

# “Investing in Knowledge & Changing Global Perspectives”

Opening address by Babs van den Bergh, vice-chair of Neth-ER

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Ladies and Gentlemen, esteemed colleagues, honoured guests,

In 1926, American writer Ernest Hemingway published his first book *The Sun Also Rises*. In it, one character asks another, “How did you go bankrupt?” The other responds, “Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly.” This quote emphasises why we are starting today’s conversation.

Our conference is titled **‘Investing in Knowledge & Changing Global Perspectives.’** This topic is both timely and imperative. How can our collective investment in knowledge strengthen the position of Europe in a world that is increasingly complex and interconnected?

As we gather today, Europe stands at a turning point. A **new European Commission will soon assume office**. With new priorities. And a mandate to steer the EU through one of the most challenging times in its 67-year history. The EU overcame many challenges and crises over the past decades, and even came out stronger many times. But we can’t simply take comfort in this factual determination, as today’s challenges for Europe are unprecedented in seriousness and scale. Where do we stand as Union?

To our west, the UK – now independent from the EU – had its first change of government in 14 years. And beyond the Atlantic, the United States has just elected its 47<sup>th</sup> president. To our east, we cannot overlook the dreadful wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. And looking at the global south, we see growing self-confidence, and at the same time new battlegrounds to establish the competitive supremacy of either the USA or China.

Meanwhile, elections in EU member states—including France, Germany, and my own country, the Netherlands—reshape national political landscapes and therefore the European political landscape. And again, where do we stand as Union?

**These changing global perspectives affect our vision on the future. And therefore: how we teach and how we conduct research here in Europe.** And yet, despite the magnitude of all challenges, we must remember this saying: **never waste a good crisis.**

After all, amid all uncertainty, Parliament, Council and Commission managed to agree on one shared ambition: to **secure Europe's position as a world leader** by **investing more in education, research and innovation**. Ladies and gentlemen, the **importance of investing in knowledge has never been more apparent**.

Let me also recall four high-level reports that came out recently and that underscore the urgency of investing in Europe's knowledge base. **First, Enrico Letta** highlighted the critical need to deepen and strengthen the internal market by **making knowledge the "fifth freedom"**. **Second, Mario Draghi** warned that **Europe will lag behind other global powers**, such as the United States and China, **unless we make bold and strategic investments** in education, research, and innovation. **Third, Manuel Heitor** argued that Europe should pursue a transformative agenda by **investing 220 billion in a framework programme focussed on competitive excellence**. **And finally, Sauli Niinistö** pointed at **Europe's technological base as key to our common security and defence**.

The shared message is clear: **Europe's competitive edge depends on our ability to prioritise and support knowledge-based sectors**.

In that light, we welcome this month's **Budapest Declaration on Competitiveness**, which explicitly reaffirms the 3% GDP expenditure target on R&D, and: to be established – finally - by 2030. And let me underline: this holds a key message to our national governments.

However. In this list, **a fifth report is strangely missing. Education**. Where is the expert roadmap on education? President Von der Leyen has announced a Skills Union. We welcome this initiative. And next year, we as Neth-ER will present our own proposals for this Skills Union.

Let me give you an advance on this. Brussels' policymakers tend to define skills in a narrow, technical way. But **in today's world, we also need other skills**.

Basic skills such as reading, where our education systems really have to step up. Ad building on that: analytical skills; critical thinking. And perhaps most importantly the confidence to ask questions.

Fortunately, **we have just the right tools to help our students develop into world citizens. Erasmus+.** When we discuss the future of European policies and programmes, let us not forget the contribution of Erasmus+.

Now, to conclude. In many ways, our conference is a call to action. Today is a chance to reflect on how we can enhance Europe's knowledge base. With the help of our invited politicians and experts, we will **explore how strategic investments in education, research, and innovation** can help us in a rapidly changing global landscape. Our discussions today are not just about identifying solutions; they are about **shaping the future of Europe.**

Hemingway's conversation warns us that we often ignore problems until they get out of hand.

But it also tells us something else: small things matter because they will gradually build up into big things. How did Europe reinvent itself? Gradually, then suddenly.

Thank you.