

Opening Academic Year 2018, Emile Aarts

THEME: VIEWS CONNECTED

“HOW IS THE UNIVERSITY DOING?” ABOUT OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Your Excellency, dear Mayors and members of the Tilburg Municipal Executive, dear colleagues, staff, students, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome all, to the 91st opening of the academic year. Our young university has entered the last decade of the first century of its existence.

“How is the university doing?” a friend asked me this summer during a stroll along the beach. While I casually answered that things were going fine, my thoughts wandered off to the essence of her question. What exactly was she referring to? How is the university doing as an institution in the Netherlands, or how is Tilburg University doing or how am I doing as a rector ...? And I was surprised at the number of associations and the many different thoughts that came to my mind.

On the face of it, the university as an institution is doing brilliantly. Never before in the history of Dutch education have so many students been enrolled in an academic program. Never before has appreciation for science been stronger in society at large. Never before has so much funding, in terms of the total amount of money, been available for scientific research. Never before have public recognition and prestige as well as people’s expectations with regard to the university as a driver of social and technological innovation been greater.

At this moment in time, however, many universities are struggling with the question of how to deal with this affluence and prosperity, while they are also confronted with the drawbacks involved. What choices must be made from among the many options and opportunities? Is education the most important task? How do we fund the increased numbers of students and how do we arrange for the necessary support services? Or should we instead focus on research as our primary pursuit? How can we guarantee academic neutrality and integrity in public-private

collaborative arrangements? Is it right to run a university like a collective enterprise or must individual freedom be guaranteed at all cost? How should we deal with internationalization? Should universities be allowed to invest public funds and compete with each other or should matters be controlled and regulated? Should differences in funding be retained now that digitalization is largely levelling out the nature of the study programs? Haven't things become excessively controlled and shouldn't we be allowed a little bit more freedom?

So there is most certainly a flip side to all this. Increasingly, voices from across the academic community are complaining that there are essential issues in higher education that need to be addressed. You have undoubtedly registered this when you entered the building and you will certainly hear more about it this afternoon.

For Tilburg University, all these issues are also important. Our ambitious growth strategy for the coming years forces us to think carefully about all these aspects and to make wise decisions. Decisions that will enable us to realize multi-dimensional growth in ways that invite all parties involved to participate and to contribute.

As for me as a rector, together with my colleagues in management positions at different levels, both inside and outside this university, I will be playing a modest role in charting this future course and in preparing and making decisions. This also means that I will continue to stand up for the interests of the academic world in all its focus areas: education, research, and impact.

That is a fun job, too! Certainly today, when we are at the beginning of an exciting new academic year, that I am looking forward to. But this speech would have been much too long as an answer to the short question: "How is the university doing?"