

Dear PhD Students,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to our PhD Day 2013.

At this moment in time, there are more than 1,500 PhD students who are preparing a doctoral thesis at our university. Not all of them are here, but I'm glad that you are, and that I can address you as rector of the VUB. After all, without the doctorates, without you, there is no science, no knowledge, and no university.

1,500 PhD students, that is really quite amazing. Because a doctorate involves so many things, such as... writing a doctoral thesis. That in itself requires great determination. There is the loneliness, the despair, and ... the unhappy partner. I myself have written a thesis for my PhD, and I have also supervised many doctorates, so I can honestly say that I am experienced in this field.

I am also fortunate enough to know that there is also a very positive side to a doctorate, which you yourselves have undoubtedly already experienced or will experience in the future. Writing a thesis requires deep insight, it gives great satisfaction and that special feeling that you are contributing to the universal world of science.

(SLIDE) If we just take a look over the past decade, we can see that our university has experienced a significant increase in the number of successfully completed PhDs. In 2002, for example, 101 of our PhD students graduated, last year we had 185, and their number has almost doubled over the last decade.

The main credit for this goes to each individual PhD student, closely followed by their supervisors. It also demonstrates that our three Doctoral Schools are doing an excellent job at supporting our PhD students.

We are also attracting increasing numbers of foreign PhD students, and nowhere has the internationalisation of our university been so noticeable as it is in you. And that is how it should be. Universities are by definition international, with English being the universal language, and to those who long for the past and believe that we should be less international, I simply say: universities have been international since the Middle Ages, Latin being the lingua franca English is today.

Dear PhD students,

It is indeed a fact that a doctorate – and by extension the entire academic world – stands or falls by one thing, and that is credibility. In recent times, several cases of scientific fraud have come to light, which unfortunately has also been the case at our university. We have taken steps to combat data fraud, and paraphrasing the credo of our university, I can tell you all that scientists must be subject to just one thing, and that is the facts itself. To commit fraud is nothing else than to subject oneself to self-interest, and that is unacceptable under any circumstance. I firmly believe that you will all agree with me on that.

Today's theme is Open Science. I truly believe that more transparent science and free access to research results will lead to less fraud.

Dear friends,

As I have just said, there are now increasing numbers of people holding a PhD. This naturally also means that a PhD will not necessarily be the key to an academic career. Not everyone can be a professor. Unfortunately, that is not possible.

Consequently, many holders of a PhD will have to look for future employment outside of the university. Times were quite different when I was awarded my PhD. We looked to a career in academia much more than you are doing now. I understand that this may also lead to some uncertainty. Do employers have any need for holders of a doctorate? And

are PhD graduates even suitable for a non-academic job market? The answer to both questions is a firm and heartfelt 'yes'. By working on your doctorate, each one of you has become a versatile researcher. A versatile researcher who can independently lead a complex project, who can overcome obstacles and also work as part of a team. Yes, you are all creative, you have strong analytical skills and good organisational skills. The business world is in dire need of such qualities. In her scientific research, our own Lucia Smit has proven that a PhD is extremely useful in business. And not just in the business world, also in government. The only thing that is perhaps still needed to match up employers and PhD graduates is a change in attitude. We have already seen campaigns that have focused on this topic, and the subject has also been widely covered by the press. For the government, giving young researchers proper support has also become a priority, so things are already heading in the right direction.

Dear PhD students,

I firmly conclude that a doctorate is of immense value. Doctorates are absolutely indispensable to the world of science, the knowledge economy and society.

Thank you.

Paul De Knop

Rector