

New Year's Speech, January 7, 2013
President of the Executive Board
Koen Becking

Our Dreams for Tilburg University

Friends and colleagues,

The first one hundred days in office are always something of a charmed period for any newly appointed executive. Politics are the precedent. It was during his first hundred days as president that Franklin Roosevelt concluded his "New Deal" with the American public in 1933, instilling hope and faith that the nation would overcome the severe crisis. Politicians have sought to play the same card ever since. German Chancellor Merkel and French presidents Sarkozy and Hollande all entered office intent on cementing an array of reforms within their first hundred days. Of course, this University is not a country, nor I a politician – nevertheless we are bound by a commitment: a commitment founded on the hope and faith that, working together, we can overcome our problems and achieve our dreams.

Tomorrow – January 8th – it will be exactly one hundred days since I was appointed to the Board of this great University. My first hundred days at Tilburg have been truly memorable. Her Majesty the Queen graced us with a visit, as did the president of Liberia. The University came out of its quality accreditation with flying colors and was widely acclaimed for its decisive and transparent handling of the Stapel affair, which drew worldwide publicity. In addition to these headline events were also a myriad of smaller ones that actually made a much bigger impression on me overall. Driving home in the evenings, the ambition, quality, and motivation I encountered daily resounded in my ears. Seeing the passionate dedication of staff members and students, I felt confident in the strength and excellence of this unique university. What has struck me more than anything is the collective willingness to team up to achieve our goals, guided by the motto of "Understanding Society." As an expression of our commitment to society, this motto highlights one of the qualities that make this University so exceptional. Our dreams are inspired by our desire to contribute to a better society. Our founding fathers, from Cobbenhagen on down, couldn't have been more satisfied about how well we've done.

Another thing Tilburg University excels at is being realistic. We understand that society expects the University to deliver concrete results from research, education, and practical uses of knowledge. And we know full well just how important it is to define an academic profile that says exactly who we are and what we do. We've grasped the fact that the Dutch government's policy focus on so-called Top Sectors won't get us very far. And we've embraced the notion that a university can accommodate different dreams side by side. But when it comes to doing business, such as the business of making performance agreements with government, we don't go by our dreams alone; at these times we take a critical perspective, particularly on ourselves. A realistic and critical mindset is crucial, because it underpins the faith we need in ourselves and each other to actually achieve those dreams. This is more important now than ever, as we begin mapping a new strategic plan for Tilburg University.

Work on this strategic plan should be completed in summer 2013. In it, we will answer questions such as: What role can Tilburg University play in society, both now and in the future? And conversely: What would it mean to our region, country and, indeed, continent and world if Tilburg University did not exist? People here at Tilburg are thinking long and hard about these kinds of questions, and already we can begin to pick out something of a connecting thread that will help to define this institution over the years ahead. This connecting thread reflects shared principals and strengths, and links in with several important themes. I'd like to tell you about four of these themes now.

To begin with: everything revolves around quality. The Netherlands boasts a set of world-class research universities. Tilburg is one of them, intent on claiming its place at top of the international knowledge chain. This drive inspires me. It entails a conscious decision to pursue quality, based on our own excellence and its impact on science, scholarship and society. It means building on our existing strengths. Tilburg University is already a world leader in several academic fields. These are what distinguish us, and must guide our strategic plan. In other words, we need to invest in those disciplines and themes that will bear fruit. We must provide more administrative and financial support to our interdisciplinary centers of excellence. At the same time, we need to create space for promising new initiatives. This certainly won't always be easy. In order to invest in our strengths and innovate, we will also need to trim down in other areas where possible. And we will need to make clear choices as to which programs and activities have a viable future at Tilburg. However hard it may be, such difficult decisions are part of the road to turning our dreams into reality.

Second, we need to define a clear academic profile. The time has come to stop thinking of ourselves as a small institution. Tilburg University has carved out a position as the preeminent university for social sciences not only regionally, but in the global playing field as well. With our high level of quality and strong impact, Tilburg can hold its own in international education and research. Nonetheless, it's crucial that we further hone our profile, with recognizable themes in areas such as Economics and Law and a broader substructure of academic fields that support this profile. In the fiercely competitive world of university education and research, this is the way forward. This is what will enable us to attract and retain excellent academic researchers and the most talented teaching and support staff. It will ensure we continue to be a valuable strategic partner in collaborative endeavors such as Brainport. A more sharply defined profile will also aid our bids to attract indirect government and contract research funding. In past years we have already been very successful at tapping these flows of funding, which will become increasingly important in the years ahead. To achieve our dreams, we must have faith in the qualities that make us strong.

The third theme concerns education at Tilburg University. In the years ahead, we will be focusing more than ever on improving and renewing our degree programs, with a view to achieving our ambitions as an education institution. We seek nothing less than to train the leaders of tomorrow: the best minds for public administration, business, education and healthcare, the judiciary and science. Our students want this, too. They want to strive to excel, to contribute, to be challenged. In their interest, it is vital that our top researchers also make a name for themselves as educators, because a top quality education is what our students expect from us. Our student recruitment needs to emphasize this message: that choosing Tilburg means choosing quality, including all that implies in terms of personal motivation and responsibility. When students choose a degree program, the university's reputation is a key

factor – one that plays into their decision now more than ever. We want our motto of “Understanding Society” to be a take-off point for their individual professional development, distinguishing all of their contributions and helping them to realize their own dreams.

Fourth and finally, we aim to “practice what we preach.” We have chosen to focus on quality as the means to retain and strengthen our position at the top of the knowledge chain in the broad spectrum of the social sciences. Having made this choice, we need to make sure we ourselves actually offer that quality. Yet this is not something we can determine on our own: we must simultaneously rely on our collaborative partners, our students and our alumni, the government and other bodies that engage our services. Of course, it takes more to convince these parties than just a strategic plan nicely tied up in ribbons and bows. What they want is a demonstration of the quality of our teaching, our research, and its uses in society. And to do that, we need to strive for operational excellence at every level, extending to all administrative support activities. After all, we can only win prizes for academic excellence if our performance in administration, management and support is on the same par. Internally, therefore, we are seeing a shift toward a more central emphasis on individual enterprise.

Our organization is developing in stride with changes in academia and society. The university of the future will be structured around a core staff contingent, with a larger flexible shell of PhD students, visiting professors, postdocs and others. People will be invited to work at the University for a period of time, joining Tilburg’s academic community, while at the same time taking part in a wider web of communities. Like other organizations, Tilburg University stands to benefit from more active engagement with external parties, including new businesses, other knowledge institutions and service providers interested in setting up on our campus and joining our academic community. And why should we want this? Because it will give everyone we work with faith in knowing that they, too, can turn their dreams into reality at Tilburg.

Friends and colleagues,

I have outlined a few of the themes that we will be fleshing out in the University’s strategic plan over the coming months. At the end of the summer, we will be able to present an itinerary to carry us through the years ahead, under the project titled “Tilburg University 2020.” Everyone here is welcome to contribute. We’ll be offering plenty of opportunities for you to share your voice – through your faculty or service department, online and offline, and during meetings with parties in and outside the University. In this process, the Executive Board and deans will take their responsibility for setting out strategic perspectives. The contribution we ask from you is the knowledge, commitment and creativity needed to create a truly distinctive and broadly supported strategic plan. I propose that we start now, today, as we toast the New Year. Share your ideas with each other. If you agree an idea merits wider discussion, you can submit it from today through our digital, interactive suggestion box on Yammer. For those of you who aren’t yet familiar with Yammer, check it out on our intranet. Once there, you’ll find the suggestion box titled – what else? – “Dreams for Tilburg University.”

I began my speech by talking about the first hundred days of President Roosevelt. We established that, essentially, everything revolves around hope and faith. I would like to close now with a very apt quote from this great president: “The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with strong and active faith.” I would like us to take these words to heart in order to realize our dreams for Tilburg. To conclude, I would like to

wish everyone here faith in yourselves, in each other and in our University. And now on to a successful, prosperous and healthy 2013!

Thank you.