



# Universiteit Utrecht

Dear colleagues,

I wish you welcome on behalf of the Board of our Faculty. According to the programme our dean Piet Hoekstra was supposed to deliver a New Year's speech now, but unfortunately Piet has become ill during Christmas holiday, so I will take over today. We expect that Piet will recover soon and that he will be back in office within one or two weeks.

For those who don't know me yet, my name is Peter Driessen, vice dean for research since June last year. And lucky for me, Piet had already prepared the speech, so it is his text (but my voice).

It is a great privilege to see you all again in this new year, a new year that will bring new opportunities and challenges for our Geosciences community. But, first of all, I hope and expect that the Christmas break has given you ample opportunity to relax and to spend some time with your family and friends. We all need to recharge our batteries after another busy and very successful year.

In this speech, it has become a good tradition to look forward and to take some time to consider and evaluate important national and international developments that sooner or later will affect the research and teaching activities of our Geosciences Faculty.

In the second part of the last year we have seen two major developments that are extremely relevant for our position in science but also for our interaction with society. In September 2015 the general assembly of the United Nations launched the Sustainable Development goals. In total 17 goals were defined and these goals represent themes that are part of the core business of our Faculty. Just to mention a few: Sustainable Cities and Communities (also in relation to good health), Climate Action, Affordable and Clean Energy, Life below Water, Life on Land, Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure and Responsible Consumption and Production.

The second event was of course the international climate conference in Paris that marks a turning point in the scientific and societal debate about climate change. At the start of the conference US president Barak Obama stated that (and I quote): "our generation is the first generation that experiences the effects of climate change but we are also the last generation that can do something about it". Although the US is probably not the first country that has the moral right to make such a statement, the result of the conference is extremely relevant. For the first time, virtually all nations on Earth have agreed to phase out fossil fuels and power the global economy with clean technologies. The transition to a society which is less driven by fossil fuels and is more resilient will be a complex challenge in which natural sciences and social sciences have to play a crucial role. And it may require quite some time before we are able to transform ourselves, how we live, what we consume and how we do business.

From a scientific and societal point of view it implies that the issue of global change - combining aspects of climate change with other ways in which mankind transforms its physical and social environment - and our major strategic theme of Sustainability has become more relevant than ever.



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Our major subthemes within sustainability appear to be extremely up to date and we see a direct link between current global developments and our scientific efforts. Just to summarize our themes:

- Healthy Urban Living in relation to Urban Futures
- Water, Climate and Ecosystems
- Future Energy and Resources

But also the focus area Future Deltas has shown to be able to contribute significantly to our research profile, together with the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance.

And let's be clear: there is a lot more excellent research within this faculty that may not be directly labeled under the umbrella of sustainability but still is extremely important for understanding system Earth and the behaviour of its inhabitants.

This year we will see the evaluation of the theme Sustainability by the Executive Board of the University and we are confident that we will be able to present a challenging set of research topics that are inspired by the great scientific and societal challenges for the second phase of the programme. Our position in science and society is increasingly recognized by external partners which results in fruitful cooperation with – to mention a few –

- CASTEL – Centre for Aligned Studies on Earth, Environment & Life; our cooperation with TNO and Deltares covering 6 important common research themes. After signing a letter of intent in 2015 we are now aiming at signing an official agreement for cooperation with these two important partners on the Utrecht Science Park;
- NIOZ – The Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research; we will have the formal kick-off of our Utrecht University-NIOZ cooperation at the end of this month and are now working on a common research agenda;
- Urban Futures. The new theme of the Department of Human Geography and Planning, also in the framework of our cooperation with the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment. The first contracts are being negotiated and a first result of this cooperation is the Urban Futures Studio run by our new Faculty professor Maarten Hajer (former director of PBL). This will also generate another focal point within the Faculty in which we see the cooperation between different research groups and departments.

These are just a few initiatives that show our vitality and the dynamics of our faculty.

Utrecht University is a so-called LERU university: we belong to the League of European Research Universities and this implies that we stimulate a direct link between research and teaching. Both are equally important in a flourishing academic society.

Increasingly, the issue of sustainability will also be part of the curriculum and we are looking forward to the start of our new bachelor programme Global Sustainability Science, a new interdisciplinary bachelor programme which will be taught in English, starting in September 2016. Hopefully, in the future we will also be able to offer a minor programme on Sustainability for other faculties.



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This year we will also focus on the Graduate School of Geosciences. We will work on the visibility of the Graduate School, for example by having a joint introduction programme at masters level, by improving the website and by offering the regular so-called Headline Story Lectures. In several courses we will offer the training of transferable skills, also realizing that a large part of the PhD community will continue with a career outside science. Last but not least we have to develop a Quality Assurance Programme for our PhD's in line with the present SEP protocol. Community building is another topic for the Graduate School in which we will also encourage the initiatives taken by master students and PhD's.

Due to all our successful efforts in teaching and research and the fact that we link up with major global issues, the faculty is still growing and expanding. Some figures for 2015 – presented on the slide - illustrate our present position:

As a Faculty Board we do not see this growth as an objective in its own but as a result of a very successful policy by all the departments and staff that works hard to accomplish this. And due to all these efforts we are still in a good position to invest in our Faculty.

To accommodate all our ambitions we are also extremely proud that we are now halfway our building programme for the GEO cluster. And commonly we use a gun to demolish a building but this time it was the start of the building process of our new office building that was marked by a gunshot..... The planning is that this office building and our Earth Simulation Laboratory (ESL) will both be ready in the second part of next year. At the end of this new years speech I also briefly like to mention two other coming highlights:

- First: Utrecht University celebrates its 380th anniversary this year; four distinguished persons will become Doctor Honoris Causa of Utrecht University and our Faculty has the honour to be involved in two of these candidates.
- Second: Around the summer our university will launch its new strategic plan; in the autumn we will start working on our own strategic plan for the period 2016-2020.

It may be clear that 2016 will be another challenging and inspiring year. I truly hope that we can count on all of you to make it again a successful year.

**“Science is a journey into knowledge and you never travel alone”**

**I wish you all a Happy, Healthy and Prosperous New Year!**

*Piet Hoekstra  
Peter Driessen*