**Introduction rector Doctor Honoris Causa | Wednesday 17 November 2021 | De Munt-La Monnaie**

Dear honorary doctors,

Dear Mr. Boon Falleur,

Dear Mr. Ribas,

Dear Ms. Druyan,

Dear Mr. Kompany,

Dear Mr. Gronowski,

Dear Mr. Tinel,

Dear Mr. Kentridge,

Dear awarding partners,

On behalf of the Brussels Parliament, Vice-President Guy Vanhengel,

On behalf of the University of Western Cape, rector Tyrone Pretorius,

On behalf of the Universiteit Gent, vicerector Mieke Van Herreweghe,

On behalf of the the Erasmushogeschool Brussel, chairman (of the board) Bart De Schutter,

On behalf of the University Hospital UZBrussel, CEO Marc Noppen

Dear excellencies,

Dear colleagues, dear students,

Dear friends,

I am standing here, in front of you, humbled and honored by your beautiful presence. In a more than beautiful venue. A night at the opera. But I am not going to sing for you.

This ceremony would normally have taken place more than a year and a half ago. In this very same place, with the same people, and in what was supposed to be a very festive year, celebrating 50 years of our Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 50 years of existence as an autonomous Dutch-speaking university. In 1969, the paths of VUB and mother university ULB parted. But we remained close friends, or better: close family.

The celebration continues, but unfortunately less exuberantly than we had hoped for. Today, we all know that unfortunately, the pandemic is not over yet.

As a university, we have a new leitmotif: The world needs you. A call to action, a call for engagement, perhaps also a cry for help.

As a university, we build our policy on the five P’s of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals. People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnerships.

And sometimes that last goal, Partnerships, gets forgotten. And it should never be. The major problems and challenges of today's world are well known.

As a society, as a university, as scientists, we have an overwhelming responsibility for our children and grandchildren. We need to tackle today’s challenges through an interdisciplinary approach. Complex problems are multidimensional by nature and require expertise from different disciplines. It comes down to each one of us.

And we must act together. People, Planet, Prosperity and Peace need the fifth P: Partnerships.

We realise more than ever that a university can never be an island. That counts for every university, including us. Especially us, as a university founded on the principles of Free Enquiry and free thinking. Thoughts are free, and they are spread everywhere, outside the boundaries of every island.

A university must be connected to its environment, in our case the Brussels capital region.

In our city, in Brussels, we are closely linked to Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts or in Dutch, Erasmushogeschool Brussel. We already work closely together, and will keep on doing so.

We are closely linked with ULB, we are sister universities forever. Brussels needs us. And we need Brussels as a living lab, as a vibrant student city, as an international and cultural hotspot.

We are closely linked in education, in research and in many projects with Ghent University.

And we are strongly connected with universities far away, such as the University of the Western Cape, with whom we have a long-standing and intense collaboration.

The world that we believe in is a connected world. Where science and art meet. Where academia and society connect. Just like knowledge and engagement.

Today, we award five honorary doctorates to top scientists and personalities who definitely made a difference and still do.

And we honor two personalities who - after the cancellation in March 2020 - have already received their honorary doctorates under restricted circumstances, but whom we would like to include in the ceremony tonight.

Ladies and gentlemen,

An honorary doctorate is more than a mere decoration.

It is also a token of connection.

Between what the laureates stand for and what the university stands for.

For VUB, this academic year is dedicated to re-thinking. Rethinking our university, our society and our world. Change is not possible without connecting the dots. Or as the late Steve Jobs said: you cannot connect the dots looking forward, you can only connect them looking backwards.

When we look back at what our honorary doctorates have achieved, we can connect many dots.

Our honorary doctorates are all connecting personalities.

They connect us to the cosmos, making it possible that we can learn more about ourselves.

They allow us to dare to dream of a cancer-free world.

They connect people and communities in our hyper-diverse city.

They connect seeming extremes through impossible friendship.

They connect everything to everything in an impressive gesamtkunstwerk.

We have a long tradition of presenting honorary doctorates to outstanding and inspiring personalities in recognition of their achievements in the academic, scientific or social field.

Tonight, the tradition will not only be reinforced, but it will also become clear why this tradition is absolutely essential for a university.

I wish everyone a wonderful and inspiring evening. And enjoy the music, in the opera.

Thank you.