

Speech to mark the occasion of the transfer of the rectorship

Prof. Philip Eijlander, Rector Magnificus of Tilburg University,

4 June 2015

All good things must come to an end.

May the spirit of wisdom and compassion in all of us grow and reach full maturity.

King's Commissioner, mayors, excellencies, rectors and former rectors of the Dutch universities, fellow professors, colleagues, family and friends and, last but by no means least, our students. Welcome one and all. I am delighted that you are all able to be here today. At our Dies Natalis celebration on November the 20th last year, I announced that I would not be completing my second term as Rector Magnificus. My resolve has not altered in the last few months; had it done so, this session would have taken a very unusual turn indeed. No, today after a period of six and a half years I will be handing over the rectorship to my esteemed successor Professor Emile Aarts. I do so in a positive frame of mind and in the conviction that it is the right decision, both for our university and for me personally. Hence the title of this short farewell speech: *All good things must come to an end.*

(Dear colleagues, the formal academic nature of this occasion requires that the session be held primarily in Dutch. I hope the non Dutch speakers among you will still be able to follow the gist of the proceedings).

Ladies and gentlemen, As you are no doubt very much aware, these are turbulent times for the university. The world of academia can no longer be described as a tranquil domain. The recent sit-in by students – and later teaching staff – at the University of Amsterdam brings back vivid memories of the 1960s. The student occupation of the Maagdenhuis back then was preceded by protests and a sit-in on this very spot here in Tilburg, events described in a book whose title translates as *1969 Rebellion in the South*. Things have changed significantly since those days; a point I will return to later.

Higher education and academic endeavor are very much in the limelight. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they are coming under increasing pressure from political and social institutions – a fact that comes across loud and clear in the media. This state of affairs has produced a whole new vocabulary compared to say a decade ago: performance targets, yield, accreditation, inspection, accountability, profiling, commercial knowledge transfer, top sector... Such administrative jargon is often far removed from the day-to-day concerns of teaching staff, researchers and students. It may even result in alienation, creating a very real danger of a gulf forming between executives and managers on the one hand and academics and professionals on the other hand. In pointing this out I do not mean to underplay the values underlying these administrative utterances. For example, I believe it is entirely reasonable to ask our students to complete seventy percent of their first-year courses within one year. Nor is there anything wrong with expecting students to complete their three-year Bachelor's program within four years. This is not symptomatic of a 'yield mindset' but an entirely reasonable requirement from a wider social perspective. And one with which students wholeheartedly agree, as I know from my regular contact and numerous conversations with them. They most certainly realize that their studies are far more than just an important sideshow in their lives. That said, it is crucial is that

we give students exciting and rewarding opportunities to work on their own personal and professional development.

Speaking of the value of science, Robbert Dijkgraaf, former President of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, suggests that there are opposing forces at work when it comes to the societal position of science: repulsion and attraction, introversion and extroversion, distance and connection. Or as he puts it: “Academic freedom and independence versus the ivory tower and callous indifference.” In this regard, ladies and gentlemen, it is all about achieving a delicate balance, about action and reaction and about seeking out the middle way. We are living at a time of overregulation, exaggerated political scrutiny and an excess of social policy-making. I have already referred to performance targets and the relentless round of accreditation and inspection. We are continually being called to account and subjected to all kinds of quantitative analysis. In practice, the emphasis on administration can all too easily lead to bureaucratization, evasion tactics, formalization and a narrow focus on counting and quantification. This is a worrying trend and one that needs to be reversed. My message is: “put less emphasis on counting and more emphasis on telling a genuine and inspiring narrative.” The soul of the university needs time, space, trust, doubt and, yes, even failure: the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. We do not have a monopoly on wisdom. There is still so much to learn and to discover, and we should never stop asking questions in our ceaseless exploration of the world in which we work, as we search for a deeper and more accurate understanding. Indeed, this very challenge is encapsulated in our university’s motto:

Understanding Society.

I used the word “alienation” a moment ago: the gulf that can arise between the university’s foundation – its “core business” if you will – and the world of management and centralized administration. We too must be vigilant and ensure that these domains do not drift too far apart. Our relatively small scale, our compact campus, our short lines of communication and our close-knit culture of mutual understanding are bound to be a great help in this respect. Instead of trying to run things from a safe distance, we need to operate on the basis of proximity and the power of connections. That has always been my starting point. Paying close attention to staff and students, maximizing contact, keeping your finger on the pulse. All this is crucial to creating and maintaining a sense of mutual trust and a genuine spirit of active participation. Don’t get me wrong: I am not arguing that this is always a simple and straightforward process. Or that pursuing this ideal has always led to the desired result. No, it goes without saying that executives are not immune to errors of judgement. But I do believe that this way of thinking and working will ensure that students will not have to resort to occupying buildings but can find other ways to make a critical and constructive contribution to creating an even better university. Of course, this means that their input must be taken seriously and be seen to have an effect. This open attitude is just as important in our relationship with our academic and support staff. These professionals must be able to rely on the university administration’s readiness to defend their interests and take them into account. By interests, I am not referring to the ambitions of a particular professor or a specific group, but to the greater good within the university. And if our political representatives in The Hague come up with some misguided scheme or other, our people have a right to expect us to minimize or counter any adverse effects. It’s as simple as that. First and foremost, we need to enable teaching staff and researchers do what they are good at and give them every opportunity to teach, research and put their knowledge to good use in a wider social context.

A highly professional team of support staff is a fundamental requirement for a high-quality international university. Effective cooperation and communication between academic and support staff is nothing short of essential. Above all, the focus should be on education and research. Education and research come first. Of course they do. That must always be our

starting point. And, lest we forget, Tilburg University comes first! When all is said and done, this wonderful university is the sum of all our efforts!

In our actions and our way of thinking, the *human dimension* should be our initial point of reference. Everything we learn, everything we know translates into the human dimension. That is the be-all and end-all. It means for example that we treat our students as individuals and not simply as numbers. Small-scale education is key, even within relatively large programs. This can be achieved by working in groups that are well structured and supervised and by ensuring from the very start that students have the opportunity to experience the benefits of consistency and cooperation. Students expect individual feedback on what they have done or produced, and they are right to do so. That calls for more than simply handing out grades. It also involves identifying points for improvement so that our students can continue to develop. After all, attracting talent and developing talent is the mainstay of the university. We harness talent to nurture talent. Teamwork is not only crucial in research but also in education. As society becomes increasingly complex, the issues at stake often go far beyond the expertise of any one discipline. They certainly go beyond the knowledge and range of the individual academic. This complexity requires cooperation and the joint production, transfer and circulation of knowledge. Here, too, the human dimension prevails. The key is to recognize what you do not know or cannot understand and where you need to work with others to achieve a better result. The challenge lies in genuine collaboration: co-creation devoted not only to understanding our complex society but also to improving it. Academic endeavor with a human dimension acknowledges the boundaries and limitations of the individual, and therefore invests in making connections and combining strengths. Together we are stronger, smarter and wiser! Of course, our combined strengths do not stop at the borders of our own campus. There are times when connecting with disciplines from other universities is the way forward. A prime example is our current collaboration with TU/Eindhoven on the theme of Data Science. An exciting initiative for which I have high expectations.

In fulfilling the office of Rector Magnificus, I have always looked to the human dimension. I have tried to keep an eye out for the people who make up our campus community: colleagues, staff, students. To pay close attention to personal contact. To find opportunities for dialogue and interaction. To listen in particular to people's needs and desires. Obviously, solutions are not always forthcoming and change is often a difficult thing to cope with, but we should never underestimate the importance of taking people seriously. In our community here on campus, the lines of communication are direct and contact is easily made. It's not about writing letters or firing off lengthy emails. No, here we can drop in on one another for a decent conversation. It may sound too good to be true but happily that is not the case. This is something we need to cherish; the human dimension in our interaction. We cannot take it for granted; it is something we must all work together to maintain. If we do, we can continue to make a difference. Servant leadership is a term we often hear nowadays. To my mind, this means that management is not about asking what others can do for you. If anything, it is the other way around. As a director or manager, you should keep asking yourself what you can do for others. That should be your attitude and your challenge: encouraging people to do what's right and to make the most of their potential.

Ladies and gentlemen, our university is in good shape! In a range of fields, our research is among the best there is. This applies not only to research within established disciplines, but also to thematic and multidisciplinary research. Our five Centers of Excellence focus on relevant social issues such as human security and the position of victims, aging and pensions, regulation of competition and market forces, the psychological dimension of somatic illnesses, and communication and cognition. With reference to the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, our performance is above average. We attract more research grants than our peers elsewhere. Only recently the Organization recognized the innovative work of three of our

researchers by awarding them Vidi grants. It is essential that we also compete on the front lines of our various disciplines in the wider world. Our strong ties with the city and region should form a firm foundation for international achievement; “deep roots, tall trees”.

Appreciation for our education is growing, as recently demonstrated yet again by the results of the National Student Survey. In only two years, we have risen from tenth to sixth to third place. Current figures for advance applications for Bachelor’s programs put Tilburg University in first place when it comes to growth. All the signs suggest that student intake may well be up 30 percent on last year. Our new educational profile highlights our small-scale interactive approach in tune with the demands of the national and international job market. Students tell me this is a profile with a strong appeal. Our task now is to flesh out this profile and bring it to fruition in our various programs. This requires concerted effort and considerable investment; yes, we do need to pump more money into education. (I can see you thinking: that’s easy for him to say now that he’s leaving. But no, ladies and gentlemen, significant investment in education is written in black and white in the university’s Tasks and Resources Plan for the coming years. These are not just empty words!). In education, the pace of innovation is rapid, not least due to the deployment of new communication technology. My firm conviction is that even here the human dimension continues to dominate. After all, inspiration and enthusiasm are triggered by worthwhile encounters.

Our profile on commercial knowledge transfer is still very much a work in progress. This university with its strong focus on society is particularly well-placed to generate added value with existing knowledge. Sustainable cooperation with social partners has been designated the best way of achieving this, with approaches and connections that stimulate both sustainability and equality. Take for instance the academic workshops run by our TRANZO (transition in care) group. Commercial knowledge transfer also calls for standards to determine what is of value. Money is not the greatest good, but at most an indicator of what is valuable in a wider sense. This university is financially healthy. Many successive directors, from the executive board down, have shown themselves to be good stewards. This too is valuable. It even gives us the opportunity to make additional investments in order to realize our ambitions.

But above all, ladies and gentlemen, we can be proud of our academic community: the researchers, teaching staff, support staff and students who are hard at work every day to become smarter, wiser and stronger and to make society that little bit better. In the end, that is what it’s all about.

In my role as Rector Magnificus, it has been both a privilege and a pleasure to work with a great many of these people, from all walks of life. Over the years, these various forms of cooperation have inspired me to give of my best in support of our wonderful university.

I have much to be grateful for but I will refrain from launching into a long list of personal thank yous. That would take up too much of your time and I would hate to overlook anyone. Besides, the personal is not always intended to be shared publicly. I hope to have a personal word with many of you at the end of this session.

I am very glad that I will continue to be part of our university community. I am deeply grateful to the university for the opportunity to study for six months, after which I will dedicate myself to the fantastic job of professor in the field of Legislation and Supervision at Tilburg Law School.

Returning to such a familiar and inspiring environment feels like a homecoming.

Today marks the end of a very special and intensive period of more than six and a half years as Rector Magnificus. I wouldn’t have missed it for the world, yet all good things must come to an end.

