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Introductory Speech

Dear guests,

I am honoured to be here today and to tell you about the Faculty of Social Studies at Zuyd University of Applied Studies. Although I am a relative newcomer to Social Work education, my background combining business administration and the social sciences has served me well to understand and accompany the complex yet fascinating environment in which we find ourselves.

A year ago, when I first started my function as Director, I recall hearing about the difficult times experienced by both Faculty members and students. The difficulties had to do with the merging of independent, pre-existing social work education programmes, the integration of the different teaching teams, the relocation of the social work programme to the city of Sittard, and of course, the accompanying financial consequences. All this was part of the context in which we had to re-shape our social work education into a broad bachelor of social work. This includes the development of a brand new curriculum – which of course, was no easy task.

Since then, we have managed to start-up the new Bachelor of social work and I am happy to say that, at least in terms of incoming students, the new Bachelor is being extremely well-received.

As a way to further introduce you to our Social Studies Faculty in practice, I would like to say a few words on

- The new bachelor social work
- The current mission of our Social Studies Faculty and lastly,
- Some practical examples of our actions

The New Bachelor Social Work

The new Bachelor of Social Work officially started in September 2006. The rationale to begin a broad bachelor of Social Work at the HZ is based on the opinion that the social work field increasingly requires social workers that can adapt and tackle a variety of tasks as they develop in the social work profession.

The first year of the Programme concentrates on orientation. It introduces students to the particular and generic competencies of social work. After that students are better equipped to choose for either a specific social work profile, for example social pedagogical work, community work or traditional social work or a student can choose the new profile which is translated as “social welfare” worker.

Today our Faculty welcomes over 1000 full-time social work students and over 200 part-timers. We have 80 Faculty members. The relocation to Sittard is complete, the previous three social work programmes are now one, and we are already in our 3rd year of the new Bachelor of Social Work programme. By next year, the students from the old social work programmes will have graduated.

Needless to say, a lot has happened in a short amount of time and we are already looking ahead. The University has its doors wide open. We are preparing to build a new location to be shared with 4 other University Faculties and are committed to playing a central role in the community. We remain enthusiastic participants in knowledge circulation, in internationalisation and in entrepreneurship.

The Current Mission of the Faculty of Social Studies

The Faculty of Social Studies' policy plan (2005) describes that part of its mission is that *the culture of the new social work programme is characterised by inspiration, co-operation, innovation, creativity, challenge, courage and enthusiasm*. This underlines

the context in which I got to know my Faculty members and students. I think that today we are well on our way to achieving our mission.

We are making space for each other, we are allowing ourselves to learn from each other, we talk to each other more, and slowly get back the balance that was lost along the way and which allows us to critically reflect on the process and move on with confidence. We are a learning organisation. The firm belief that there is a growing need for professionalization in the field of social work has helped us tremendously. We are inspired by our students' interests and individual needs and take every opportunity to guide them in the most relevant way. We stimulate links with schools and local welfare organisations, keeping each other informed and committed to local pilots. We place particular attention on cooperation in regional social developments because social problems do not stop at our borders. We encourage student interest in what goes on internationally.

All this offers inspiration for our own work and perspectives for the future.

Some practical examples of our actions

The Faculty of Social Studies has a solid structure of consultation with network partners in the social field: students, welfare organisations, policy makers, government and social scientists. We seek each other out as a way to continuously evaluate ourselves and our actions and as a way to accompany change, needs and realities.

One example is the project *Samen Werken aan Leren* – or in other words - *Working Together on Learning*. It is an example whereby higher education institutions and local organisations working with disabled people structurally co-operate to optimise the links between student competencies in social work education and the professional sector dealing with the interests of the disabled. Given the anticipated labour market shortages, a “refresher” courses for current professionals is a point of interest for all partners to act upon together.

Another example is the EMOL foundation. It is a centre of expertise on social support. EMOL is based on the need for more demand-driven, market-oriented social welfare. Our Faculty is a participant along with three welfare organisations, a commercial advisory group and our very own research centre *CESRT* that does European comparative social research. It is a unique combination of experts on advice, research and training, education and social service provision. The partners share the ambition for knowledge development and dissemination by bundling their specialised know-how and efforts. This makes it possible to identify and address key challenges in one, targeted team effort.

To summarise, I'd say that the challenge for us as a Faculty is the continuous quest to meet and anticipate social questions, driven by professional curiosity and ambition. The Faculty is already embedded in its socio-cultural environment. We emphasise competence-based learning through the interactive involvement of students in their educational process. We continuously fine-tune our exchanges and practices by building bridges between our academic staff, students and the social professional environment in which we live.

Thank you for your attention