

DIES NATALIS

Abridged inaugural speech as delivered by *Professor Wim van de Donk*, Rector Magnificus and President of the Executive Board of Tilburg University, on November 19, 2020

Dear colleagues, students, and guests,

Universities are *essential institutions* that help carry, protect, critically examine, challenge, and further develop important ambitions and values in our society.

Of course, universities are also *organizations*.

With all the trappings, and all the perks, quirks, and trials that come with them.

Yet it is the very fact that universities are *institutions first and foremost* that should be decisive for how they are governed. Especially in times of transition.

I quote Sheldon Rothblatt:¹

It is both natural and unnatural to discuss institutions as if they embody an abiding, single purpose that provides a compass for decision-making.

It is natural because complex institutions are otherwise unmanageable, adrift and open to all competing pressures.

But it is unnatural for precisely the same reason.

Highly differentiated organizations can be limited to key objectives only if they are inherently stable and unchanging.

Universities are neither, which is why discussions today are more likely to focus on “changing roles” and “future challenges” that bypass the question of an institutional essence. Yet any discussion of “changing roles” inevitably invites a backward look.

Changing roles and future challenges: but always with a keen eye for essentials.

A University is an open community that is –thus – connected to networks.

Above all, those of the great variety of professors, scholars, and research groups.

They were, are, and will continue to be at the hub in the regional and global networks in which they have to compete and collaborate at the same time. *Team science is a pleonasm*.

¹ See the full text, which will be published later, for full references and additional sources.

Cooperation is key for universities. And cooperation they must increasingly seek, following –first of all – the current dynamics that steer the production and co-production of new knowledge, and consequently the logic of our network society, ironically inspired by the latest policy dreams of central government.

Many uncertainties, even about whether universities will survive in their current form ...

But whatever the organizational form will be the idea of a university itself is – permanently and essentially polyphonic.

And this is our first reason for inviting Cappella Pratensis to sing here today. Polyphony: an impressive innovation in the Low Countries.²

The polyphonic or multi-voiced university: in this connection, it might be interesting to explore the question whether the context of universities has not become too predominantly Anglo-Saxon.

Hasn't the Rhineland spirit that inspired Europe (and that was also embraced by Cobbenhagen and his circle) become lost in the foreground of aggressive globalization?

In its wake, extreme and one-dimensional competition influences the behavior of organizations, sometimes to such an extent that they risk alienating themselves from the deep soul of their institutional profile – a profile that demands balanced attention to a broader set of values.

A university cannot afford such alienation.

Our university cannot afford such alienation, at the risk and cost of losing its very soul.

The history of universities teaches us that future prosperity calls for a careful monitoring of the institutional essence of universities, including both the importance of fundamental research and a close relation with economy and society.

A historical perspective often can help us avoid becoming bogged down in false polarities.

Salerno, Bologna, and Padua are considered to be the first and oldest universities. They emerged in the context of the trade developing in the 12th century cities whose names they proudly bear.

If this happened today, we would be speaking of developing ecosystems that drive innovation, prosperity, and growth.

The word 'university' itself refers to the fact that students began to unite, to form communities.

Initially and primarily to stand up against expensive and absentee professors.

In this process of 12th century university formation, the internationalization of the student population played an important role. Far from home and undefended, they united for mutual protection and assistance, and it was this organization of foreign students that was the beginning of the university.

² See the full text, which will be published later, for more information.

So the internationalization of higher education is of all times and the economies of Bologna and other regions prospered because of it –I say this with a passing nod to the increasingly louder debates in The Hague to perceive internationalization – wrongly, in my view –exclusively as a funding problem in the education budget. Penny wise ...

Students united. They campaigned for affordable housing, sometimes even threatening to leave when the city council was not sufficiently forthcoming. That was not an empty threat to a university that owned no or very few buildings.

It must therefore be a great relief to you, too, Mr. Mayor, that Tilburg university has such a beautiful campus.

Its current emptiness is very painful: despite the blessings of online facilities, we can see and feel that this is not how it should be.

It is not. Most certainly not.

Quite the contrary, in fact. We do not want to be a ‘Netflix University’ (although I can imagine you stop the stream of this event to get some fresh popcorn and drinks now).

No: this should be a vibrant campus. And I promise: next time the drinks are on us!

And while we are on the subject of students uniting, their professors soon followed suit, forming guilds of their own that quickly gained control over licenses to teach. Regulation, self-regulation, certification, accreditation, review: it has always been thus.

For instance, the 1231 papal bull *Parens Scientiarum* contained rules on all sorts of things, but mainly the university’s independence and self-governance.

But also... a ban on bearing arms.

Apparently, the latter was necessary, because students had united in groups based on region of origin, which encouraged a certain rivalry and sometimes even violent altercations.

In a fine book about the rise of the universities, Charles Haskins relates how the students in Paris did not get a very good press. I quote: ‘The English were drunkards and had tails; the sons of France proud, effeminate and carefully adorned like women [...].’

And finally, in equally unflattering terms: ‘the inhabitants of Brabant, men of blood, incendiaries, brigands, and ravishers.’³.

Well, we’ll just have to take Haskins’ word for it.

In this day and age, however, students are above all curious and committed.

And that makes sense, because so much is at stake for their generation.

³ See the full text, which will be published later, for full references and additional sources.

Universities: students were, are, and always will be at the heart of it all. And therefore – we are a university after all – so is academic research done by the scholars that teach and form them.

For lecturers and students alike these are hard times: the corona crisis shows them, too, how we are being tested, as a society and as a university community.

But they are resilient and resourceful, and deserving of our trust. In a situation that compels us to improvise, these qualities seem to me to be more robust and hence adequate coordination mechanisms than regulation and control.

After all, we are educating responsible and entrepreneurial thinkers, aren't we? Society desperately needs them.

On a relate note, it seems to me that our lecturers and researchers see very clearly that organizing education as well as research programs around current social issues is more inspiring than neatly boxed knowledge.

This implies that interdisciplinarity will become increasingly important. In my view, Tilburg should lead the way here as well, and one effect might very well be that we will have to divest ourselves of some traditional organizational routines and regulations that hinder our departments and Schools from become inspiring hubs in open networks.

Digitalization can help us here. Digitalization in all its manifestations is inspiring and connecting, but also disruptive. We may not realize it, but the imminent digitalization wave (the fourth wave?) may hit us harder than previous ones.

This goes in particular for Artificial Intelligence (AI), strongly represented at our university ever since Professor Max Euwe installed the first 'mechanical brain' here in 1963. We look forward to AI delivering real and meaningful breakthroughs, in all disciplines in which our researchers are active, for instance, in fields like health care and wellbeing.

We also have the important task of ensuring that certain forms of AI do not become alienating manifestations of intelligent artificiality.

It is in this context especially that our university's profile, combining as it does a strong focus on digitalization/artificial intelligence with the humanities, social sciences, economics, theology, and law, that has preeminently prepared us for the coming academic decade.

I need only mention JADS and MINDLABS: both are examples of how Tilburg University engages in and creates new networks. For the university as an organization this is by no means easy to achieve, but from an institutional perspective it is absolutely necessary.

An organizational view sometimes favors inertia and routines; the institutional perspective clears to road to change that our values and our mission call for. Organizations have borders, institutions values that enable them to transcend them.

Or is it the other way around?

The idea of a university as a networked community goes far beyond that of our professors and students.

Let us not forget to mention all of our support staff, who essentially contribute to research and education in this digital age within our university community.

And our alumni, too, scattered around the world though they may be, are an integral part of our community. As are the City of Tilburg, the regional ecosystem, and entrepreneurs do.

The fact that we cannot meet now in a normal way makes it painfully clear to us what we need most: each other.

Each other.

We should remind ourselves of this more often, especially in a society where notions such as the public interest and the common good are coming under increasing pressure from individualization, algorithmically amplified in so-called 'echo chambers'.

Digitalization isn't all gold.

The algorithmization of the 'I' and the closed systems of 'We' naturally foster a culture based on exclusively partisan facts.

This ultimately also undermines the potential for peaceful coexistence.

There are legitimate concerns about the society we are trying to understand.

Do we have sufficient insight into that strong undertow which can cause certain positions and institutions to just go under?

It is difficult to understand society without having some idea of what is truly valuable about it.

And our ambition will have to go far beyond merely understanding: we may be expected to actively connect our knowledge and the results of our fundamental and applied research with those who are, economically and socially, shaping the necessary transitions in our society.

We should also continue to discharge our responsibilities in training people who want to take the lead in these transitions and assume responsibility. An ambition that is committed, and deeply rooted in our identity.

Tilburg University aspires to be a bustling community working to develop and pass on knowledge, and, in doing so, also paying attention to *Bildung* and character building.

For young students as well as for those who understand the necessity of lifelong learning and professional training.

This idea of a university has stood the test of time over many centuries and momentous changes. Van der Heijden, a former Rector Magnificus of our eldest sister in arms, spoke of a network university. Rothblatt of a multiversity.

These ambitions and realities must be reflected in our strategic questions and choices.

Which networks do we need to improve our results and to serve our students better?

Which networks give our scholars the opportunities they need to form and be part of a nerve center for research?

In which networks are we only marginally relevant?

How do we develop, combine, or select positions in regional, national, and global networks?

And so, facing these questions, we come full circle to my opening reference to Rothblatt's observations on how the university ought to be organized and governed. Do we operate an organization, do we care for an institution, or do we choose a position in a network?

I submit that all three options, or angles, warrant our considered attention.

And all three raise a number of critical questions. I concede it would be rather presumptuous on my part to try and answer them today.

But, as far as I'm concerned, that is exactly what we –together, as an academic community, as a university – are going to do in the coming year, in the strategic dialog about what we think is important for the future of our Tilburg academic community.

What can we expand, what had better be discontinued?

We are growing, but whereto and why?

We are internationalizing, but why, how, and with whom?

If we do not ask and debate these questions and if we do not succeed in making the choices we deduce from them, others will unavoidably force us to accept the consequences of theirs.

Dear colleagues, there is absolutely no reason to entertain romantic notions about networks ... Networks can be as closed as hierarchies.....

Dear colleagues, making choices is as inevitable as it is necessary and merits a new impetus. And although we will and indeed must take our time, there is also a certain urgency, because in our times, too, we are facing these 'changing roles' and 'future challenges' Rothblatt referred to.

The crisis that prevents us from meeting today in a more customary and infinitely more preferable setting is also testing us and has already accelerated a number of change processes. Digitalization in particular: it will continue to have a fundamental impact on how the practice of teaching and research will develop.

The new Executive Board, together with the Deans of our Schools and on behalf of our committed university community, will be happy to shape, discuss, and implement the outcomes in a dialog with our partners and in our networks.

I trust that this will lead to a clear and broadly supported agenda, with confident choices for the coming academic decade.

A special decade for our university, which, in 2027, still young and agile, will proudly celebrate its first centennial.

The society that we are trying to understand and serve expects us to maintain a visible and inspirational presence. That also means: to not be silent about the sometimes unexpectedly precarious future of our democracy, our state under the Rule of Law, our economy, our culture, our natural environment, and our society itself.

And: to speak inspirationally on impact, connection, and new perspectives.

This terrible crisis is indeed testing us, but it also invites us to lift the mental lockdown that may prevent us from acknowledging that new knowledge, ideas, and perspectives are required to keep our society healthy, sustainable, and livable.

A crisis such as this one urges us to ask fundamental questions about what truly matters to us.

Our catholic tradition and identity inspires and invites us to continue to critically discuss these questions.

That, dear audience, was the second reason to ask Cappella Pratensis to sing here today.

The song they have just sung, *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*, is even older than the oldest university. It transcends boundaries and invites us to reflect on timeless perspectives that touch us to the core. In friendship and love, for each other, for science, for society.

Thank you.