

Transfer of Rectorship, 4 June 2015

Emile Aarts

The Enterprising Thinker

The wise rector

Thank you, Philip, for your fine and insightful words. You have clearly described your period as Rector Magnificus, your many accomplishments and the problems you encountered. You have also given us an impression of your approach and method of working, which was always consistent and thorough as befits a great rector. You have certainly been a *wise* Rector and you have done so much for Tilburg University. I am certain that the entire academic community is extremely grateful to you, and I am equally certain that this will become apparent many times today as we mark your departure from the position. I hope that you will enjoy hearing yet more fine words, both during the formal part of the proceedings and at the reception and dinner to follow. Everyone will surround you with warmth, returning that which you have so selflessly given in the past.

I consider you to have been an exemplary rector: distinguished yet approachable, obliging yet consistent, competent and authoritative. You have shown a fertile mind, sharp judgment and appropriate leniency. These are qualities which the Jesuit philosopher Baltasar Gracián recommended to us in his 1647 work, *The Oracle: a Manual of the Art of Discretion*, a Machiavelli-inspired set of rules for the guidance of 'kings and intellectuals'. Its three hundred aphorisms remain extremely relevant today. You yourself have applied many of them, perhaps unknowingly, in your extremely skillful dealings with others.

Philip, I hope that you will now find the time and the calm to devote yourself entirely to academic pursuit once more, as a true academic should. The office of Rector Magnificus is merely a brief interruption of academic productivity. I wish you many more fruitful years within your beloved Law School, working alongside the many colleagues who are greatly looking forward to your return.

The new rector

Well, ladies and gentlemen, here I am! The 'exact' scientist from Eindhoven. After thirty years with Philips Research and twenty-five years as a professor at Eindhoven University of Technology, I have arrived in Tilburg with a new gown and a chain around my neck. It will take some getting used to. All eyes are on me and I can sense that you are all thinking, 'come on then, friend, tell us what are you going to do and what is going to change'. In response, I gratefully call upon the sage counsel of my predecessor, who during the preparations for the handover advised me not to present a strategic master plan with ten action lines and matching objectives on my very first day. I was, however, required to devote some thought to such a plan during the *seven* rounds of the selection procedure ladies and gentlemen! Students, staff, professors, deans, the Executive Board and, of course the members of the University Council: they all wanted to know my plans and what I was going to do for them. There are two questions which stick in my mind. The first concerned how to deal with the many 'idiosyncratic' academics at Tilburg University, by which I refer to those who are used to doing things their own way and

therefore do not really need a rector at all. The second question concerned my 'Plan B': what will I do if everything goes horribly wrong in the first six months? Well, I'm not going to tell you, ladies and gentlemen. Again, I intend to follow the sage advice of my predecessor, Philip Eijlander. I shall refrain from saying anything about my plans until they have been refined in detail.

Unknown and unloved

Of course, there are some comments I can make about Tilburg University itself. I have been here for almost six months and a few things have caught my attention. First, this university has undeniably the most attractive campus in the Netherlands. The way the buildings have been assimilated into the green setting and the wider landscape is particularly impressive. I am also particularly struck by the warmth shown by the staff. People here are open and sincere, and that applies equally to our students. They are vital and engaged, taking a very active part in the many student associations and campus life in general. The courses and programs are good and are recognized as such. The most recent surveys place Tilburg in equal third place in the national ranking, behind only Wageningen University and Eindhoven University of Technology. The distance between us is very small, and claiming our rightful place at the top of the list will be an interesting challenge for the years ahead. There has been a significant increase in the number of applications from prospective students, which indicates that we are on the right track. TIAS has provided an excellent example with its extremely high accreditation as an institute. Its master's programs in Business and in the Social and Behavioral Sciences have joined the list of 'excellent programs', alongside the traditional courses in Law, Strategic Management, Quantitative Finance and Actuarial Sciences, Econometrics, Mathematical Economics and Accounting.

The motto of our university is 'Understanding Society', whereby excellence, effectiveness, engagement, internationalization and social innovation are our priorities. This is clearly very positive.

However, there are some other notable aspects which warrant mentioning. We can ask ourselves three questions: how well known are we, how good are we, and what do we stand for? The 'unprompted name awareness' of Tilburg University is not high. Far from it. When secondary school students in Zeeland were asked to name five universities they would like to attend, Tilburg was not among them. Things are little better in Limburg, where just 26% of respondents included us on their list. Here in our own region of Brabant, the figure is slightly over fifty per cent. According to these young people, the university itself "lacks allure" and Tilburg as a city does not offer the vibrant student life they seek.

Quality, on the other hand, is seen as good. The national publication *Studiekeuzegids* ('Study Choice Guide') praises the high academic level and quality of all programs. We enjoy good accessibility and have a strong international orientation. Our professors regularly attract positive media attention. Survey respondents often cite key values such as sustainable quality, the importance of heritage, social and ethical responsibility, and the Christian and humanist tradition of the university. Our website is well designed and information is readily accessible, although some comment that it lacks a clear statement of our vision and mission.

Excellence and freedom of thought

In short, Tilburg University is a sort of 'Sleeping Beauty'. The good news is that she is slowly but surely waking up. If we are to galvanize her into full consciousness, we must take note of developments at the national level. Of course, Brabant is known for its relaxed congeniality, and

there is nothing wrong with that. But we must not ignore the questions which now occupy all universities, their staff and students. Issues such as participative governance, for example. Is there still room for small programs which attract relatively few students? How much freedom of choice is there with regard to subjects? A recent publication, *Het Excellentietraject* ('The Excellence Process') by Rudolf Dekker, offers a good summary of the various difficulties facing Dutch universities. Many of those difficulties have their roots in the performance agreements between the universities and the Ministry of Education, whereby the focus is on pass rates and the number of students who successfully graduate within the allotted period. These are of course important considerations which no modern university can ignore. All must devise and implement an appropriate strategy.

I am encouraged by remarks made by the current Minister of Education, Jet Bussemaker. In a television interview broadcast on 24 April this year, she said that she does not wish to impose hard-and-fast rules on the universities, but that many had themselves opted for the 'performance culture'. She went on to state that universities have adequate opportunity to apply the resources they are allocated in whatever manner they see fit. By adopting a clear and unambiguous profile and acting in accordance with that profile, Tilburg University can establish a very sound basis for the years ahead. It is however important that our staff and students are fully involved in developing and implementing that profile in a manner which they acknowledge to be appropriate, and that all processes are fully inclusive and transparent.

The innovative rector

So, the question that remains is what should that profile be? Once again, I shall refrain from giving a comprehensive answer at this time. However, I do believe that a modern university must be a 'third generation university' in which knowledge valorization is seen as a primary process alongside those of knowledge development and knowledge transfer. The combination of these three processes will allow us to educate critical and independent thinkers. Our motto *Understanding Society* can, I believe, be extended to become *Advancing Society*. After all, having a good understanding of society is not enough. We must be willing to use that understanding to improve society. We shall call this approach 'Enterprising Thinkers', as suggested during one of my recent lunchtime meetings with staff and students. Within five years, we shall be a university which is renowned for its acuity of thought and enterprising action.

When my appointment was announced, the independent university magazine *Univers* referred to me as "The Innovative Rector". I would like to think that this is an accurate description of my character; it is precisely what I wish to be. Perhaps innovation is my main strength, if it is not too immodest to make such a claim. Together with my equally innovative friends and colleagues, many of whom are here today, I have been involved in much innovation in and around Eindhoven. We shall now continue our efforts in Tilburg. We intend to place this university firmly on the map, working in partnership with the City of Tilburg and the regional authority. Our first move is to establish a joint graduate school specializing in data science in association with Eindhoven University of Technology. It is to be located in Den Bosch. In time, we intend to develop a large-scale data science innovation ecosystem in the Den Bosch-Eindhoven-Tilburg triangle.

To summarize, Tilburg University can look forward to a very bright future, particularly if we take measures to safeguard the quality of education and research, achieve better name awareness, and if we sharpen our focus on the society and ecosystem of which we form part.

I think I have said more than enough for the time being. Let me conclude by saying that I am greatly looking forward to the challenges that await. I hope that I am able to display the wisdom, creativity and innovative ability needed to give Tilburg University the new élan that it so richly deserves.

Thank you.