



***Vrij denken sans frontières / Penser librement zonder grenzen***

Academic opening speech by rectors C. Pauwels et Y. Englert

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Your Majesty, Your Majesty,  
Ladies and gentlemen minister-presidents, secretaries of state and ministers of state,  
Ambassadors, Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen Mayors and Eldermen  
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,  
Ladies and gentlemen Chairmen and Rectors from Belgium and abroad,  
Dear partners from Belgium and from our European Universities Alliances,  
Dear colleagues,  
Dear students, dear alumni,  
Dear members and friends of our university communities,

*'It takes two to tango'*

That's good, because we are two. And at the same time, we are many. It's wonderful that you are all here. A birthday party with so many people must be a special birthday – and indeed it is.

185 years ago – the Arc de Triomphe didn't yet exist and Belgium was just 4 years old – our shared story began with the founding of the Université libre de Belgique, which quickly became the Université libre de Bruxelles that we know today.

50 years ago, obliged to separate following a political decision based on the context of the time, Vrije Universiteit Brussel was born. It was an important stage in the affirmation of Flemish culture and dynamics.

But separation didn't mean severance. We began a collaboration between our 2 institutions that has only grown, particularly in recent years where it has become especially close. That VUB and ULB are celebrating their birthday together, which we're all here today to do, is not without significance. Our universities share not only a history but also, and especially, a shared dream of the future. And we want to share this dream with you. A dream of dialogue and cooperation. A dream of crossing borders. A dream of borders that fade away. Not by themselves, but because we dare to cross them.

Free thinking without borders – Free thinking without borders.

In that sense, our shared past is a source of inspiration. A source that never dries up and that we must cherish. If we are celebrating together our 185 and 50 years of existence, it is not with nostalgia for the past – which is part of our story and had its dynamics and its reasons that we must neither deny nor magnify but instead recognise.



We celebrate this common anniversary and these 50 years of intense collaboration not only because we are proud of our universities, but also because we are proud of our city, our communities and our country.

In these gloomy times where we often emphasise what does not work, what separates us, we say: hey, let's take advantage of today's event to celebrate. To celebrate what brings us together, to celebrate what enriches us, to celebrate what makes us stronger.

We love our country, because it's small and threatens nobody, because it is appealing, generous yet discreet, serious yet festive, surrealist and impertinent, full of contradictions but above all a crossroads of cultures, because it is complex but at the same time so much richer. Finally, because it is peaceful and liveable – though we must remain vigilant to ensure that is the reality for every citizen.

We love our country. We love our land that lies at the crossroads of German, Romantic and Anglo-Saxon culture. A land where we are always looking for common solutions. And yes, our country is complex, as all great challenges are complex, and can rarely be solved without cooperation across borders. Today, more than ever, we must go beyond what divides us, without closing our eyes to it. We must unite, without losing ourselves in each other, and together we must seek creative communal solutions.

So we must not deny these borders, but instead cross them. In all directions. We also love our communities, because they make it possible for each culture to exist, for each culture to develop, and above all for cultures to meet and inspire one another.

We love our communities because they push us to more collaborations, with francophones, with Dutch-speakers or with German-speakers, but also with the numerous communities that make up this country, whether they are official or not, remembering that each one of us belongs to several of them.

We love our home region, because Brussels is Brussels. Hyper-diverse, multilingual and multicultural, it has everything a major city should, it fizzes with surprises, with opportunities and riches, it's a living lab for our students and our researchers.

We love our region, because Brussels, as European capital, offers us this great international connection, and this international connection allows our universities to develop in a world where the concept of borders and their use needs to be debated – "imagine there's no countries" – and in our Brussels region the "Belgian compromise" has undoubtedly become an international seal of quality. We in Brussels should be prouder of our talent for compromise.

And finally, we also love our universities. Of course. To be a free university is both a fantastic gift and an enormous responsibility. Something precious that we must



protect, must cherish and must develop. As a free university we are vulnerable but at the same time we have incredible power.

We love our universities because together, in Brussels but also in Flanders and Wallonia, they have carried out and still carry out so many projects, so many concrete actions in service of society, so many ways of releasing and training free, responsible citizens. Because this is where we affirm our free and original research. Our history has always been about looking forward, across the borders of time, and today that hasn't changed.

Don't take this declaration of love as cute, naïve or simply chauvinistic. We are aware of the limited scale of our country, of our communities, of our regions and our universities in the world. A world that has changed significantly. The university arena today is a global one. And, just like in the cartoon by Pierre Kroll, in response to the institutional challenges in our country: seen from space, we are just a pencil dot on a piece of blank paper.

To ensure our fragmentation doesn't become a handicap, we must constantly adapt to today's world without denying our values, think outside the box while remaining true to our heritage, thinking freely without borders. Our universities must manage the growing tension between research and teaching, the cutting-edge research of our colleagues that must be defended, and the openness of our students who are eager for social advancement that must be supported. We will not give up on either of them, convinced that these two missions of the university are fundamental.

Régis Debray spoke of borders by saying that, like medicine, they can be at once both remedy and poison. For us, borders should conjure up images of the open sea, and not of barriers, not of walls behind which people turn inwards. And is that not the quintessence, the essence, of The University, the name of which points to universality, to continually pushing the boundaries of knowledge?

These limits of knowledge have been breached by our researchers for 185 years. This year we also celebrate the centenary of the Nobel Prize awarded in 1919 to Jules Bordet, one of the fathers of modern immunology. Bordet is of course not our only Nobel Prize winner. 4 of the 6 science Nobel Prizes awarded to Belgians have been our researchers: François Englert, Ilya Prigogyne, Albert Claude and Jules Bordet.

The freedom these researchers were able to enjoy in their fundamental research, carried by the message of free examination, is surely no coincidence.

Let's add to those the 2 Nobel Prizes for peace, awarded to Henri la Fontaine and more recently Denis Mukwege, and you get a roll-call of 6 Nobel Prize winners in 185 years of existence. A solid list that we have every reason to be proud of.



Crossing borders.

There is the border between university and society.

A university does what it needs to: ensure exceptional academic education and innovative research. And you must also sometimes be able to solve the issues of the day.

Scientists need rest. That inevitably presupposes a certain border between university and society.

But this border should not become a gulf. Today, universities are accused of being elitist and unworldly.

Mostly unfairly, but sometimes, unfortunately, correctly.

We don't always pay enough attention to the real problems that people have to deal with every day.

As supporters of free research, we must also look critically at ourselves. We must be aware of our own position and our own privilege: as academics we can do what we enjoy doing and what we are good at. Isn't that fantastic?

But we must realise that there is indeed sometimes a gulf between the issues that trouble society, the issues that trouble people, and the issues that academics are working on. This gulf should not exist. We are there for and because of society.

That's why we are symbolically discarding our gowns.

*(The gowns are being put down)*

We are happy to wear these gowns, but by wearing them we are confirming there is an underlying distinction, a gulf, and that is not something we want. Our place is, must be and will always be for, with and by the people. There is no place for a border here, no borders when it comes to our effort, no borders when it comes to our commitment, no borders when it comes to our connectedness.

Crossing borders.

We must remember how often borders can be deadly, when we want them to be impassable, when we build walls, be it the ghetto of Warsaw, the Berlin Wall or those that flourish today in Palestine or Mexico.

Did you know, in 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, there were 15 similar walls around the world. Today there are 70. Almost 5 times as many!

Even natural borders, like the Mediterranean, can become, through the cynicism of man, places of suffering and death.

Borders define the life of a person. We think of the countless scientists around the world who are prosecuted, excluded, imprisoned or forced to flee their country. Not everyone appreciates scientists and their insights. We think here in particular of our colleague Ahmadrez Djalali, but certainly not only of him.

Crossing borders.

ULB and VUB have worked in recent years to surmount the obstacles presented by several frontiers: language, communities, administrative regulations.



Recently, at the Brussels level, this joint dynamic has allowed ULB and VUB to grow together, to launch innovative projects and to create exceptional opportunities that we wouldn't have been able to dream of launching alone.

And here are some examples:

*(Video is playing)*

All these achievements were only possible thanks to the involvement and outstanding work of all the staff of our two universities. Please, give them a big round of applause since the party of this day is also theirs!

Ladies and Gentlemen. VUB and ULB are partners, with the long table of weKonekt as a symbol: everyone is welcome at our table.

For the future of the universities and of society as a whole, it's absolutely essential that we work together across every possible boundary.

The joint initiatives of ULB and of VUB are devoted to this cooperation: for the multilingual schools project, for Artificial Intelligence, for the genetics of cancer, to name but a few.

Our collaborations are not marked by the seal of exclusivity but by that of openness.

ULB also works with UMons on developing the new university campus of UCharleroi, with IHECS to create a major school of journalism and communication on the Médiapark site, with the Haute Ecole Ilya Prigogine on our shared campuses, with the City of Brussels for a large hospital complex on a European scale, the largest complex in Belgium.

In Brussels, VUB works closely with our association partner Erasmushogeschool Brussel, in Flanders we are developing research campuses in Zellik and Gooik, and with our alliance partner UGent we laid the foundations for the first English-language bachelor degree. A degree in social sciences, which began three years ago and was an immediate success, with international students as well as Belgian students who want to study in English. This too is crossing borders and bringing the world closer to us.

We prize collaboration and solidarity over isolation and individualism, as is underlined by the motto of our country.

The academic year that is beginning at ULB will be the year of languages, because we realise that mastering languages – whatever the developments of artificial intelligence – is to master an indispensable tool of communication in the world of today and tomorrow, and above all a way of discovering the culture and the knowledge of others. As Heidegger wrote: "Language is the house of being".



In this context, and if we consider studies into multilingualism from an early age, it is obvious that we must have multilingual schools, and in a multicultural and multilingual city like Brussels, it's not only obvious but should be a priority. Here too, ULB and VUB are working together, and here too we must cross boundaries, because we are moving towards history, to the meeting point of cultures.

50 and 185 years of history, that's what we're celebrating today.

And our story is writing itself into the future. We are each reflecting and acting on the future of our environment, with ambitious climate action plans and our own strategic plans. On the ULB side, we are building for the future with the participative and comprehensive creation of a strategic plan that today enters its final phase and that helps us to measure the challenges of tomorrow and the changes that we face, on a global scale. It's in this context that we must put into perspective and understand the adventure that stands before us, ULB as well as VUB, with the foundation of European alliances.

Yes indeed, both of our universities have formed an alliance with new partners within the framework of the European Universities Alliances. Remarkably, our two projects, CIVIS for ULB and EUTOPIA for VUB, have been selected by the European Commission to be among the 17 pioneers, the 17 alliances that will write history. The European Universities Alliances will have a great impact on the future of universities in general and our universities in particular.

This afternoon, our 2 alliances, CIVIS and EUTOPIA, met in Brussels.

Together, we are launching a brainstorming on what the European universities can become, thus fitting us into the logic of sharing a reflection desired by the Commission. As Toni Morrison wrote: "All progress depends on the unreasonable man. I prefer not to adjust to my environment. I refuse the prison of 'I' and I choose the open spaces of 'we'."

We sincerely thank our colleagues for being with us today, marking the importance of what we are starting to build together!

Our speech would not be complete without a clear message for our students, current and future, resident and from abroad. We are happy to welcome you and, with your impetus, to evolve our teaching, stimulate mobility, integrate the digital world and above all develop respectful behaviour in teacher-student relationships. That way everyone wins, because as Abraham Lincoln said: "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my ideas of democracy".



Your Majesty,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen  
Dear students,

There are more than 6.000 of us from ULB, from VUB, and from many other institutions, gathered here today for this celebration. I hope that this reunion is just the first step towards more moments of sharing, of collaboration and of shared learning.

You will understand by now, today we are celebrating the power of cooperation... and of union. And today, more than ever, l'Union fait la fête. Your Majesty, we are honoured by your presence. It touches us sincerely.

So let us finish on a lighter note and follow the recommendation of the great Louis Armstrong: it takes two to tango !

Caroline ? Yvon !