden, such as Evert van Nieuwenburg, are currently developing the software for the next generation of quantum computers.

We need to give people like Evert van Nieuwenburg, the “Kamerling Onneses” of our time, every opportunity to help us navigate through the transitional times we are experiencing.

We need to invest in these fields of research, these absolute game changers, in order to create and secure a competitive, strong, fair and safe European Union.

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Let me conclude by making this strong appeal to our European policy makers.

If we want to remain at the forefront of innovation, we simply HAVE to increase our investments in research, innovation and education at the EU level. A recent publication from the European Commission has shown that an investment of one Euro in research and innovation, generates an economic benefit between five to eleven Euro's. Taking into account that the Framework Programme is one of the very few EU programs that is fully spend each year, I call this a very good deal!

There are plans for a European Competitiveness Fund establishing an investment capacity that will support strategic sectors and technologies critical to the EU competitiveness, including research and innovation, and Important Projects of Common European Interest.

It is important to not only focus on investing in strategic technologies, but also in social sciences and social innovations.

Our Universities, our researchers can provide insight into the changing geopolitical landscape, offer solutions for a fairer distribution of wealth, help holding big-tech companies accountable, and empower especially our younger generation with the skills they need.

The future of Europe hangs in the balance. Lets tip the scales to her benefit by investing in our greatest asset: our continuing thirst for knowledge.

Thank you.