

Speech Aalt Dijkhuizen

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Opening of the Academic Year, Wageningen University,
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Opening speech

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On behalf of the Executive Board of Wageningen University and Research Centre I would like to welcome you all to the opening of the academic year here in Wageningen. Formally the start of the year for Wageningen University, but for us a joint starting moment for the entire organization, including our specialized research institutes and our third pillar, the Van Hall Larenstein College.

For the opening event we are used to inviting speakers from outside Wageningen UR to share with us their view on relevant future developments. We are very pleased and honoured to have this time three distinguished speakers: Mister Wouter Bos, Member of Parliament and Leader of the Dutch Labour Party, Mister Joe Borg, European Commissioner for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs and Mister Roelf Venhuizen, Managing Director of NAM.

Ladies and gentlemen, last week we were very pleased to receive the news that for the second year in a row students valued Wageningen University as the best university of The Netherlands. The selection was made on the basis of 10 criteria, for example the quality of the course program, the quality of the scientific staff, the quality of the facilities, their preparation for the labour market et cetera. A great honour and a great compliment to all our people involved.

We are also pleased that for the fourth year in a row our university was able to attract more new students from the Dutch secondary schools than the year before. The latest figures show an increase of around 5%, with which we rank in the top of the fourteen universities in the Netherlands. Together with the enrolments from the Dutch polytechnics and from abroad we hope to welcome a total of more than 1100 new students at our university. At Van Hall Larenstein total figures show an increase of around 1% compared to the same time last year, which is in line with the average in the same domain, and predicts a total here of almost 1200 new students.

Ladies and gentlemen, the year was also successful because we achieved many interesting and valuable results from our research. And that is what we aim at, science for impact, for quality of life. It is far too much to summarize the outcome here and now. For that I would like you to refer to our website (www.wur.nl) and to our research reports and publications. What I would like to mention is that we were able to attract extensive so-called FES-funding for our Flowers & Food research initiatives, including two technological top institute programs for Food & Nutrition, as an extension of the Wageningen Center of Food Sciences, and for Green Genetics. In this strong and nationwide competition, 80 million out of the available 140 million euros were allocated to subjects related to Wageningen UR. A fantastic success, for which we owe many thanks in the first place to the Ministers of Agriculture and of Economic Affairs, and to all the people from inside and outside our organization who worked so hard on it. The prospects for the next round of funding are also quite good again.

Another success we could celebrate was the signing of a 4-year partnership program for 'Globalisation and Sustainable Rural Development' with the Minister for Development Cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mrs. Agnes van Ardenne. This partnership aims at an efficient and sustainable use of natural resources in countries in the South. Five million euros of additional funding will become available for research and training activities focusing on issues such as competing claims, biodiversity, international food chains and capacity building. An important success for our newly formed Wageningen International initiative, led by Dr Bram Huijsman, and in which we join forces with respect to our international work.

Also important was the establishment of the new institute Wageningen IMARES, Institute for Marine Resources and Ecosystem Studies, led by Dr Martin Scholten. In this institute we join forces within Wageningen UR (that is, the former RIVO fisheries institute and the Alterra Texel ecological group) as well as with TNO. The new institute will focus on the economic exploitation and ecological management of the sea and coastal areas, activities which were introduced and discussed earlier today in a special seminar, and which will come back later in today's program.

Also worth mentioning is the good progress we have made with the many building activities that are underway, and which will give us state-of-the-art facilities in research and teaching. It has also given us the opportunity of physically housing part of Van Hall Larenstein in Wageningen. They started here two weeks ago and I would like to extend them a warm welcome. I do hope that they will feel home soon.

Another achievement that I would like to mention is an extensive deal we made by selling one of our spin-outs, Cedi Diagnostics, focused on veterinary tests, to an international company based in Switzerland. Moreover many new businesses are developing. For us this underlines that we really made a step forward in professionalizing our Wageningen UR-wide knowledge valorization in what we call the Wageningen Business Generator, led by Dr Wim Jongen.

And worth mentioning is the fact that we completed the outline of our extensive windmill project near

Lelystad. When all our mills are up and running, Wageningen UR will be more than self-sufficient in energy use. An important achievement and a sustainable contribution to the quality of life.

And finally it was a satisfying year for us because the extensive restructuring program Focus 2006 proves to be successful. In that program we discontinued research fields in our institutes in which we could not obtain or maintain a good position and we reduced the cost of supporting staff and overhead by 25%. A huge operation, necessary to improve the financial situation and to use the available resources as much as possible for our core tasks: research and teaching. A similar process was realized successfully at Van Hall Larenstein.

But, ladies and gentlemen, restructuring and cost reduction are one side of the medal; opening up new perspectives for growth and new activities is the other. That is what we have focused on in the recently developed Strategic Plan 2007-2010, of which I would like to present you some key issues. Developing the Plan has been an extensive process and we are very pleased that so many of you, from both inside and outside Wageningen UR, were willing to contribute. We started the process from outside in. Looking at what is happening in the world around us, we see a further and extensive increase in the world population and a rapid economic development in various parts of the world, such as in Eastern Europe, in the Far East (China, India and South-East Asia) and in Latin America. This makes that three issues are commonly considered key-issues for future development: food, fresh water and energy. Three issues that are at the core of our interest and expertise, and fully fit in our mission 'to explore the potential of nature to improve the quality of life'.

In brief we describe our domain as 'healthy food and living environment'. Within this domain, we distinguish three interrelated core-fields: (1) food and food production, in which we pay attention to subjects such as human nutrition and health, sustainable agriculture, horticulture (including flowers) and fisheries, infectious animal diseases, international food chains, and the use of biomass within the scope of a bio-based economy, (2) the living environment, with special attention to issues such as nature conservation and biodiversity, landscape, land-use planning, water management, adaptation to climate changes and competing claims on natural resources, and (3) health, lifestyle and livelihood, with a more social sciences approach to issues such as the demands and behaviour of consumers versus those of citizens, risk perception and risk management with respect to aspects such as food safety and new technologies such as biotechnology and nanotechnology, and a real basic issue for the quality of life: food security in relation to poverty in less developed countries.

In the domain of 'healthy food and living environment', Wageningen UR has a strong international position, but our specific position in Europe could and should be strengthened. That is what we aim for in the coming years, to be the European knowledge institute in our domain, while maintaining our roots in the Dutch society and continuing our worldwide scope and activities. To realize a top position in Europe, we will build on our strength and focus on high-potential areas. Three social themes and three fields of expertise have been chosen in this respect for additional investment and support. The three social themes are: (1) food, health and behaviour, (2) climate-resistant coastal zones, and (3) bio-based economy, and the three fields of expertise: (1) bio-nanotechnology in relation to food, (2) systems biology in relation to genomics, and (3) scaling up and down decision levels and governance. To establish and extend our leading role in these areas, both in research and in teaching, we will select and give the lead to the best groups from within our organization and hope to attract interesting partners from outside, such as a strategic alliance we aim for with one or more medical schools. Considering more specifically our teaching program, Wageningen UR wants to be seen as a renowned and flexible education house, where university and higher professional education complement each other. An education house, where students can choose among a professional, an academic and a research course of study, all of which with a strong international focus, and respecting and maintaining the existing difference between academic and higher professional education.

Ladies and gentlemen, to obtain and maintain an international top position we opt for quality as the leading principle in our organization: quality in the academic profession at our university, quality in market orientation and entrepreneurship in our specialized institutes, quality in practical focus and solutions in our higher education college, and quality in the supporting staff and management procedures. High-quality groups will get more financial room at the expense of underperforming ones. A stronger link will be established between individual performance and personal financial reward. High salary earners, including new professors, will be appointed in their position on a 5-year basis and will be systematically evaluated before renewing their appointment. A pilot program for a tenure-track system will be started to identify young top talent in as early a stage as possible to help prepare them for leading future positions. We strive for more high-quality international staff and define English as the official organization language from 2008 onwards. And finally we are developing and implementing a series of additional measures and tools to further make our operational management lean, mean and simple in order to create maximal room for our core tasks: research and teaching, and to make our organization much more flexible to anticipate external developments and changes. We hope and trust to get the formal approval for the Plan. A full description will become available later this year.

Ladies and gentlemen, the ideas of the Strategic Plan have to be implemented parallel to the running activities. So again, a busy time ahead for all of us. We owe many thanks to our people for the tremendous amount of work they do and have yet to do in the time to come. We are fortunate to have so many dedicated people in our organization, both staff and students. Meanwhile, it has become a tradition to mention some of them at this occasion, of whom we are extra proud. That is, in the first place, Dr Harro Bouwmeester from Plant Research International, who was awarded the prestigious NWO Vici grant of 1.25 million euros meant for scientists who successfully started a new research line and belong to the world top in their field. Dr Bouwmeester focuses his research on the way plants communicate among each other and with organisms in their surroundings, for instance to attract useful fungi. And of Professor Marcel Dicke and his team, who won the Battle of the Universities, a strong nationwide competition among all the universities. The instruction was to make top-level scientific publications, in their case in Nature and Science, accessible to the general public. They will do that for their research on the role of insects, and will transform Wageningen into a city of insects in the third week of September, together with many local shopkeepers and the Ouweland Zoo in Rhenen. A really big event, to which you are all invited to visit and participate in. The third person I would like to mention is Professor Erik van der Linden who started the

seminar series 'Science is cooking', in which he brought together scientists and chefs to combine science and arts for new innovation in haute cuisine. A tremendous success with a keen interest from the media and the public. It has led to many new contacts and potential for both our research and teaching. And then Professor Joop van Lenteren, who received the prestigious Shell Award for his 30 years of work on sustainable production methods in agriculture. He is especially known for his work on biological crop protection systems in greenhouses, which significantly reduce the use of bio-chemicals. We are also extra proud of Mr Willem Foorhuis, Reader at Van Hall Larenstein, who received the Innovation Award for Higher Professional Education for his new and participative approach in the renewal of rural areas. And finally the students Nana Kwabena Kufuor from Ghana and Javier Escabal from Peru, who received the World Bank prize, offered by the Amsterdam Institute for International Development, for the best MSc and PhD theses approved by a Dutch university. This year both awards went to Wageningen graduates, supervised by Dr Kees Burger and Professor Arie Kuyvenhoven, respectively. It more than shows the high quality of both our international students and our international social sciences program.

Ladies and gentlemen, I could continue for some time to inform you about our work and developments in our organization, but unfortunately there is no time left for that, so I will leave that for next year. For now I would like to wish our students and staff another successful year and declare the academic year 2006-2007 at Wageningen UR open.

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