

## DIES NATALIS 2020

Speech by *Professor Klaas Sijtsma*

November 19, 2020

**Dear Colleagues and Students,**

I am very happy that we can meet, albeit digitally, for the celebration of the ninety-third birthday of Tilburg University. Today's theme is Transition in Academia.

In pre-corona times, which already seems long ago, we would have met in our Auditorium, enjoying the different topics of our Dies Natalis, and have drinks and inspiring conversations afterwards. It's a pity that all those things aren't possible today, but the next best thing to do is to continue based on what is possible.

This is what we're doing today, and I hope many of you are following this academic session through livestream.

My speech addresses the question how we should assess and evaluate the work we, academics, do.

The reason for choosing this topic today is the dissatisfaction existing among large groups of the academic community when it comes to the appreciation of teaching, research, societal impact, leadership, and team spirit. The Covid-19 crisis perhaps amplified this issue but didn't cause it; the dissatisfaction existed long before Covid-19. Because the issue is rather complex and because of practical time constraints, I'll focus my reflection on the VSNU project called "Erkennen en Waarden", or Room for Everyone's Talent.

First, a few facts and a little history.

By Law, Dutch universities have three tasks: Education, Research and Service to Society or Societal Impact. Of course, each of these three key tasks receives our appreciation.

The question is whether they should receive equal weight. To complicate the discussion further, I add two other tasks.

The first task is Leadership, which refers to governance, management, and administration.

Taking responsibility for Leadership contributes to running our own academic organization.

That is, our own Department, School, and University.

The second task is Team Spirit, which refers to being a team player rather than an individualist in the organization. Team spirit also refers to team science, which nowadays is quickly gaining ground.

When I started as an assistant professor in 1983 at the Vrije Universiteit, my contract said I must spend 40 percent of my time to teaching, 40 percent to research, and 20 percent to governance and administration. So, most of the tasks I mentioned were already valued.

An individual's performance interview assessed each task, but there was a problem.

The problem was that students' course reviews as we know them today didn't exist and objective standards for good research were lacking.

Instead, when reviewing an individual's performance, the department head used his impressions and personal experiences. Today, one would call this a narrative.

In addition, at the level of education programs and research programs, external supervision on the quality of such programs was absent.

Education programs were good by content, but from our perspective, the students' role was quite passive, primarily attending classes, studying the course's book, and taking an exam.

Research programs existed depending on the responsible professor's initiative and interests, but not so much according to plan.

Hence, for someone doing his best and wishing to move ahead in the organization, objective quality standards didn't exist.

During the 1980s, signs of change were becoming visible when the Dutch government introduced several rounds of budget cuts for all universities. One sign was that failure to comply with certain publication requirements led to budget cuts for the department, whereas unproductive individuals were no longer allowed doing research.

This was known as "voorwaardelijke financiering" ("conditional budgeting").

Another sign of change was the foundation of national graduate schools for particular research areas that had to gain the KNAW's recognition.

These graduate schools made demands on senior faculty's membership with respect to a minimum number of authored international articles.

Faculty picked up the signs of change, and began publishing more, competing harder for grant money, and supervising a greater number of PhD students.

After 1990, this development gained momentum and after 2000 it went into overdrive.

Since then, it may appear as if research is the dominant activity and the other academic activities come second.

This state of affairs recently became the focus of criticism when it became apparent that there is no ceiling to numbers of articles, amounts of grant money, and numbers of realized PhD theses.

Although personally I don't object to productivity, even great productivity, I can see that productivity-demand without limits suppresses time and energy we're able to spend on the other academic activities that are no less important.

Moreover, this might also endanger our work-life balance.

It's time to discuss today's first transition.

We need a better balance between the different activities of education, research, societal impact, leadership, and team spirit. A better balance will contribute to a healthier organization and a lower perceived workload.

Especially, the rat race for publications in journals, grants, and PhD theses wears people out, in particular, the younger generation who still have to find their way in the academic world.

There should be enough time for preparing excellent education without the fear that this lowers the quality of one's vita. This is also true for being able to contribute to leadership, governance, administration, and societal impact.

Working together in teams is an essential part of the creative process of academic activity, both in education and research, and should be valued.

At Tilburg University, we've started to implement Room for Everyone's Talent in an effort to recognize that academic work also consists of educational accomplishment, contributing to the university's, the school's and one's department's leadership, and being part of one or more education and research teams.

In addition, we also ask of everyone to explain for whom they do their research— society at large, a particular group, or their colleagues—or whether they are trying to solve a difficult problem only to solve it, without an articulated expectation of who will benefit.

This is fundamental research in its purest form, and we must protect it at all times and at all cost:

Do you think Einstein ever knew that his purely theoretical work in physics would enable the GPS system that tells you where you are?

Should his supervisors have asked for immediate applicability?

Room for Everyone's Talent should facilitate that some colleagues spend more time on education and others on leadership, but under the condition, that senior faculty always engages in both education and research.

Our almost 20,000 students constitute the future of society, and we should be proud to contribute to their training and prepare them for a valuable and satisfying role in society.

Our research contributes to better understanding society and helping society to maintain a high level of wellbeing and moving through difficult times, such as the present pandemic.

In comparison with other sectors/industries who are facing job insecurity, closure, or an enormous workload—think of health care—we have dream jobs.

Dream jobs, even when we're forced to work from home, now and then feel squared-eyed from staring at our laptop screens, and miss the interaction with our students and colleagues on our beautiful campus.

Nevertheless, there is always room for improvement, more room for everyone's talent.

Finally, I will discuss two disclaimers.

First, by the end of the day, the work has to be done.

So, if more people want to do more research and less teaching, a little math will show that there aren't enough people who teach.

If no one is prepared to contribute to leadership in the greater interest, others take decisions about YOU and you will lose your grips on how you prefer to organize your work.

We all have to show solidarity and take responsibility for the tasks at hand in the Department or the School.

I am only saying: Don't expect miracles, but expect a fairer assessment system that takes account of some degree of specialization based on your talents.

Second, when I started my career in the 1980s, there was no rat race for articles and grant money, but it was often unclear what to accomplish at all.

What we would now call narratives were rather subjective and unreliable accounts of one's work.

For youngsters like me, who did publish articles and obtained grant money, the new system of counting that took shape in the early 1990s and that many despise nowadays, was a relief.

The objective assessment criteria provided me with new chances and a career.

A few decades later, the system has become a caricature and a source of frustration for many.

And that's where we are now.

All I am saying is: Don't expect a new system to work miracles, not everything new will work out fine.

Think hard about what needs to be changed and what was good and needs to be maintained and integrated into the new system.

So much for Room for Everyone's Talent.

Diversity is the second course on today's transition menu.

I'll keep it short: We have made several steps forward but there's still a lot of ground to be covered.

It gives me great pleasure to unveil a collage of our female professors, mostly as a reminder of the ground we still have to cover.

The collage will find a place in our Portrettenzaal.

I am looking forward to the days when female professors will say to one another: Do you understand why we don't have a collage of male professors?

When that happens, we have accomplished our goal.

And don't forget, gender is only one diversity background variable, and there's so much more to gain.

Time for the third transition.

Before I hand over the rector's chain to my successor, I have a few words to say.

I thank the Board of Governors for the trust placed in me.

Many thanks go to the members of the Executive Board, Paulina Snijders, Wim van de Donk, Secretary Rob van Hensberg, and former President Koen Becking, for the excellent cooperation. I thank Sylvia Hoyinck, my personal assistant, for the wonderful support and her persistence in reminding me of the things I tended to forget, sometimes a little on purpose, I have to admit.

Thanks are due to the Deans and the Vice Deans of our Schools, and all the other colleagues in leadership positions.

The university's support staff deserves everybody's gratitude, before and during the grim Covid-19 era.

To our faculty: Be sure that the Executive Board greatly appreciates your infinite effort in keeping the university going.

Keep attending meetings and keep calling each other on the phone

To all the senior staff: Keep in close contact with the junior staff, they need you.

John Lennon sang "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

To our students: I understand the challenge you have to cope with in these unprecedented times.

It's not what you expected, and I admire your stamina, optimism, and good humor studying from your dorms and parental homes.

Your study results have been good so far; so, why not try to be the best generation ever?

And while you do, keep an eye on one another, at a safe distance, while maintaining a good spirit.

Thank you.

I invite the chair of the Board of Governors, Hugo Reumkens, onto the stage.