

**Text of the Opening Address to the Second International STEPS
Conference
by Jos Elbers, President of INHOLLAND University**

INHOLLAND University Rotterdam
Auditorium

Thursday, 14 November 2002, 18:30

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you here to the Rotterdam site of
INHOLLAND University on the occasion of the second international
STEPS conference. I am happy to be able to welcome people from five
different European countries: the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden,
Spain and the Netherlands. So perhaps I should say the English word
'welcome' also in these languages:

Willkommen, Välkommen, Bienvenidos en welkom!

But I hope you don't mind that I'll proceed to address you in English.

Doing so, I extend this word of welcome to this international gathering not
only as your host on behalf of our University, but I feel I do so also as an
ambassador of the City of Rotterdam.

During informal parts of the programme, international conferences often provide an opportunity to get to know the city in which they are held. I have understood that you will have an opportunity to do so at the end of the conference, on Saturday afternoon. Rotterdam has a reputation as a city of hard workers, and you will certainly see evidence of that. You have seen your programme and it is clear that you will work through an intensive programme up to and including Saturday morning. I certainly hope that you will have some energy left at the end of the programme, as Rotterdam has much to offer. This is not only a reference to its architecture, for which our city has already acquired a considerable reputation. In our University's opinion, the city, which literally surrounds us, is an ideal learning environment. This is where the world of practice happens, for which we educate our students. This is where the problems occur, which require the efforts of well-educated professionals. This is where people and cultures meet, which enrich the lives of all those involved. Rotterdam's inhabitants are doers. They are not inclined to see solutions in thick policy documents and long discussions, but rather in a concrete approach to problems. This also applies to the way Rotterdam deals with issues relating to care and work-related counselling. The mentality of Rotterdam is certainly discernible in the approach taken by the Rotterdam 'Triologue', in which the government, social institutions and educational institutions co-operate to raise the level of care for people with mental disabilities. This approach is also well suited to INHOLLAND University.

Every person is talented and it is up to us to take advantage of this and, as far as possible, to develop the talents that people have. This principle is in line with what we wish to be as a university: ambitious and innovative, and at the same time warm, open and socially responsible, not only towards our students and staff, but to all people in our society.

In doing so, we are keen to co-operate with organisations in the fields for which we educate students. We have a long relationship with Stichting Maaskring in various areas. We have combined forces with this foundation and with Stichting OMIJ Rijnmond to carry out further research and to develop the theme of 'work' within the framework of the STEPS project. This approach to practical cooperation, which is characteristic of Rotterdam, will be discussed frequently this evening and in the coming days.

In the next two days you will give thought to the follow up of the initial meeting in Hamburg in January of this year. At that conference, you formulated the objectives of your project within the framework of antidiscrimination. On the basis of these objectives, the European Commission has subsidised your project. In my view, this was the right decision because the STEPS project focuses on extremely important issues in the societies involved in this project. The essence of this is that, as far as possible, we wish to offer every person equal opportunities to be himself or herself and to lead an independent life.

The people who are the focus of this conference are generally confronted with huge obstacles to achieving their objectives, both within themselves and in society. Consequently they run the risk of being marginalised. In western society, knowledge is an extremely important factor in economic success. Companies are confronted with fierce international competition. They apply modern technologies on a large scale, even in processes which, in themselves, are relatively simple and in the past could be done by people with a relatively low level of education. The Rotterdam harbour, almost literally visible from this location, is an example of the fact that simple work no longer exists. Computers have taken over much of this labour. Consequently, more work can be done by ever fewer people, but we also observe that these people must have a high level of expertise. We realise that developments such as these cannot be reversed. At the same time, this realisation is a tremendous challenge to us to ensure that people do not miss the boat. This applies particularly to people with a disability. Although, on the whole, the work done by people with learning disabilities is not complex, with regard to its content, it is valuable work. The value attached to this work is very important. After all, this gives expression to the value attached to the capabilities of the people who do this work. This plays a major role in determining their own feeling that their participation in society is valuable and valued.

As a university, we take this very seriously. We educate students for a wide variety of sectors. We consider it important that our students learn to look beyond the boundaries of their own study programmes.

A broad cultural baggage and a sharp eye for the human factor are, in our view, essential characteristics of the professionals whom we educate. In this regard, I would like to mention an initiative taken by INHOLLAND University Rotterdam, which is considered to be very promising by the municipality and the institutions involved, namely the '*Jongeren voor Jongeren*' ['Youth for Youth'] project. Students from social work programmes and programmes with a focus on economics and management developed this project. The essence of the project is that these students, during their last year of study, assist young people from deprived areas in finding jobs. Often these young people have missed out on part of their schooling or some other circumstance has made it difficult for them to find work. Whatever the reason, these young people consider it very important to have a job. This also demonstrates that having a job not only provides an income, but also—and that is perhaps of greatest importance—it gives one a sense of one's own worth.

Within the European STEPS project, you will concentrate on emancipation and the participation of and solidarity with people who have learning disabilities. Having a job plays a major part in this.

How can people with a disability do meaningful work in our knowledge society? What we can do to enable them to obtain the necessary competences?

These are questions which will have pride of place in this second STEPS conference.

It is a tremendous benefit that we do not have to rely only on our own resources to find answers to these questions, but that we are able to do so in a European context. Europe occupies a prominent place in our policy of internationalisation. It is therefore with great pleasure that we welcome our guests here today from Hamburg, Barcelona, London/Canterbury and Lidingö/Uppsala. In welcoming you, I would also urge you to share your experience with each other during this conference. The exciting theme of this conference more than justifies this. A wonderful task awaits you in the coming days. I wish you every success in developing new perspectives and new methods to enable people to make a real contribution to our society. This is what society asks of us and, above all, what our talented, disabled fellow human beings may expect of us.

Thank you.

Jos Elbers