In the same week that she takes over as director general and executive director of the London Court of International Arbitration, Jacomijn van Haersolte-van Hof has spoken to The Times about her career to date, her plans for the LCIA, and doorstepping a judge in his swimming trunks.

Van Haersolte-van Hof was named as Adrian Winstanley’s successor in February and started her new job on Monday, following his retirement. Today, she appears in The Times’s “Lawyer of the Week” column.

The Dutch lawyer tells the newspaper that enhancing diversity at the LCIA will be a particular focus of her directorship, echoing points she made at this year’s ICCA Congress in Miami. As the first woman and first non-UK national to become director general in the LCIA’s 122 year history, her appointment looks like a decisive step towards this goal.

“Gender is an obvious component of diversity but by no means the only aspect,” she says. “Legal tradition, cultural diversity generally and age are other important factors.”

She says she also hopes to increase the LCIA’s international profile, while maintaining its solid base in London, and to expand its caseload and users’ network in an increasingly crowded market of arbitration services providers. The centre already has overseas ventures in Dubai, India, Mauritius and South Korea.

A former counsel at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer in Amsterdam, Van Haersolte-van Hof moved to The Hague to set up her own arbitration boutique, HaersolteHof, in 2008. She has arbitrated cases under the rules of the
Netherlands Arbitration Institution, the ICC, the LCIA and UNCITRAL and was a member of the working group led by Albert Jan van den Berg that produced the latest revisions to the Dutch Arbitration Act, which were approved in May this year.

And yet, she tells The Times, she became an arbitration specialist largely by accident. While still a student, she went to speak to a professor and family friend about a paper she had to write and he steered her towards the topic. His name? Pieter Sanders, one of the drafters of the New York Convention

“I had no idea he was the godfather of arbitration,” she says: “I had to look up the word in the dictionary.”

The interview also deals with the highs and lows of her career following this fateful meeting.

She says her worst day as a lawyer was losing a case on appeal that looked like a sure thing: she had previously secured an order for the seizure of a foreign embassy in The Hague, on the basis that it wasn’t in use (there were squatters living on the premises).

Her most memorable experience was visiting the home of a Rotterdam District Court judge to obtain leave for the attachment of a vessel. Apparently she was unexpected: she had to make her submissions “on the legal niceties of piercing the corporate veil” on his doorstep while he was wearing nothing but his swimming trunks.

Asked about her role models, she names Saunders (who died in 2012 aged 100) and her mother: “She has managed to combine a very successful professional career (physiology) with family life and pursuing such interests as music”.

She also offers advice to readers seeking a career in arbitration: “Consider (also) studying economics and/or engineering” (presumably, to give them proficiency in financially complex or technical disputes).

One revelation she made to The Times was edited from “The Lawyer of the Week” interview: that, had she not become a lawyer, she would have become “an F-16 pilot as I was fascinated by planes”. She also told the newspaper where she saw herself in 10 years: “Still teaching international arbitration, and otherwise back to doing arbitrator work, from The Hague and/ or London”.

While serving as director general, van Haersolte-van Hof will continue to follow through on cases where she is sitting as arbitrator until their conclusion. She wrapped up her counsel work in May.

In one of the last of her counsel engagements, she was a member of a team that won a favourable result for Ghana in UNCITRAL proceedings. The tribunal dismissed all but one of Balkan Energy’s damages claims, downsizing a US$3 billion claim to a US$12 million pay-out.

Van Haersolte-van Hof’s appointment is part of an eventful year for the LCIA, which is currently finalising its revised arbitration rules ahead of their launch on 1
October. In June, the LCIA Court named John Townsend as José I Astigarraga’s replacement in the role of vice president, and added nine new members from the UK, US, Switzerland, Russia, Egypt and Nigeria.

In London, van Haersolte-van Hof lives in South Kensington and enjoys cycling to her new office in the LCIA’s premises on Fleet Street. The full text of her interview with The Times can be read, with a subscription, on the newspaper’s website.

The arrival of van Haersolte-van Hof coincides with the release of the LCIA’s latest registrar report, which says that the number of arbitration referrals to the court reached a record high of 290 in 2013 (with additional referrals for mediation and other forms of ADR).

This surpasses the previous record set in 2009, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. It is also an increase of 10 per cent on 2012.

The report also contains figures relating to the value of disputes (again, up on previous years) and the appointment of arbitrators.