

Opening Academic Year 2018, Koen Becking

THE FUTURE-PROOF UNIVERSITY, CHARACTER BUILDING, PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPMENTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, EXPECTATIONS

Your Excellency, dear Mayors and members of the Tilburg Municipal Executive, dear students, ladies and gentlemen.

Welcome all, to our wonderful university. Even though I say so myself. But it is true: every time I enter our campus, I am proud and happy. How it all looks, all that greenery, the lively atmosphere, the top facilities for our researchers, teachers, and students. Take a look around this hall, ladies and gentlemen, and this building, CUBE. It is truly education paradise!

Talking about the *Future-proof* university: this building not only boasts the latest educational facilities, it is also founded on our educational philosophy – I will come back to that later. It is also future-proof in terms of the sustainability of its energy management. The special groundwater system installed here allows us to keep cool in summer and warm in winter.

Language policy, internationalization

Ladies and gentlemen, I am also happy and proud that the Minister of Education, Culture, and Science is with us today to witness the opening of our 91st academic year and present the keynote speech. I'm doing my speech in English, because that is what we do when there are people among us who do not speak Dutch. What is our language policy? Well, here at Tilburg University, we are consciously and consistently bilingual. Not only as a matter of courtesy, but also and especially because science is international in scope; because we want to give our students an excellent perspective in a globalizing world. So they can literally and figuratively push their limits. Many foreign students also come here to do just that. Take a stroll on our campus and you'll hear not only Dutch and English being spoken, but also Spanish, Chinese, German, Portuguese and what have you – hardly surprising, given that our campus is peopled by something like 100 nationalities.

* The presidents of Europe's twelve leading universities for economics and social sciences have recently met for strategic talks at the University of Mannheim. Another way to strengthen our international position.

What other developments, besides internationalization, do we face, what challenges are we to meet, what does it all mean for our and your responsibilities, and what may each of us expect from the other? From the government, from the Executive Board, from staff, from students?

Ambition and basic funding

Based on our academic core values of honesty, integrity, transparency, independence, and responsibility, we give talent maximum scope to contribute to solutions to issues involving the sustainability of Planet Earth, a resilient society, peace, security, and health. However, this is only possible if basic funding actually makes structural room for talent and the highest quality of education and research. The Netherlands is facing the question of what level of funding fits its ambitions to educate people in the best possible way and to belong to the top as a knowledge-based society.

We are resolved to maintain the high quality of our research and education and where possible raise it to even higher levels, while implementing a growth strategy at the same time. That is our ambition. It is also a major challenge at a time when, over the last 15 years, government funding per student has decreased by 25%. A time, too, of structural underfunding of research and education. And a time when studying at university has become more expensive, when students must take more courses, and when their well-being suffers the adverse consequences.

Responsibility in the digital society

The challenges for the future do not merely concern technology in and of itself, but also and especially the application and impact of that technology on people and society, areas in which Tilburg University aspires and continues to excel:

- *Empowering a Resilient Society*
- *Enhancing Health and Wellbeing*
- *Creating Value from Data*

You see, the main task ahead is to shape a resilient society, one that aims to ensure decent care and well-being for its citizens and that takes heed of the complexities of such issues as privacy, security, robotization, and migration. The task ahead is to create added value using big data.

In this regard, when we moved with Eindhoven University of Technology, the province of Noord-Brabant and the City of Den Bosch to found the Jheronimus Academy of Data Science (JADS), we moved purposefully. The digital society urgently needs contributions from the academic disciplines Tilburg University fosters and cultivates: economics, social sciences, law, and humanities.

Here is a joint responsibility of the University and your Ministry.

Responsibility: Integrity

Speaking of responsibility, we are firmly committed to scientific integrity. Good research and education must be founded on reliability, verifiability, objectivity, and independence. Spurred into action by – there's no two ways about it – that awful and shameful fraud case, we have taken significant steps to secure and further scientific integrity. I would even venture to say that Tilburg University has been one of the trendsetters, much as we have also pioneered encouraging Open Access.

Expectations: Realizing dreams

Frankly, underfunding research and education makes meeting the expectations of staff and students a tall order – financially, in terms of investments, and in terms of well-being. For what ambitions do we still have, what dreams are we working to realize? Here are a few:

- Small-scale, labor-intensive, and research-intensive education
- More cooperation of lecturers and students
- International classrooms
- Clear policy on English as the language of instruction
- Effective career services
- Entrepreneurship and support for startups
- Improved well-being.

Entrepreneurship and career services

Where entrepreneurship and *career services* are concerned, the two Brabant universities in Tilburg and Eindhoven, the four Brabant universities of applied sciences, the Province of Noord-Brabant and all regional development agencies have joined forces to support promising Brabant start-ups with one joint program, called *Braventure*. A kick-starter for fledgling enterprises in their first steps towards success. A great way for our enterprising graduates to get on board.

As far as *career services* are concerned, the Tilburg University Career Portal was launched last week. This new dynamic portal facilitates the meeting of our students and study associations with the business community.

Responsibility vis-a-vis work and study pressure

We have been able to invest, for example, in this new building, CUBE, a sustainable education paradise for both teachers and students, as I mentioned before. But I have seen and still see that our academic and support staff have had to absorb one cost-cutting exercise after another. Nevertheless, our staff have continued to work hard unless, of course, they have become burned out in the process. I'm sorry if that sounds harsh, but it is a fact that the workload among academic staff is higher than in health care. Since we take these concerns very seriously, work pressure will be an important policy issue in the coming years. This is why we very well understand the presence of WO in action and FNV here today.

I realize that also our largely cheerful and optimistically minded students have great difficulty making ends meet, even with jobs on the side and financial support from their parents. And there are more than a few who find the study pressure too hard to cope with. This worries us as well and we are not alone in that: I refer to the concern that has been voiced by the VSNU (Association of Universities in the Netherlands), the National Institute for Public Health and Environmental Protection, RIVM, as well as our own student psychologists. The latter do everything – and in that, we are unfortunately not alone, either – to resolve problem situations and help dropouts get on their feet again. Both the work pressure of our staff and the well-being of our students are high on the management agenda.

Student satisfaction

But it is not all gloom and doom, most assuredly not. At the beginning of my speech, I talked about being happy, with the infrastructure, the greenery, the campus. But I'm also happy because our students are very satisfied with this university. That is a fact, which you can check in the National Student Surveys that have been published over the years. Again in this year's Survey, the results of which are used as input for *Elsevier's* and the *Keuzegids Hoger Onderwijs*. Students gave us a 4.12 on the Richter scale – yes, they vote with their feet 😊 -, on a five-point scale, that is. I'm chuffed with this. Good facilities and a pleasant studying environment, literally as well as figuratively speaking, that is what our students may expect us to provide. But it is not only giving, we also expect something in return.

Talent programs

‘Het is hard studeren in Tilburg’ (‘Studying at Tilburg is hard work’), that used to be the Tilburg University slogan. Our present slogan is ‘Understanding Society’; it expresses our social task and responsibility, but studying hard, well, that part still applies. And there is nothing wrong with that, by the way. Students who want to go the extra mile can do so in special talent programs such as the Outreaching and Honors program, various top classes, or Academic Forum’s certificate programs.

Student athletes

The successful policy for student athletes also deserves to be mentioned. These students can get additional support in terms of time and facilities. We honor them in our Sports Center if they excel in their specific sport and in their studies, for instance, national field hockey players, racing cyclists, Olympians, but also someone like Jackie Groenen, a *rising star* in the national women’s soccer team. Starting this academic year, what is currently called “student athlete status” will be renamed “talent status”. From January 1, 2019, other target groups, top musicians for instance, will also be able to apply for talent status.

Participation

What also makes me proud is that our students take their responsibility with respect to participation. They clearly provide invaluable input. What is learnt in the cradle lasts till the tomb. In the late 1960s, the basis was laid for the democratization of higher education in the Netherlands at this 90-year-old institution, under the motto of ‘Participation in all sections and at all levels’. Today, we continue to reap the fruits in our consultative structure, the University Council, the School Councils, and employee consultative bodies. And we can be proud of the political commitment of students here in Tilburg: we had the highest election turnout (34%) of all Dutch universities.

Thinkers and doers with character

This building also fits in perfectly with our ambitions in the field of education, set out in the Tilburg Educational Profile. Like all other educational institutions, we focus on knowledge and skills. But we want to offer more: we have an additional focus on character. We want to provide our students with so-called 21st-century skills and what you could refer to as *Bildung*, in order for them to develop more broadly, enabling them to take up positions of responsibility after their studies. To enhance society. Our alumni are thinkers of character and characterful doers.

I think it is admirable that students still want to be active besides their studies, and that is what they continue to do here, in their droves. That, too, helps to practice useful skills.

Expectations: Invest, teach, study, care, be glad, be proud, and admire

Your Excellency, ladies and gentlemen, on a sunny day such as this one, to see all these young people walking around the campus, well, that gladdens the heart, doesn't it. Therefore, Your Excellence, dear Ingrid, let's keep it light. Invest more as a joined effort of the government and the Dutch universities. So that teachers can enjoy teaching. So that our researchers can conduct research carefree and with integrity. So that students can quite literally enjoy the privilege of education and go to lectures relaxed rather than totally stressed out. In order for us to take good care of all our staff. In order for us to be pleased, proud, and happy, and continue to be so, about *your* acts as well as our own.

Thank you.

Koen Becking, President of Tilburg University