

NETWORKING - KEY TO TOMORROW

Introduction

1991 being the year of the 355th anniversary of Utrecht University, this conference was particularly significant. The University has a great interest in networking and as the central theme of the conference was "networking", the link was very strong.

The theme of the 71st lustrum of Utrecht University focusses on the role of Utrecht in an international context and illustrates how important it is for the university to become more international in its view. With an increase in European integration it is even more important than ever to see education and research in an international context. Only when optimal co-operation and the best possible exchange of data and prospects are achieved can significant development be made in science and scholarship. Science and scholarship of course have always been internationally oriented, but in the last few years, the international exchange of staff, students, knowledge and ideas has developed at an enormous rate and will intensify further in the years to come. The importance of networking cannot be stressed enough.

This conference was a contribution towards the internationalization of Utrecht University. Here the foundations are being laid for an international network to service our society, and in particular to make the knowledge gathered within our institutions more accessible to society.

Botanic gardens and education

Botanic gardens, with their accessibility and their attractiveness to the public are, for many, the public face of the university. Gardens have an important cultural-historical function; they are in a sense nature's pantry and, as such, eminently suitable for educational purposes.

The Utrecht botanic gardens have always been closely linked to the rest of the university, as far back as the planting of Utrecht's first botanic garden in 1639, three years only after the university was founded. At first, the Sonnenburg bastion offered ample space for the whole garden, but through the centuries the gardens outgrew their borders, as Utrecht did itself, and several locations had to be used to accommodate them.

Now, following the 70th lustrum of the botanic gardens, they are concentrated in the Van Gimborn arboretum in the town of Doorn and in the unique systematic garden at the Hoofddijk fortress which is part of the famous Water Defense Line of the Netherlands. As you may know, this stretch of land that could be flooded whenever necessary, served to keep all intruders from the east or the south out of "Holland". Nowadays, it has become one of the most beautiful botanic gardens in Europe, if not in the world.

Over the course of more than 350 years, the notions of education and research, and of the use of botanic gardens have changed and these ideas continue to change. The gardens' importance for education and research, in particular for the biology faculty, is beyond dispute. The same can be said of the gardens' cultural-historical function. Judging by the lustrum book and the many activities aimed at the public, the development of education has been well anticipated. One activity in particular is the theme-trail. The theme last year was "scent", this year it is "folklore".

This conference was the next step in the reinforcement of the gardens' educational function. The importance of the botanic gardens for both the university and the city of Utrecht and its surroundings cannot also be stressed enough. The pace of development in society, as well as in science and scholarship, raises many questions concerning responsibility and ethics; questions which do not only involve scientists and scholars.

Conclusion

The necessity of well-balanced public education regarding nature and the environment is becoming clearer, particularly as concern for the environment is growing rapidly. Botanic gardens can play an important social role by encouraging people to treat nature and their surroundings with more respect.

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