



KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, CHARACTER

TILBURG UNIVERSITY EDUCATIONAL VISION STATEMENT

JUNE 27, 2017



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1. Introduction: committed to society

What is it that we train our students for? While the answer to this question changes over the course of time, it will always be linked to the tradition of our university – a university of social sciences and humanities. This tradition is one of *commitment to society*. Our students are trained to analyze very complex social problems and to contribute to solutions as independent thinkers. In doing so, they employ *slow thinking*, a disciplined way of thinking based on scientific insights that prevents premature, biased and potentially harmful decisions and that places their actions in the light of values we consider worth pursuing: solidarity, empathy, and responsibility. Our alumni are experts in their fields but also possess communication skills that allow them to easily interact with specialists from a wide range of disciplines. They are good at cooperating and collaborating with others, while their critical and independent minds keep them from simply going along with seemingly obvious conclusions and actions. The bigger picture and its ethical dimensions will always be taken into consideration. Next to knowledge and skills, students are also familiarized with moral debates and ethical points of view during their education. *They are explicitly invited to develop their moral compass; we call this character building.* After their studies, they will make a positive difference to society as *professional thinkers of character*.

2. Our values: truth finding, solidarity, empathy, and responsibility

Academic education is buttressed by scientific research methods and results. Academics are trained to think and act in the light of robust and state-of-the-art scientific research. That is why our students are first and foremost thoroughly familiarized with science, with its results, its methods and techniques. It is for this reason also that our socially engaged programs will always be *science-driven* and aimed at finding truth. At Tilburg University, this is coupled with a strong awareness of science-external values. For us, the values that we consider worth pursuing follow from our history, our tradition, and from urgent social issues: solidarity with the less fortunate, empathy with and openness toward those holding dissenting views, and responsible management of our vulnerable (social) world.

Solidarity with the less fortunate is not just an intrinsically humanitarian value; pursuing it demonstrably contributes to a more just and more livable world. Globalization, large-scale migration, and the advent and proliferation of social media are unprecedented developments. They lead to notions and ideas clashing, and force us to reflect on a variety of viewpoints and outlooks on life. Our Dutch tolerance, sometimes bordering on indifference, is unable to offer an adequate response, and yet empathy with those holding dissenting views turns out to be a prerequisite for an open and constructive interpersonal dialog. Careful management of our vulnerable world has become a pressing and topical problem. Today, every development raises a range of questions linked to sustainability in a wide variety of fields. These, in turn, raise issues like the social effects of, and risks of, the disruption of communities. Countless urgent social threats and challenges can only be addressed with the help of adequate knowledge and skills, and a clear moral compass.

We will be able to realize our aspirations to generate academic social capital and to contribute to a resilient and vital society only through the use of powerful instruments offered by science and through our continuous ambition to bring about social innovation. Only by 'understanding society' can we advance it towards a state where there is less misery, a fairer distribution of wealth, sustainable wellbeing, and more extensive possibilities and opportunities for those who have the necessary talents.

3. Our tradition: Cobbenhagen and the decompartmentalization of science and academia

Priest and economist Professor Martinus Cobbenhagen (1893-1954) left his mark on what later was to become Tilburg University with his adage: "What you are is more important than what you know." For Cobbenhagen, the focus on the humanities and social sciences, which characterizes Tilburg University to this day, followed naturally from the idea that the expert economist '[will feel the need to] look over his neighbor's fence and ask how his own discipline "comes in in the general schemes of things"'. In order for one to become a complete, well-rounded person, so Cobbenhagen felt, mental and spiritual enrichment is a vital component, which will be totally absent if one remains engrossed solely in one's own specialization.

The rich disciplinary content of the humanities and the social sciences can act as an antidote against a one-sided and scanty view of society. Cobbenhagen's thinking was based on the view that the economic sciences are organically linked to sociology, psychology, law, theology, and philosophy. Economics as an isolated discipline, divorced from its related disciplines, was something Cobbenhagen considered dangerous because he felt it would contribute to undesirable materialism. He advocated solidarity over individual capitalism, social capital over self-interest.

Tilburg University continues this tradition, also in its educational programs: our alumni are enterprising thinkers, people of character contributing to social innovation in a rapidly changing world. They are not merely specialists in their fields ('what you know'), but also academically trained people that will be influential in shaping the nature of our society ('what you are'). The scholar or scientist cannot be divorced from the person as a human being.

4. Our goals: thinkers of character, an international perspective, and a focus on the future

Tilburg University wants to train its students to be thinkers of character. Training them solely in terms of expanding their knowledge is no longer enough. In these turbulent times, Tilburg University offers its students the opportunity to work on their character. This is done through the educational program they take *and* through more general academic training that prepares them to meet the 'grand societal challenges' and other current pressing issues with a strong drive and with creativity. Next to knowledge, we also offer them intellectual experience and work experience in social environments. These enable students to build their capacity for critical and self-critical reflection, their intellectual independence, and their capacity to judge for themselves, and thus ultimately to build their character.

Our students are trained to be critical academics. In Tilburg, this also and primarily includes being critical of their own way of reasoning. Right from the start, they are taught to argue in terms of refutable claims and to yield to the more powerful empirical evidence and to the better argument, in which moral considerations are also taken into account. Their teachers will likewise display these characteristics, as their self-critical and moral academic attitude serves, and is meant to serve, as an example to the students. In the force field of science and in light of the values mentioned, Tilburg students learn to settle for nothing less than improving the lives of others, and they consider this to be a necessary condition to experience their own lives as creating and having value.

Thinkers of character

Our alumni are, firstly, academically trained, analytical, critical and passionate; secondly, they take an interest in and try to come up with constructive solutions to urgent social problems; thirdly, they are enterprising thinkers, thinkers that take action, thinkers that prudently put the insights they have acquired into practice in society – thinkers who not only understand society, but also propel it forward, driven by a strong feeling of solidarity and a powerful sense of empathy, always taking into consideration the human dimension and a sustainable world. In short, they are thinkers of character.

Student centricity

Tilburg University is *student-centric*: the academic training offered is meant to exclusively serve committed students who feel attracted to our moral mission and who, together with us and on the basis of scientific insights, want to work toward improving present-day societies and make them more livable and sustainable. We prepare our students for a realistic future in which new problems will require creativity and action, a future where the balance between effort and remuneration is a fair one, and where life-long learning has become second nature, has grown into a *habit*.

International orientation: a *must*

The current demands at the international level on the content of education, both from the scientific disciplines and from the job market, also determine how the educational programs and the general academic training components are organized at our university. Students need to be able to participate in international teams consisting of members of diverse cultural backgrounds from a variety of disciplines, working on global and extremely complex challenges. To this end, they learn all about the ‘classics’ of their discipline but also acquire extensive knowledge and understanding of the state-of-the-art in their field. It goes without saying that this knowledge is international knowledge – gathered over time by the international community of scholars and scientists. This is why Tilburg University welcomes international staff members and students and why it offers its students the opportunity to spend a period of time abroad.

Dealing with an uncertain future

Tilburg university graduates contribute toward increasing the sustainability of our social world. In their studies, they have learned to deal with uncertainty in this process: They have learned to assess when the tentative remains so conditional that taking action would be a blind gamble, and when the tentative becomes a scientifically sufficiently underpinned insight that can be built on with confidence.

In situations of uncertainty, Tilburg students will increasingly be valued for the *combination* of knowledge, skills and character that they bring to the table. Having the academic knowledge to analyze and solve complex problems will always be valued highly, but characteristics like ‘critical reflexive thinking’, ‘creativity’, and ‘emotional intelligence’ are becoming increasingly important. While we do not know exactly what the jobs of the future will be, they will undoubtedly involve cooperation and collaboration in interdisciplinary knowledge teams consisting of members from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The impact of radical, technological, and social developments on the way we live together in communities, on our self-image, and on what we should consider important, is incorporated in educational programs, and in cooperation and collaboration with (international) companies, organizations, and institutions that we prepare and train our students for.

The importance of job orientation and familiarization with the future field of activity

The demands made by the students’ future work or field of activity are changing as a result of increasing digitalization and globalization. In addition to sound academic knowledge, future graduates will also have to have the right 21st-century skills. In their training, more and more attention will have to be paid to problem-solving skills, to social and communication skills, to planning and organizing, to team skills, decision-making, creative and innovative thinking, and to digital skills. Labor market orientation can take place in the academic programs themselves through personally experienced practical contact with the relevant field of activity. Academic (research) traineeships are therefore important, as is carrying out ‘real-life’ assignments for companies or organizations. Also as a result of developments in society, with more and more flexibility, independence, and personal initiative being expected from academically trained employees, with the currently still growing number of self-employed people, our programs are paying substantially more attention to entrepreneurship – in the broadest possible sense.

5. Our way: *slow thinking*, professional teachers, responsible students, helpful alumni, and the human dimension

Modern scientific insights naturally influence the way academic education is organized. Daniel Kahneman (*1934) integrated psychological insights into economic science, particularly with regard to the human ability to judge and to make decisions in uncertain circumstances. Together with Amos Tversky (1937-1996), he investigated the way people take decisions in conditions of uncertainty. Their research showed that human choices and actions are not just the result of rational thinking, but that instincts and all kinds of real or apparent irrationality

play a role in these as well. Our fast thinking is dominated by instincts, automatic responses and habits. The idea is that through schooling and training we can correct ourselves where necessary by tapping into our ability to employ *slow thinking*, and thus take decisions more consciously.

Slow thinking in academic education

In academic education at Tilburg University, students are stimulated to more frequently practice 'slow thinking'; science in general takes time because its method is painstaking: finding the right questions, finding plausible answers, empirically testing hypotheses, and drawing peer-reviewed conclusions all take time (*slow science*). In the interactive and varied courses, learning situations are created in which students are confronted with their *cognitive biases*: their (seemingly) irrational, erroneous ways of thinking. *Biases* become apparent most readily when students find themselves in all kinds of different pedagogic-didactic situations. Education should not be restricted by the straightjacket of a *fixed format*. How courses are structured and taught is determined on the basis of the course objectives, the available content (also digital), and the professional insights of the teacher. Throughout their education, particularly when things appear transparent and clear-cut, students are taught to take a step back and reflect on the situation at hand.

Professional teachers

It is not self-evident that the academic staff will have the professional skills required to facilitate such a learning process in students, and to be able to coach and guide them. The university will therefore have to keep paying special attention to the further professionalization of its teaching staff, to give them all the support they need to realize this objective. The academic teaching teams will have to be able to teach students 'slow thinking', to demonstrate the importance of 'real-life cases,' to raise intercultural awareness, reward creativity, stimulate self-criticism, cultivate curiosity, practice effective communication, and above all to never lose sight of the ethical aspects involved in any issue or case. It is important that the professional knowledge of the academic teaching staff be kept up-to-date constantly. Like the students, teachers too are required to adopt a *habit* of life-long learning.

Responsible students

The central objective of our academic community is to train students to become culturally well-rounded individuals in terms of their intellectual, moral and social development. This is not something that simply happens to them; they are themselves responsible for their own studying process, for assessing educational components, and for calling their fellow-students to account when they feel they are shirking their responsibility. They partly determine their own development process. Students should be expected to put in effort and show commitment, and should be judged on this by their teachers as well as their fellow students. Inspired by Cobbenhagen's idea of responsibility, we do not see students as consumers, but as *members of the academic community who (therefore) take responsibility for that*

community. They contribute to their study group, to their program, and to their university. The *student centrality* mentioned earlier cannot exist without the intensive cooperation between student- and study associations and the board of the university.

Alumni

As soon as possible after they have started on their studies, students should become aware of the importance of reflecting on and preparing for their future careers, whether this be within or outside academia. Students are aware of their responsibility for their own development and their future activities, and they make use of the facilities available in the programs and on campus that can help them with this. In this regard, the importance for our programs of the advice that Tilburg alumni can give students, the doors they can open for them, and the perspectives they offer as important participants in shaping a world in perpetual transition, can hardly be overestimated.

The human dimension

In spite of the growth it has experienced since it was founded, Tilburg University has remained an intimate university with a green and walkable campus. In the future, we will continue to teach students in a way that will appeal to them and we will not treat them as a number. We will make use of modern means to make this possible: information and communication technology, mentor systems, and educational buildings designed with a focus on scale. There is nothing wrong with large groups of students being taught together in plenary sessions, as long as this is combined with ample room, literally as well as figuratively, for small groups and for personal attention for and coaching of individual students. Teachers and staff keep an eye on students, and teachers are accessible and easy to contact. We use 'scalable teaching concepts,' tutor- and mentor groups, and make sure that students and teachers are given the opportunity to build a personal relationship, which is essential for the transfer of knowledge, for practicing skills, and for building character.

6. Our choice: Knowledge – Skills – Character

New knowledge in the field of human thinking and activity shows how the education we offer should incorporate awareness of the pitfalls of unconscious *biases* that can have a negative effect on our science and our societal decisions. Tilburg University makes abundantly clear to its students collective engagement in science leads to a more secure foundation, on the basis of which they, as morally trained thinkers, feel they can safely take initiatives. These initiatives contribute to the social innovation so necessary in a perpetually changing world, so that slowly but surely, this world will be able to offer better prospects to more and more people. Tilburg academic education is characterized by a special combination of *knowledge transfer*, *skills training*, and *character building*. In short, we train students to be enterprising thinkers of character.