

## Professor Louise O. Fresco

### Opening Academic Year 2019

#### 2 September 2019

Excellencies, Mrs Deputy Mayor, members of the supervisory board, distinguished guests, dear colleagues and students. It is an honor to welcome you, on behalf of the executive board, at the OAY 2019-2020. I also extend a warm welcome to those who join us online and invite you all to participate through our live twitter feed.

1. Exactly five years ago I stood here to argue that one the tragedies of our times is that our stunning scientific and technological progress takes place in an increasingly pessimistic environment. Obviously, part of this contradiction is that the extraordinary progress in welfare affects climate, terrestrial and marine ecosystems. However, where most of us believe science is not just the cause of problems but also essential to solutions, this feeling is not shared, at least not among the middle classes in OECD countries. Then, I called for a new Enlightenment: a continuous dialogue between science and society.
2. The call for dialogue takes on even more urgency today. Our field - agriculture, food and environment - is subject to intense scrutiny: sugar, obesity, food safety, waste, meat and animal proteins, chemical and greenhouse gas emissions, bleaching corals, water pollution, deforestation, biodiversity, zoonotic diseases, you name it. Scrutiny is normal and important, but too often now it takes the shape of one-liners, half truths, outright lies, insults and even hatred. Trust in science as such does not decline rapidly among educated people, but the role of science has changed. It is used as a supermarket from which one can pick arguments to defend whatever opinion, a set of data for any interest group to draw its ammunition in a polarized fight.
3. More so than five years ago, even reputed mainstream media take sides. Hasty apocalyptic conclusions abound, to be replaced the next week by new alarms or wild expectations. Framing is the name of the game: selective quotes, disregard for original sources, no checks and counterchecks, reporting on single studies as breakthroughs. Of course, researchers, under continuing pressure to attract funds and attention, are part of this game.
4. Polarization and a sense of doom leave little room for nuance. Yet in science, the devil is in the details and in the counterintuitive. It is our task to point to ambiguities, knowing full well that new ones will emerge. Worse, the debate often takes the character of religious strife. Dissenting opinions label a person not just as *wrong*, but *morally unfit*. Casting doubt on the integrity of a speaker without proof is unacceptable. Not only does it discredit the speaker, but it also disqualifies his or her future opinions (as I have experienced myself...). It leads to further polarization. And it tightens the silent majority into more silence.
5. Is there a way out? Yes! In a polarized world, academia remains the place where every opinion within the law and spoken with respect must be heard. Opinion, yes, but based on evidence. Everyone has the right to his or her own opinions and views, but not to his or her own facts.

Dear colleagues, dialogue is *our* academic responsibility. Trust our capacity to listen and speak. Trust our collective courage to express dissenting opinions. There is no Wageningen party line, no monolithic approach, no push for consensus. Only the desire to further collective understanding. Just like society, we are polyphony: multiple voices abound. This is not only essential for moral reasons, but also because new insights often result from seeing things differently. As educators, researchers and science applicators we must be accountable - but not afraid. Let us cast doubt when needed, question policies and opinions, examine all statements including our own. Internally at WUR, and externally with all stakeholders in the famous Dutch diamond and beyond. We are there to think the unthinkable, speak the unspeakable, debate the undebatable and dispute the indisputable.

6. So are we ready to nurture a culture of dialogues? Mostly, yes. The motivation of engaging with society to develop solutions is widespread in WUR. Everyone is committed to make a difference. But we are not yet diverse enough. Although diversity does not mean that everybody is right or the truth is in the middle, a dialogue requires diversity. We need to become more diverse in terms of ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, class and views.

7. I am proud to announce that we will start this year to build our Dialogue Center, a symbolically transparent building. It will be the place where we concentrate Wageningen Dialogues to Find Answers Together. In our age, answers do not only take the shape of rational propositions. Most people need more than economic incentives. In the Dialogues we will experiment with ways to nudge the public into considering behavioral alternatives and to engage them in citizen science. We need to better understand the emotions behind the feelings of doom and the unwillingness to accept nuance. Perhaps the desire for simple black and white oppositions is an antidote to modern life's complexities.

8. I hasten to add that all this talk about dialogues does not imply that we become a factory of quick-fix solutions. Our role remains to surprise society with completely new ideas that break out of a polarized deadlock. Just as electricity was a gamechanger in cities ridden with coal fires and candles, so we will without doubt discover completely new ways to deal with the pressing issues of our time: poverty, food, inequity, climate, nature and environment. Fundamental, curiosity driven research and the freedom to discover are the cornerstones of progress. The most telling example of this is gene editing which no government program and no strategic plan could have predicted. Remember, science is not there to validate commonly held opinions but to move the frontiers of knowledge – acknowledging at the same time society's unease.

9. Dear students: you have a major role to play. Probably the most important thing to learn is sensitivity to new ideas, however far-fetched, and the willingness to question your own. Social media can be both horrible and eye-openers: use them wisely. Balanced, honest dialogue is an academic skill that you should practice from the start. I know how many of you feel strongly about sustainability. We will help you to acquire the tools to contribute to a healthy, equitable and sustainable future world.

10. Ladies and gentlemen, this is how we will move forward: with you as partners in continuing Dialogues to discover answers together. A dialogue is not an accumulation of monologues. It will not always be plain sailing. But if you think dialogues are time-consuming and expensive, I suggest you try polarization instead!