

Educating Entrepreneurial Thinkers

Speech by Prof. dr. Emile Aarts Opening academic year

August 31 2015

Ladies and gentlemen, dear students, colleagues, and guests,

Thank you, Koen, for sharing your insights and thoughts with us about the present and the future of our university. I fully share and support your interesting perspectives, intentions, challenges as we take our university 'onwards and upwards'. You mentioned Education, Research and Valorization, and indeed these are the three primary topics that I wish to elaborate on in my contribution to this opening ceremony.

I would like to begin by telling you about Leonoor Slobbe, a master's student in Management who applied for a job interview with KLM. I was particularly impressed by her creative and proactive approach. She used contemporary social media to profile herself and this made me curious to find out how she got on after graduation, and we exchanged a few messages on Facebook. Leonoor indeed was invited to come to KLM and explore job opportunities, which is great news. In the meantime, she went to Cambodia to work on a water treatment project, enabled by Western donations, installing clean water filters giving people permanent access to safe, clean drinking water.

When I think of the Tilburg University profile, I think of people like Leonoor. For me she is a role model and I call them 'Entrepreneurial Thinkers': young people who apply their talents: intelligence, knowledge, and energy to create a better future for themselves and for society at the same time. They use their knowledge to make deliberate decisions and their skills to turn them into action.

Last week I also was impressed by another phenomenon that took place at this university. I witnessed the arrival of our new students. Almost three thousand young freshmen from more than 60 nationalities participated in the various introductory programs and courses, and without exception I saw enthusiasm and excitement, although last Friday early in the morning I saw some tired student, but they seemed to have enjoyed a fabulous introduction week so far.

With a growth of over 25% in the number of new enrolments, Tilburg University evidently has more than reversed the downwards trend of recent years and is thriving once more. With double digit growth we are the fastest growing university in the Netherlands. It proves that we have unique assets that make Tilburg University attractive to young talents, and we are very happy with this development.

While growth in numbers is indeed desirable, we need to make sure that we maintain our high quality standards, as these contribute to our appeal. Managing growth and excellence at the same time is a challenge and if we want to continue to grow at these rates we need to find new smarter ways of working. Fortunately, our education profile developed by Alkeline van Lenning

provides a number of interesting leads from which we can approach this challenge. The introduction of new scalable teaching concepts like tutor and mentor groups and the use of advanced ICT methods in education are promising directions to develop a fully student centric approach to education. Whenever, I meet our new students, I am impressed by their dedication and motivation. They are keen to take the next step in their career development. We should be able to maintain and grow this spirit throughout their study at Tilburg University. We should become the university that not just delivers certificates; we should provide students with a career perspective.

Three months ago, ladies and gentlemen, when I took over office from my predecessor Philip Eijlander, I was standing on this very same stage referring to Tilburg University as a 'sleeping beauty'. I was alluding to its many allegedly hidden, or at least underexposed qualities. Standing here a 100 days later I can only say that all impressions I got from the many discussions I had during this period with you and others confirm and deepen this opinion. I also mentioned at that occasion that I was not willing to present a ready-made five-year master plan explaining how I was intending to kiss her awake from her slumber. Neither shall I announce such a plan today. The Executive Board intends to do so during the *Dies Natalis* celebration scheduled for November this year. Nevertheless, the course lines of the plan are surfacing and I would like to use this occasion to share some insights from a personal perspective with you as an 'overture' to the long-term vision and plans that we will present later this year.

During these past months, I have spent much time getting to know the Tilburg community. I have toured around the various departments of our university. I spoke with academics, professors, managers, administrators, students, and members of the support offices. Together, we have discussed about every aspect of governance, education, research, and valorization which has led to a wealth of insights. I have familiarize myself with the 'Tilburg way of working' - how we interact with the outside world – and with the university's culture: how we interact with each other.

... and from what I have I seen I can only conclude that this is a great university. First of all, as I already mentioned, there is this huge population of highly motivated students who greatly appreciate the education and *Bildung* we provide. This is rightly so confirmed by the various surveys, rankings and course assessments in which we are achieving consistently better results. I have met our dedicated and professional staff who are keen to raise our university to a higher level of excellence, constantly looking for ways to improve the processes in place. I have been privileged to meet many excellent scientists whose research enjoys an international reputation. They are productive, creative and innovative, able to take the world by surprise with their excellent research and deep scientific insights. Tilburg University fares extremely well in the rankings of specialist universities, and our thought leaders feature prominently in the media. Despite of what some people may think or feel..., in my impression scientific excellence still lives and rules at Tilburg University.

And in terms of the university culture, students are justly impressed by our openness and the degree to which we consult them about matters that are likely to affect them. This has earned us the coveted *Toffe Peer Award*.

As I said, the past months have confirmed my original impressions. Our 'sleeping beauty' has much to offer if only she would wake up to become fully active and make full use of all her talents and qualities.

That is not just my opinion: it is confirmed by hard facts and figures. By exception I would like to mention three persons in particular for their exceptional achievements. The first two are the recent VICI grants winners Professors Bert Jaap Koops and Emile Kraemer, whose work is widely recognized as excellent. The third person is Professor Rianne Letschert, who became President of the *Jonge Academie* of the KNAW. So much excellence, so much spirit..., in one word: it's awesome.

And all these assets, ladies and gentleman, enable us, Tilburg University, to make a major contribution to the advancement of society. The world in which we currently live, places ever higher demands on our education and research. As Koen mentioned earlier, globalization and technology are making knowledge readily accessible to all, technology has become a commodity..., what we are going to use for is what will make society tick in the future. The main driver behind most of the solutions to the grand societal challenges is digitization or datafication as others call it. Society's demand for knowledge and information is hardly satiable. People want answers and solutions, and they want them *now!* Researchers, government and private sector organizations demand ready access to data and knowledge developed elsewhere. Expectations of life are high and growing, all over the world, and competition is fierce. As Tilburg University we have a great opportunity if we are willing to profile ourselves. Let me explain what I mean with this.

Universities worldwide must adopt to a more distinctive profile. If you are not recognized as one of the top universities in a specific domain, you don't count, especially not in the international scene. It is a question of developing a brand, that starts with awareness and develops into loyalty. This not only holds true for prospective students and scientists that want to come to Tilburg University, but also for the various stakeholder with whom we collaborate; other universities like the TU/e, the city of Tilburg, the Brabant Region, but also the international network in which we participate. As the government increasingly withdraws from its traditional areas of responsibility, the pressure to be a 'participative' university becomes that much greater. We are now expected to raise a significant proportion of our revenue ourselves, which means approaching various organizations for a share of the indirect funding flows, and actively 'selling' ourselves to potential contract research clients. This element of profiling is far more than in the past.

I am dreaming of Tilburg University to become an outstanding 3rd Generation University; that is a university that deals with knowledge at three levels: transferring knowledge, which we call education, expanding knowledge, which we call research, and turning knowledge into societal and economic value, which we call valorization. And I want us to excel at all three levels. Evidently scientific excellence should provide the foundation for all our professional activities. That is the key-asset of a top university and there can be no doubt about this whatsoever.

In the not-so-distant past, Tilburg University adopted a slogan to keep up with its profile and mission: it is called 'Understanding Society'. Though this slogan we wish to express and highlight our concern for the interaction between technology and society, and in this respect it was a very fine motto. But in my expression it did not do justice to our full potential as 'understanding' is a passive concept. One can understand it all but if the knowledge is not used to make changes the impact is void. We not only understand the requirements of society but we can also apply our insights to contribute to the advancement of it. We therefore announced that we will raise our ambition level. We no longer wish to only 'understand' society; we will lift our motto into 'Advancing Society'.

This does not mean that we must now run around changing all the signs or Tippex over the headed notepaper. We can let those things take their natural course. It does however mean that we must make a plan whereby we will establish a firm position in the world of Education, Research and Valorization. To do so, we must ensure that all our activities are better coordinated and that our cooperation with each other is more effective. Only then can we develop and follow a clear agenda in an efficient and effective way.

Cooperation is not an end in itself, but is a means to an end. Once we know what we want, and are working according to the agenda, we can no longer act as autonomous individuals. We must work together to achieve common objectives. We need to depend on each other, take ownership and act responsibly. For some of us this means that you need to change a little your mindsets from “what can this university do for me”, into “what can I contribute to this university”. We all can work in the interests of *our* university, creating a new élan that will provide a sense of unity and pride, and that will turn this university into a great place to work.

We already have many examples of such activities. TIAS, Tranzo and other centers are doing excellently in this respect..., and I am proud to announce two other more recent examples. For one I would like to mention DAF Virtual Reality Lab, a unique Living Laboratory, offering students the opportunity to contribute to the development of virtual reality concepts with the active support of stakeholders from the private sector. Another example is the newly founded University College, which is rooted deeply in various multidisciplinary concepts that provide our newly entrepreneurial thinkers with the skills needed to advance society with practical solutions.

We can work together more efficiently and effectively if we have a clear plan under the banner of ‘Advancing Society’. I have a number of firm aims. I wish to see Tilburg University occupy a very prominent position in the World University Rankings. I want it to be rated as among the best – preferably *the* best – in the National Student Survey. And by 2020, I wish to see our knowledge, which is of such importance to society, to be spread and educated to no fewer than fifteen thousand students annually.

In June, I said that valorization should not be regarded as a mere adjunct to education and research. In my view, valorization is an essential component of a modern university’s work, one that justifies its very existence. Here too, we see that cooperation is of growing importance. We cannot allow ourselves to fall behind. We must be open to alliances with universities and other partners, both in the Netherlands and elsewhere. I am therefore pleased and proud that the Data Science Initiative, in which we join forces with the Province of Brabant, TU Eindhoven and the City of Den Bosch, is about to begin. It is a marvelous example of inter-faculty, inter-university and regional cooperation between the academic world, public sector authorities and the private sector. I am certain that it will attract much international interest.

Cooperation extends beyond the scientific sphere. The major changes within society entail equally major changes in governance and administration. Our university, like our competitors, must take heed of ‘market forces’. This has occasionally led to some friction. Some people feel that the role of the administrator is given undue importance and that their voice is not heard. During my wandering in my first 100 days I discovered the existence of a petition drawn up and signed by a group of eminent professors of Tilburg University. They asserted that the distance between the university administration and the work floor, particularly the senior academic staff, is too great..., and after having studied its contents and after having discussed it with some of its subscribers I reached the concluding that I can agree with this statement. I want to close this gap and restore trust and confidence. For this we need to find way to reopen and strengthen the

dialogue with the scientific community. For me, this has high priority. However, I cannot do it alone. I therefore call upon your help and ask you to submit concrete proposals so that we can begin a constructive discussion as quickly as possible. At short notice we from our side will announce a few lines of action that should contribute to this purpose.

Running a university is a challenge and its leaders must see to it that they live and rule from within an ivory tower, producing plans and imposing them from on high. Those plans must enjoy broad support. They must inspire. They must be practical and practicable. The resources needed for their implementation must be made available. Support, trust, and open consultation are essential, because they enable us to make the right decisions. I am therefore pleased to report that the Executive Board and College of Deans jointly have agreed to form a senior management team which in the future will support the decision-making processes through intensive and constructive discussion and lean processes. We can then move forwards as quickly as possible, with minimum of bureaucratic ballast. I am also pleased to note the very satisfactory progress made in increasing the efficiency of the support departments as part of the BEST process. The objective is to achieve similar gains throughout the organization by improving coordination and cooperation between the faculties, departments and all staff. And finally I can announce that this fall we will run a project called Speech 2015 in which we will invite representatives from all different walks of our university to present on stage during a major event their vision on the future of this university as if they were the president or rector of this university themselves.

Dear colleagues, in conclusion I wish to express my gratitude for being your rector. I have enjoyed every minute of my first hundred days at this university, even the discussions in the University Council. I hope that I can serve you in the years to come in my capacity of innovative rector.

Thank you for your attention.