***Untangling and Unburdening***

July 9, 2021

Hans-Georg van Liempd, Puck van Tilburg

*Introduction*

Tilburg University wants to serve society and be a university that is meaningful, that has value. Every employee in our organization contributes in his or her own way to fulfilling this mission. We think it is important to give our employees trust and be proud of them. A new strategy provides an opportunity to take a fresh look at how we are organized as an institution and how we collaborate with each other. In the coming period, the focus will be on how we can best shape our ambitions.

This memorandum is the result of the discussions at deliberation table eight. This deliberation table did not focus on a grand new vision of service provision. However, it did result in an ambition to proactively examine how our work can be made easier. By saying goodbye to ingrained situations that may no longer be the best choice, by reducing unnecessary bureaucracy, by simplifying matters, or by sometimes making choices that are not always the most efficient but that allow our core tasks to flourish the most.

Support is a broad concept: it includes not only basic processes that can be steered towards high reliability and efficiency but also processes that are aimed at qualitative support and that must be steered towards the quality to be delivered. This requires a differentiation in objectives per process. Get the basics right and dare to make choices in what we want to excel at regarding support. Make these choices together with the scientists and students.

One of the members of the deliberation table formulated the aim of the service as: ''make the student and the employee happy,'' of course within the preconditions of our public task and resources. We want to improve our services based on our core values: *curious*: can it be done better? *connected*: what is the recipient's perspective? *caring*: what does change mean for our colleagues? and *courageous*: we dare to make choices even if they are not easy.

*Where are we now?*

In 2016, TiU undertook a major reorganization: Building Excellent Support Tilburg University, BEST. In what can be seen as a “blue approach” our support organization was given a new structure. Several components were then further developed and there are still ongoing projects, such as business intelligence. We do not want to integrate these processes into this document, but we do want to test them against the principles we have formulated, and possibly stimulate and expand them further.

*Dilemmas and how we deal with them*

We looked at the discussion of service delivery from four dilemmas[[1]](#footnote-1).

1. *Change vs. stability*. Improvement often means change: of methods, of processes, of people, etc. The internal and external environment requires the organization to adapt, but constant change is costly and can make employees demotivated and insecure. An organization also benefits from stability, with small(er) changes to bring about the desired transformation that is necessary for better service delivery.

We are open to change but believe that improvements can be achieved without radically changing the organization. The organization—especially given the workload and COVID-19 crisis—also needs a degree of stability.

2. *Control vs. empowerment*. We want employees to be able to use their talents and to pioneer, innovate, etc. Control is then often a hindrance and bureaucratic. External parties impose a lot of control on the university (inspection, accreditation, ministry, auditor, etc.) but there is also internal pressure. Too much control undermines innovation and renewal by employees. Because of the emphasis on control and the need to eliminate all risks, we have made many processes too complicated.

A principled approach can help. By starting from the intrinsic motivation of every employee to do the right thing, we want to greatly reduce the regulatory burden. Instead of exactly prescribing which guidelines must be met, by whom, and in which situation, we want to better formulate and communicate the intention. And where external regulations or major risks impose limitations regarding, we want to make an explicit assessment of how we want to deal with this in our organization. This also means a more relational accountability that is about learning instead of judging by means of an endless list of KPIs that often do not measure our intentions.

3. *Consistency vs. variability*. Consistency provides benefits of scale and harmonization. But substantive differences in education and research can sometimes require allowing for variability. The question is when and where the tipping point lies.

We do not think there is reason to propose a new redesign of support. However, we do engage in an open discussion about whether the intended benefits have been realized and possible drawbacks mitigated. With sincere respect for all that has already been realized because that is substantial and mostly good, there are always opportunities for improvement. We want to collect feedback on what we can do better. This will allow us to see which parts of our organization can be seen as examples for others and where more attention is needed.

4. *Plurality vs. uniformity.*

Our organization is pluralistic. A university has different roles in society, and we do many different types of work. There are processes that we design according to principles of high reliability and efficiency. It is important and logical that we design and manage these processes in this way. We work with public resources and feel a responsibility to use our resources efficiently.   
  
We also see processes for which it is necessary to design them from a different angle. In supporting our lecturers and researchers, we want to give them room to function optimally and achieve our common mission. We contribute ideas and start from the principle "yes it can, unless…" even if it requires cooperation across Divisions in finding a solution. For example, we are committed to reducing the workload. That means we do not use process steps that do not add enough. It also means that we are *courageous* and dare to look critically at all the demands placed on our organization. We also want to support our students in this way.  
  
This means that we must weigh the benefits and use of resources differently. We do this together as colleagues, with students, and where applicable, with our partners in society. We want to see if we can realize support closer to the primary process without compromising professionalism or effectiveness. This can also increase decisiveness and give us the feeling that we are working together towards the objectives in education and research. An important example is the digitalization of education.

As a university, we are aware of our role in society. We want to contribute to solutions. This means that we support our students and scientists but also consider other interests. It also means that we take our responsibility in sustainability, scientific integrity, and information security. Where we want to simplify our processes, we look for additional steps to achieve these values appropriate to our role in society.

*The road to the new strategy*

In the coming strategic period, we want to work with a rolling agenda in which, each year, we select processes to improve, together with the people involved in such a process. In doing so, we will translate the strategic objectives in these processes into what is needed in terms of support and apply the considerations described above. Now that educational capacity and workload reduction are so urgent, the obvious first step is to look at the administrative processes with which lecturers have been increasingly burdened in recent years.

Process descriptions are not an end in themselves, and we only want to use them if they help employees to do their jobs better or if they provide more insight into what can be expected from the service.

An important tool we want to use is measuring how we are doing. We will also organize *feedback and monitoring* when improving our processes. This will also provide insight into where more attention is needed. We propose that, in the coming planning period, more Divisions think about similar instruments as LIS has developed. We also want to work with suggestion boxes and a “Kafka button” to report unnecessary bureaucracy. We also want to use the *employee monitor* that will be conducted in 2022 (?) to better identify the areas in which we can organize our services more effectively.

We have given ourselves the explicit task of "de-regulating" in order to collect quick wins and low hanging fruit and thus remove administrative pressure. For each new or existing rule, we believe it should be demonstrated why this is necessary and which rules can be abolished as a result. In the somewhat longer term, we want to examine per domain (education, research, etc.) how the administrative burden can be tackled or lightened.

We strive to create a culture in which it is okay to make mistakes by learning from them, in which we give and hold each other accountable in a positive way. Together, we can also work on ownership. Every employee should be able to feel ownership over the work he or she does for our institution.

Within TiU, all members of our academic community feel safe, recognized and valued and can allow their talents to flourish fully. This also applies to the support staff. Their work and that of lecturers and researchers increasingly intertwine, with distinctions becoming less and less relevant. Just as we offer every student the environment to flourish, every employee, supportive or scientific, at the university should have the opportunity to flourish. Recognition and appreciation will also need to focus on the *career paths* and advancement of support staff. Finally, we propose the creation of a *talent pool* of young support staff, think of (starting) project leaders and policy officers.

1. See Colin Price "Leadership and the art of plate spinning" for the first three dilemmas. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)