

Advancing Society begins with yourself

Speech by Dr. Koen Becking Opening academic year

31 August 2015

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

We are here to mark the official opening of the new academic year. This is always a memorable occasion but perhaps even more so this year, for several reasons. It is the first opening ceremony to be presided over by our new Rector Magnificus, Emile Aarts. Later, we shall welcome a very special guest speaker, Mr. Frans Timmermans, First Vice President of the European Commission. We are honored that he has made time to share his views on ‘the Rule of Law in Europe’. And we are very much looking forward to hearing from Professor Kim Lane Scheppele of Princeton University, who will be speaking about ‘a Europe of Values’.

The theme for this afternoon is ‘Advancing Society’, familiar territory for our guests. Frans Timmermans has been working to ‘advance society’ throughout his long and distinguished career in public service. He has never sought the easy route. His current portfolio as European Commissioner includes Better Regulation and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. This is surely an enormous challenge given the slightly strained relationships of recent months.

Why does Tilburg University wish to ‘advance society?’ It is not a question of idealism but one of *responsibility*. It is our duty. We have a moral obligation to contribute to society, not least because we live and work in a prosperous nation. As our colleague Bartel van de Walle tells his students, “It is a privilege to be so well off that we can help others.” Bartel is known for his work on coordinating disaster response efforts using the social media. He encourages all students to be socially active because it expands their horizons, helps them to identify needs and enables them to address those needs. Bartel often works in difficult and harrowing circumstances. His motivation is the social relevance of his work, as we can read in the Annual Report.

This desire for social relevance characterizes Tilburg University, and has done so since its earliest days. Our founder, Professor Martinus Cobbenhagen, believed that an education in economics is incomplete if it does not also consider ethics and social responsibility. This philosophy has always been a cornerstone of our educational vision. It is what sets us apart, and it will continue to do so.

In today's world, we must devote even greater attention to social relevance, for several reasons. There are many challenges, not only those at the European level which occupy Mr. Timmermans. The demographic trend of population ageing combines with rapid advances in technology to bring about major changes on the employment market. We see the emergence of new forms of service provision. This demands a university that can move with the times, is willing and able to innovate, and can address the requirements of society. At the same time, that university must be 'contrary' enough to initiate its own research, perhaps not knowing precisely where that research will lead.

We aim to produce graduates who are true 'global citizens', able to make a valuable contribution to society. They are independent thinkers who understand society and can play their part in improving it. We must demonstrate our social 'added value' and this is indeed what the government expects of us. Only recently, the Minister of Education, Jet Bussemaker, called for universities to devote greater attention to *bildung*: the all-round development of their students.

A university must not only reach out to society but must bring society within its walls. Our strategy combines social innovation with technological innovation. The Brabant region offers many opportunities for institutes of higher education to 'put their heads together' and form alliances. We might even think in terms of a 'University of Brabant'.

We wish to invest in projects in which we work alongside other organizations, public and private, to arrive at new solutions to challenges in areas such as healthcare and employment. This type of cooperation will bring students and staff in direct contact with the world beyond the campus.

Our colleague Prof. Katrien Luijkx already has very close ties with the healthcare sector, as we can read in our Annual Report. She is a leading authority on geriatric care and her ambition is to make her knowledge available to care organizations, helping them to work more effectively.

Tilburg University has a moral obligation to 'advance society'. However, this is not our only motive. We do so because it is inspiring! Working to create a better world provides enormous satisfaction, and it is particularly fulfilling when a university provides the means to do so. It is also very satisfying to explore uncharted territory through our fundamental research.

Our social orientation helps us to maintain a distinctive profile. This, together with high quality standards and our campus with its small-scale, specialized character, is what makes Tilburg University attractive. These are the qualities which today's young people seek in a seat of learning. We can therefore look forward to welcoming an increasing number of students, especially if we are also successful in raising the quality of our education and research yet further. This is another important ambition within the current strategy. We shall make substantial investments in quality, partly from the reserves and partly with resources made available by the 'BEST' restructuring

process. In time, the government is to provide additional funding further to the savings it will achieve following the introduction of the new student loan system.

Our internal reorganization will be finalized over the coming months, whereupon everyone will know his or her new role in time to begin working in the new structure from the 1st of January next year. The savings made will be used to finance many additional teaching and PhD research posts. In short, we are doing precisely what the minister has asked. We expect the government to keep its side of the bargain: there must be significant extra investments in education and research. This is absolutely essential if we are to maintain our high international reputation. We shall therefore also continue to press for the prompt implementation of the 'open access' policy, under which all scientific publications are made freely available to all, as so forcefully advocated by the government.

Are we achieving our aims? It is only eighteen months since the strategic plan came into effect, so it is too early to draw any firm conclusions. We have begun many new initiatives which have yet to mature, such as the new educational profile and the diversity policy. We are also working on the new University College and the Cobbenhagen Center which will promote our values and identity. The governance structure has been strengthened with the appointment of several prominent academics. We have also invested in efforts to improve our students' career prospects. Again, it is still too early to expect firm results but the intention is that all students should be equipped with the knowledge and skills which today's rapidly changing employment market demands. The Career Services department will help them identify and develop those skills.

It is important that we offer programs and courses in line with society's changing requirements. For example, there is now a demand for people who are familiar with the world of Big Data. Last year, I announced the intention of establishing a Graduate School for Data Science in Den Bosch. We have since made excellent progress and the partners – the provincial authority, the City of Den Bosch and both Brabant universities – have given their full commitment to the initiative. Several private sector companies, large and small, have also promised financial support. In short, interest is very high.

Once again, I refer to the Annual Report in which Collette Cuijpers of TILT explains her personal mission. It is to reform, renew and improve her educational activities that her students are able to offer the skills and knowledge which will be needed in future. She wishes to develop critical academics who can make a difference. To ascertain whether this is indeed the case, she maintains close contact with alumni and others active on the employment market.

We continue to do well in research rankings and in program assessments. Both enrolment numbers and overall student satisfaction have risen significantly. As you may recall, the National

Student Survey put us in tenth place in 2013. We made significant progress to reach sixth place in 2014. Today we are in joint third position. In terms of student numbers, we will see the biggest increase of any university in the country, probably more than 20%. In the international Times Higher Education ranking we will probably also rise significantly. We can all be justly proud of these achievements!

But there has also been criticism. During the past year we have heard several nationwide calls for academic staff to be given greater input in how the institute is run, for more transparency in governance, and for the workload to be reduced, not least in terms of the administrative requirements. We have taken these points 'on board' and intend to work with you to find solutions.

Our ambition is for Tilburg to be universally acknowledged as a leading research-driven social university. Prospective students and top talent should opt for us based on this profile and the quality of our education and research. We are well on the way but we are not there yet. There remains much work to be done. The strategic plan, to which many of you contributed, can be refined to achieve even greater focus. We must be very clear with regard to the direction we wish to take. In 2010, the Veerman Commission concluded that the quality of education and research would be greatly enhanced if institutes of higher education were to adopt a more distinctive profile. Its recommendations have yet to be fully implemented.

The lead role in defining the new focus and direction falls to our new Rector Magnificus, Emile Aarts. He has taken up the challenge with vigor, working to establish distinctive education, innovative research and relevant valorization. When accepting the position of Rector Magnificus, Emile suggested that the mission and motto of the university, 'Understanding Society' should be changed to 'Advancing Society'. This seemed an excellent idea. Merely understanding how society works is not enough. We must apply our knowledge to bring about change and create a better world.

'Advancing Society' is quite a claim. It falls to all of us to fulfill the promise, and that calls for hard work and daring. The hard work is the task of improving our education and research while retaining our social orientation. The daring applies to innovation: we must look at problems from new angles. You cannot change the world by sitting back and telling other people what they should be doing. Advancing Society begins with yourself!

Thank you for your attention