

VENICE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY
PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURATION ADDRESS

OCTOBER 1, 2026

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We are all honored to take part in this remarkable celebration of leadership change at Venice International University. Since its founding in 1995, the University has had two presidents, with Ambassador Vattani serving in this important capacity since 2001. Today we commemorate the Ambassador's achievements even as we joyfully welcome Venice International University's 3rd President, Dr Bernd Huber, to lead Venice International University at this important time of global transformation.

Venice International University is a singularity in higher education today. Originally founded by 5 member institutions from Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas, its vision and mission has been to create a dynamic global campus that represents the rich diversity of our world today. Today its 23 partner universities and research institutions are united in a shared commitment to facing our world's biggest challenges together—from environment and climate, to social justice, to the impact and consequences of technological advancement. VIU refutes the institutionally siloed nature of higher education as it is practiced today. VIU believes that our individual universities are more than the sum of their parts. And so its partners commit to the shared conviction that students from our particular universities are educated best when they learn together. San Servolo is thus a truly global campus destination, convening students and faculty who share a world view of knowledge attainment.

When we look across the last 30 years of higher education around the world, we might well ask: what experiments have had as much success as VIU? What undertakings in academic innovation have truly changed the industry? The Erasmus Program began a few years before VIU's founding, and it has leveraged the robust network of EU universities to create a mega-campus system of sorts, but from its conception it was neither fully global nor did it envision a single campus destination and shared curriculum as part of its innovative educational model. A number of US experiments in exporting higher education occurred around 30 years ago as well, but have not performed up to expectations. And the recent rise of Chinese universities is interesting to watch, but it is too early to know their long-term impact and outcome.

Such experiments, regardless of their success, have taken an incremental, rather than transformative, approach to educating the world's students. In different ways, they have adapted existing structures and practices rather than rethinking how we develop and deliver education from the ground up. In such a landscape VIU stands out. VIU began with a simple and profound

question: ‘Can we create a single campus where faculty and students from around the world convene to build and study a curriculum that is explicitly focused on global questions and challenges?’ And what do we need in order to do so?

To transform such a question into a vibrant learning ecosystem and to head such an enterprise is no mean feat. The individual able to successfully convene university leaders from all continents in order to imagine new possibilities for our collective future—this task requires an exceptional and rare leader indeed. And today we are fortunate to celebrate two such men.

Ambassador Vattani, you have led Venice International University with wisdom, creativity, and imagination. Today we are a thriving campus, a global destination for the world’s most interesting minds and for those who aspire to devote their lives to solving the world’s most intractable problems. And this is largely because of your tireless commitment over the last 25 years to transforming VIU into a thriving community of education exploration and arts experimentation.

Before you arrived at VIU, you were already widely acclaimed for your illustrious diplomatic career, with achievements that ranged from being the only official in the history of Italy to have twice held the Secretary General position in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to serving as Ambassador to Germany and President of the Italian Trade Commission, among many other career highlights. Such a remarkable record would have been enough for most. But not for you. You began a whole new career in higher education innovation, for which I, on behalf of the Board of Directors and the Assembly, profoundly commend and thank you.

During your years leading VIU, you grew the consortium from the original 5 institutional members to a thriving community of 23 remarkable partners from around the world. I was asked to speak today in my capacity as a member of the board. What attracted Rice University to join VIU was the quality of the partner universities and their collective capacity to truly represent the cultural, social, economic and technological diversity of our world. This achievement is yours, Ambassador Vattani. You have built a distinctive environment, graced with all the right ingredients for success. In short, you leave Venice International University well equipped to succeed over the next decades.

Many would agree that you are, as we say in the US, “a hard act to follow,” and they are absolutely correct. And yet, a sure sign of the exquisite success of this institution and you as its leader is evidenced by the quality of the leadership to be found within our own ranks, and more specifically in the person of Dr Bernd Huber.

Bernd—today it is my great honor to welcome you to your new leadership position as the 3rd President of Venice International University.

Your accomplishments are many and illustrious. As the former President of Ludwig-Maximilians Universität München, you ensured that LMU became a University of Excellence, a top ranked global research university across all major international rankings, and a model of international innovation. You led the University's internationalization strategy with farsighted wisdom and ambition, as witnessed by LMU being one of the 5 founding institutions of VIU.

Your intellectual endeavors have been recognized through your membership in the European Academy of Arts and Sciences. You are a world renowned economist with expertise in labor markets, public finance, government & debt and European fiscal and monetary integration. Widely esteemed by leading colleagues in your field, your academic contributions have been both plentiful and disciple-changing.

If we need any additional proof that VIU has become a world-class institution over the last decades, it can be found in the fact that we have attracted a new president who is not only one of the great scholars in academia but also a true innovative leader. To be a legitimate scholar superstar AND a university leader par excellence is tremendously difficult and only a small number of university presidents around the world can claim this accolade. That VIU has successfully recruited such an individual to lead the university in the years ahead speaks to the success that VIU has had in transforming from an 'outside the box' idea with a start-up mentality 30 years ago into a revered institution in an industry that doesn't respect newcomers.

Today we celebrate a new chapter for VIU, and, President Huber, your proven track record in academic leadership is essential for our ongoing success. It is a time of rejuvenation for VIU in a world that is very different than it was 30 years ago, and you will ensure that VIU continues to have maximum impact in the years ahead. Some parts of VIU will, no doubt, need to be reimagined for the world context today, because VIU needs to keep inventing itself as an innovative education/research institution in order to thrive,.

Instituting governance practices appropriate for the times, for example, has been a board focus over the last year, and this is part of the ongoing evolution of a durable and growing place. When VIU was founded 30 years ago with a smaller membership, the world context was different. It is natural and right that leadership is now building the governance model that sets VIU up to have maximum impact in the world of today and tomorrow.

Because you have been a wise and deeply valued voice of leadership on the VIU Board, you are the right leader to align the past to the present to fulfill VIU's deepest promises and commitments in the years ahead. Board members have described how you have brought your rich experience to board conversations, and they deeply appreciate your strategic thinking, generosity, and unwavering commitment to academic excellence. Those of us who have had the privilege of working with you know also the warmth and collegiality you bring to everything you do. I speak for the Board when I say that we are truly delighted to see you take on this new role and look forward with great excitement to all that VIU will accomplish under your leadership.

On behalf of my institution and the VIU board, I would like to present both of our illustrious leaders with this small token of our abiding esteem and gratitude. The Athenian Owl is widely understood as a symbol of wisdom, erudition, and knowledge throughout the western world, and so it is an appropriate token of your leadership of this institution. Lalique's beautiful crystal owl adds artistry and invention to these traits, and thus captures the essence of VIU and the inspired leadership it has enjoyed and will continue to enjoy.