

# Facing the Future

*Keynote delivered by Luce van Kempen during the opening ceremony of the 2021–2022 academic year on Monday, 6 September 2021.*

In order to keep the holiday spirit alive, I will be taking you on a trip to Bologna today, where I spent this past summer. Bologna is home to one of the oldest functioning universities – if not the oldest functioning university – in the world. Situated next to the university, we find the *Due Torri*, the two towers, which are the city’s pride and joy. From above, you have a fantastic view of the entire city and with a little bit a luck, you might even be able to see as far as the mountain ranges of the Apennines on one side and to the Adriatic Sea on the other.

At least, that’s what I’ve been told. Because every day, dozens, if not hundreds of people, climb the 489 steps of one of the two towers, the *Torre degli Asinelli*. Some people who will not be among them, however, are students. It happens to be the case that the students of the Università di Bologna share the dogged superstition that if you climb the tower as a student, you will never get your degree. And given that the defence of my Master’s thesis only took place last Monday, I chose to err on the side of caution and stay below.

Standing at the bottom of the tower, a few questions crept into my mind. Because if we think about it further it’s pretty striking. Why should students only be able to make the climb once they’re wearing their laurel wreath? Should they only then be able to explore the world which they have previously only known from below from a new perspective? Should they only then be able to see how everything fits together and see what else lies on the horizon?

In ancient times, the towers were used as watchtowers to spot any advancing enemies and thereby be

prepared for the imminent threat. Anyone who looks at the publications coming out these days will see more than enough threats to students’ futures.

The most far-reaching threat being the climate crisis. This summer, communities all around the world were once again faced with the impact of global warming and more extreme weather conditions. We are headed towards a situation where planetary boundaries will be exceeded and there will be unprecedented loss of biodiversity. It is therefore unsurprising that many young people, myself included, have had sleepless nights since the publication of the most recent IPCC report. After all, what sort of future will we be facing?

At the same time, dark clouds have also been gathering from a social perspective. The generation now embarking on their university adventure faces unprecedented socio-economic challenges. As early as 2019, we at the Social and Economic Council (SER) identified a ‘toxic cocktail’ in play in society: student debt, flexible contracts, an overheated housing market – all of which is topped off with a colossal mental health crisis. Mix in a pandemic and two years down the line we have essentially seen every traffic light jump to red.

These two enemies have one significant similarity: We’ve been able to see them coming for a long time from the top of our watchtowers. And from a scientific point of view, we have an incredible amount of knowledge and expertise at our disposal to put a stop to these threats. We know about the damage caused by carbon dioxide and nitrogen. We know how to set up sustainable energy systems. At your university alone, you have a battalion of scientists at your disposal with solutions for a more robust and fair housing and labour market. However, time and again it turns out that the system we have all created is extremely complex and unmanageable. We are unable

to convert all the observations from above into concrete action. And as long as we leave only a select group at the top of our towers, thereby providing them with the opportunity to oversee the entire system, the systems will only become more complex and the problems more serious.

As a university, you too are a complex system. A system that cannot be easily tamed. To quote the late Donella Meadows (2009): the system called a university is made up of buildings, students, professors, administrators, libraries, books, computers. Perhaps even more important than all those physical elements, a university is made up of 'academic prowess' and 'school pride'. All those elements of your system are connected by information flows, such as strategic plans and diploma regulations or physical flows such as budget allocations and students moving on from their Bachelor's to their Master's. Your system also includes barriers that delay and hinder those flows.

Because connoisseurs of the work done by Meadows, one of the founders of systems thinking, know that the most important thing about a system is the purpose of that system. For the university, that purpose is: 'to discover and preserve knowledge and pass it on to new generations.' I think that's something we can all agree on.

However, in view of the challenges we see coming at us from the top of our tower, this is where a major task lies for you, as a university. I think all is well on the knowledge acquisition front. But how do we ensure that we truly pass on that knowledge to future generations? And that we pass on the right knowledge?

Because if we want current and future generations at the very least to be stepping into a stable future, we're going to have to pull out all the stops. That means more than just educating the brightest students, publishing the most groundbreaking research or winning the most prestigious prizes.

It means critically examining your own system as well

as your place within the systems. Only then will you be able to help give those younger generations that stable future. By way of encouragement, I would like to offer you three principles to help achieve this aim:

The first principle is that you properly maintain all components of your own system. After all, a complex system can only function properly if all its parts function together. If one of the elements fails or one of the connections breaks: the whole system will stall. For you as a university, this means that you must carefully observe how the elements are functioning and take any signals that point to vulnerabilities seriously. However, it also means looking ahead and asking yourself critical questions, such as: what elements shape the future of our system? Are we getting these new generations involved enough? Are we listening to their needs and acting accordingly? Naturally, you need not adopt everything blindly or go along with every whim or trend. However, you ought to be aware that every dent inflicted on your cogs today, will lead to faulty mechanics tomorrow.

The second principle is that, like those towers in Bologna, you are not only an anchor to your own community, but to the communities around you. A beacon on the horizon, for when you get lost and can't find your way. So you can at least orientate yourself in the right direction. The role of the anchor also means that you have a responsibility: a responsibility to remain reliable and, above all, visible. To open your doors and help as many people as possible to get to the top of the tower. And to share the discoveries you have made at the top with the people who are unable to climb all 489 steps – to allow them to be equally resilient.

Which brings me to the third principle. Passing on your knowledge to future generations means that you must transfer your knowledge successfully. In Bologna, bell towers are still used to celebrate ceremonies and for calls to worship, as well as to prepare the people below for danger. Bologna even has a prestigious bell ringers guild: the *Unione Campanari Bolognesi*. For reference, and an Amsterdam equivalent, this would be the Ajax of

Italian bell ringer associations. True specialists, who ensure that everyone below knows what they have to do. And although they all go through the same intensive training programme, the true connoisseur can hear exactly who is at the ropes and thus giving the melody their own personal colour.

As a university, you too have your own specialists. Your lecturers and professors. And they too have a crucial role in getting their message across. Similarly, each of them will have their own style and colour. It is in this regard that John Henry Newman (1852) spoke of the importance of the voice of the teacher. In order to truly impart to your students all your knowledge as a university and thus prepare them for the major challenges that they are to tackle later on, it is vital to give that teacher's voice freedom and flexibility. In order to provide students with as many perspectives and points of view as possible and to allow them to as many timbres as possible. To identify the nuances. Because there are no perfect solutions. That's because no one can play all those bells perfectly. Rather it is the interplay of all those personal tones that create the most beautiful melody.

That brings me to my conclusion. I hope that this coming year I'm able hear the bell towers of the UvA ring out loud and clear. I hope that you may serve as an anchorage to your own and other communities. And that we get as many people as possible to the tops of those towers. So that together we can tackle this climate crisis and that toxic cocktail: and thus face a bright future with a resilient spirit.

*References:*

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