Leiden University is doing well. We are consistently scoring high in the international rankings, we are operating in networks with prestigious international universities, we are attracting a large group of students and we are focusing on the quality of our teaching in many successful ways. But not every talented staff member and student can benefit from our success equally. We need therefore to focus our efforts on becoming more diverse and inclusive, on becoming an even better university.

Twentieth century American philosopher and writer Eric Hoffer said: ‘in times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists’. We have to be careful not to behave like the learned from the Hoffer quote, and make sure we stay open minded learners who are dealing with the present. Because in the present, the world is changing rapidly. The research issues are becoming more and more global. We have an increasing number of international students, PhD’s, postdocs and other staff. Since 2000 the numbers of female students have been larger than the numbers of male students. The numbers of students with an ethnic minority or migrant background are significant, about 18% at our university, and they are increasing. Yet, in terms of diversity and inclusivity as much needed core values, we are still lagging behind.

As a result we are shortchanging students and staff with a different background than the norm of the heterosexual, white male without a disability. We are shortchanging students and staff who are different, not because we set out to do so, not because we consciously want to exclude, but because we are not yet opening our minds enough to the research data and to the stories of the individuals that we are disadvantaging. That is about to change. With huge enthusiasm, a group of our top researchers and faculty leaders have been working on a diversity and inclusivity
policy that is based on scientific evidence and that should help lead Leiden University into a different era. Their plan is being presented today.

What do the research data teach us? There is overwhelming evidence that implicit bias is the number one reason why people that do not belong to the norm group, make it to the top in smaller numbers. We all suffer from it. It makes us believe for instance, that men are better leaders than women. Even women on average prefer male leaders to female leaders. This is so firmly engrained in our thinking that we are not aware of it. That is why it is called implicit bias, or unconscious discrimination.

Women don’t make it to the top of academia in equal numbers to men, not because they are less talented and motivated, but because of widespread stereotyping and implicit bias against them. This starts very early in their lives. The result is that only one in five professors at Leiden University are women. Ethnic minority students have more trouble negotiating their high school careers, their academic studies and their careers after their studies, not because they are less talented and driven, but because they don’t fit in with the norm group and meet with bias, stereotyping and lack of support. The result is that students with a migrant background at Leiden University are 1.5 times more likely to drop out of their studies in the first two years than other students and that we have too few staff members with a minority background. Lesbian and gay students and staff don’t always dare to come out and as a result cannot be their true selves, which research shows gets in the way of optimal performance. Our university is not doing as well as we could for people with a disability, which can lead to exclusion and a waste of talent. We need to open our minds to the research facts. We need to open our hearts to the stories of the people we discriminate against.

I find implicit bias itself not the biggest problem. The biggest problem is the denial of it. It appears to be a very Dutch phenomenon. We cherish the illusion that we are an equal and just society and that we do not discriminate. I think it is time that universities start challenging this notion and take the lead in the public debate. Leiden University is well placed to play an active role. We have researchers at our university who are experts on implicit bias. We are so close to the research data that show the extent of unconscious discrimination and stereotyping, as well as the devastating effects of it. Unfortunately, even in academia, our own university included, there is still a lot of denial. It is very hard for many academics to accept that our system of selecting people is so flawed. We love to believe we are truly meritocratic, that we know exactly who is the best person for the promotion or the leadership job. Unfortunately, we do not. We should forgive ourselves for our
imperfect assessments and for our implicit bias. I have reached the point, however, that I can no longer accept the denial of bias. That needs to stop. If there is one place where we should be open to the research, to truly hearing the stories, where we should dare to be introspective and be brave enough to right what has been wrong for so long, it is academia. It is, perhaps, especially this university, the bastion of freedom.

I feel co-responsible for our diversity policy and I want to focus on two specific goals: make the people in my wonderful university aware of the research, aware of the implicit bias, aware not so much of their personal shortcomings, but of the shortcomings of our institution as a whole. And second: explain why it is crucial to start moving as an academic community, to embrace the change, to be brave enough to work together towards a system that enables all talented people to make it at our university. It will take effort, energy and money until we have reached the optimal state of diversity and inclusivity, but is the right and the smart thing to do. The quality of our research and of our teaching will improve and our staff and students will feel more at home and connected.

Universities have a crucial role to fulfill. The research outcomes that we produce and the research-based teaching that we provide our students with, should benefit the society that pays us and trusts us. This era needs multidisciplinary solutions for the grand challenges that our world faces. For multidisciplinary solutions we need diversity in backgrounds. Right now, we don’t have enough of that diversity. The result is that we do not employ the right mix of researchers, that we do not ask the right research questions and that we do not provide equal opportunity within our diverse student body. Our students are the leaders of tomorrow, who will need to implement the strategies our world needs. The world is changing, we should behave like the learners and not the learned who are equipped for a world that no longer exists. We cannot be fearful of change, we have to embrace it.

Leiden University is doing well, but nowhere near as well as it could be doing. Over the next years, we will be working very hard on improving. We have a concrete diversity plan that will engage everybody in the university. We will try to inspire our students and staff to become aware of the beauty and the necessity of diversity and inclusivity, to be brave and go out of their comfort zone, to be open to the many great things that people from different backgrounds and cultures can bring to the table. We will try to take the lead in the much needed national debate. We will start creating an even better academic community. In a truly diverse and inclusive
university, students and teachers will all be learners. I am sure that once we have reached that point, we will have built a better university and a better society.

I want to end with a quote on diversity by Einstein, who was not just a genius, but also a truly insightful and creative person. His quote applies to people, not just to men. I have taken the liberty, assuming that he would forgive me, to change the ‘he’s’ in his quote to ‘she’s’. That way we can all start practicing with not immediately assuming that when we hear ‘she’ it applies to only women and when we hear ‘he’ it could easily apply to all of humankind. The gender-revised quote reads as follows: “A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. She experiences herself, her thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of her consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”