

ICA Rectors and Deans Forum 2011

Welcome

Paul Van Cauwenberge, Rector, Ghent University, Belgium

Dear rectors and deans of agricultural and life sciences universities of Europe

It is a great pleasure for me as rector of Ghent University to open this important forum organized by ICA. When our Dean and your President Prof. Van Huylenbroeck asked me to use the facilities of this conference centre of the university, I agreed immediately. This was because Ghent University as an institution and also me personally are convinced that international platforms for exchanging ideas among higher education institutes are very important. I am therefore grateful and proud that I can welcome such an important audience of peers of 35 rectors and deans from over more than 20 European countries. This meeting is very timely as the aim is to look at the future of agricultural and life sciences institutes who everybody knows have to play an important role in the transition from a petro-based towards a bio-based economy. In times that Europe is going through a severe financial and economic crises, reflecting on innovation of our economies and in particular in the areas of food, environment, bio-energy and green chemistry and about the role higher education and research has to play in it seems evident and crucial.

Agricultural and related life sciences disciplines such as food technology, environmental technology, biotechnology, forest and nature management and rural development are indeed in this time of transition key disciplines to overcome important challenges the world is facing today such as feeding an increasing world population, taking care of our natural resources, providing new forms of energy or creating new activities in rural areas which more and more serve as recreation areas for the urban population. Universities and Faculties of Agricultural and Life Sciences have a unique offer to make in responding to the needs faced by those sectors both in terms of education and research.

This high level forum of rectors and deans will certainly contribute by reflecting on how your institutions may strengthen their position which is at the cross road of engineering, natural and social sciences and how society may make better use of this for responding to the needs of local, regional and worldwide society. I have noticed that the organizers have been able to put together a program with really high level speakers coming from leading industries and associations such as the European land owners Association and The international Life sciences institute Europe, and leading European companies such as Vandermoortele in food industry, Syngenta in agricultural inputs and Danisco in Chemistry, to exchange with you their ideas about future developments in their sector and the possible challenges this presents. This as well as the fact that EU Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development Ciolos who

unfortunately was unable to be present in person has accepted to record a video message shows the importance that also the European Union attaches to this meeting.

That Ghent University serves as a host for this meeting should not be a surprise. Our Faculty of Bioscience Engineering is one of our leading and most dynamic faculties. Together with my faculty of medicine, the faculty of sciences and the related Flemish institute for Biotechnology, is the bioscience engineering Faculty making that Ghent University has a leading position in life sciences. In the most recent Shanghai ranking of world universities Ghent Universities was ranked on the 90th place and this mainly due to its leading position in life sciences where we figure even in the top 75 of the world. We host or have hosted some top professors in these disciplines such as in the past Prof. Heyman, Noble Prize winner and more recently Professors Marc van Montagu and Schell, pioneers in biotechnology and today Prof. Inze of VIB who is the number 1 world scientist in plant biotechnology. Also in the Faculty of Bioscience Engineering we have some world recognized authorities such as Prof. Verstraete in microbial ecology who received some years ago the special Prize of Science given by our King and who was also last year awarded a prestigious prize in China. It is therefore not surprising that when under my leadership this university decided to create 5 top level multi-disciplinary research platforms in which Ghent University wants to concentrate part of his research funds to consolidate his leading position, the selected platforms were all situated in life science disciplines and that in three of these platforms the Bioscience Engineering faculty plays a leading role. These three platforms are biofotonica, bio-informatics and biotechnology besides neurosciences and inflammation and immunology in the Faculty of Medicine and Psychology. These platforms have been granted each five extra professorships and a number of PhD scholarships. I mention this because I think it is a good example of how universities can concentrate on important innovative sectors in which they are excelling and in which they can make the difference by bridging the gap between research and innovation through transfer of knowledge to society and industrial world. The time that universities were ivory towers practicing 'pure' science has indeed passed already for many years.

Working with industry and society is in the new role universities have to play a key element. This university has invested the last number of years also a lot in what we call technology transfer. Also here our Faculty of Bioscience Engineering plays an important role with a number of really successful spinoff realizations among others in microbial digester and bio-energy technologies. Further the Faculty hosts four valorization platforms in food technology, biotechnology, aquaculture and bio-informatics. Also international collaboration is important in this new vision on university education. This Faculty has in this a leading role in our university with nearly half of its 300 yearly graduating master and 70 PhDs coming from abroad. It is clear that the model developed by the Faculty of Bioscience engineering is an example not only for the other faculties in this university but also for your institutes who are searching of how increased interaction between education, research and valorization by industry and society and how to cooperate with other leading faculties and Universities in Europe and the World. They will also play a important role in our plans to realize an off shore campus in biosciences and engineering in South Korea.

That you have elected Prof. Van Huylenbroeck, the dean of this faculty as the president for your Association is a sign that this leading position is also recognized at European level. I am sure he will not disappoint you and further develop ICA as a leading association for exchange and cooperation in life sciences.

I am convinced that this conference centre 'het Pand' is a good location for your activities. I want to share with you some of its history. Het Pand is an indeed an old Dominican monastery on the banks of the river Leie the river which crosses Ghent city. Originally it was established in 1201 as a hospital next to Saint Michael's Chapel, here right behind the corner. Already by 1225 the institute had become too small and by that time the first Dominicans took over the buildings and further developed it as a Monastery. Therefore, the year 1228 is considered to be the official date of establishment of the monastery in Ghent. In 1473 Margaret of York, spouse of Charles the Bold, laid the first stone of the street wing or library wing, which was the most important extension of the monastery.

In 1796, after the French Revolution; the monastery was closed and sold. The new civil owner, used as depots for wine and the refectory where we are now became a 'Bazar', a market for furniture. It is not surprising that the building was degrading fast. It was only when Ghent university in 1963 was able to to acquire the building and decided to arrange 'Het Pand' as its cultural and convention center, that it was renovated and restored. Works started in 1971 and were only accomplished in 1991. Since then this centre serves as host for many national and international meetings and conferences.

I hope it serves also as a good environment for you for your high level meetings of today and tomorrow. I am convinced that your Secretary General Dr Simon Heath, the collaborators of the Faculty of Bioscience Engineering, Ann and Hilde together with the professional support of the people of the Semico, an organization which is by the way directed by one of my former students, will do their utmost best to create the right environment for your formal as important your informal discussions. I also hope that you will have some spare time to enjoy the magnificent mediaeval centre of this city of gent as it would be a pity to miss it.

Let me therefore end by wishing you not only very fruitful discussions on the future of your disciplines, the development of your institutes and on the future role ICA as platform for exchange and cooperation, but also a very nice stay in our university and city.

3rd November 2011