

Opening Academic Year 2017, Koen Becking

Taking Responsibility in a Connected World

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a wonderful honor and a great pleasure to welcome you again today and to address you at the opening of the academic year 2017. It is a special occasion because this is our 90th anniversary. The festivities of this 90th anniversary will concentrate around the Dies Natalis in November.

A special word of welcome to all staff, teachers, researchers and alumni. Welcome also to our special guests, the mayor of Tilburg and his team, his Excellency bishop De Korte, respected mayors of Breda, Gilze-Rijen and Oisterwijk. Avans, Fontys and NHTV presidents Rupp, Nederlof and Van Oorschot. Colleagues from TU Eindhoven, many business partners, and several ministries. And above all, a special welcome to our students, who, just like last year, play an important role in this opening of the academic year. I'm glad to see you all back again on campus. It has been quiet without you!

The theme of this year's opening is "Taking Responsibility in a Connected World". Let me start my speech by quoting a great American president, Abraham Lincoln, one of the founding fathers of the United States, who once said: "You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today."

Abe Lincoln was president of the US for less than one term, but he wrote history by abolishing slavery, ending the Civil War, modernizing the economy, and reinforcing government. What an accomplishment in just four years' time! At the same time, he was open in his views and his approach, entered into debate, and rendered account in the Senate.

At last year's opening, I spoke on the crucial role of the social sciences and humanities for science and society. And, as you may remember, I also talked about the need to join forces in this region to be able to address so-called wicked societal problems.

Taking Responsibility is first and foremost about taking action, on decisiveness, and on rendering account. Translated into university-related terms, it is about the impact and transparency of our core activities, i.e., teaching and research. But also about decisive governance, about being prepared to change. And about the decisiveness of all those in our academic community who contribute

to that teaching and research and influence society through their important work.

Taking responsibility in a connected world, with a good life for everyone as the ultimate result. Let us zoom in on the aspect of connectedness in the theme. Together we want to explore – just like the Rector Magnificus has just done from his point of view – what it means to take responsibility as a university, and as an individual. Since Professor Margriet Sitskoorn will talk about taking responsibility as an individual from her perspective, I will focus on our responsibility and connectedness as a university.

There are many interpretations; one concentrates on the principle that individuals, organizations, and the community are each responsible for and transparent about their own acts and are able to explain them, both when asked and at their own initiative.

A more philosophical definition of taking responsibility is: respect for the value of all living things and caring about the plight of others. Whether your kids are concerned or mine, or your future children, whether it is about concepts like democracy, sustainability, norms and values, and of course science itself. All agents and also all concepts in this field are vulnerable and simultaneously of great value for us. All of them require recognition and protection. More

than ever, we realize that they are all threatened and in need of protection. And more than ever, we realize that, in times of fake news, of divergent opinions, of alternative facts, and of the denial of facts, it is especially academia that can point the way forward.

How can the university contribute to the call for the end of the frustration, experienced worldwide by many, to solve complex problems for large groups of people, preferably on a global scale? By proving answers? By asking the right questions? By conduction research? By doing so alone or in collaboration with suitable partners? In the past year, various people – Robbert Dijkgraaf among them and the president of the KNAW last week – have made a case for collaboration in the form of a Universitas Neerlandica, a University of The Netherlands, in order to face the current issues. I consider it our duty, from our position as a university firmly embedded in society, to be open to or, better yet, take the initiative towards collaboration. This is not only the case for higher education institutions, but also between secondary and higher education. Funds have recently been made available by the government to stimulate this connection

As an example, we also seek collaboration with Fontys University of Applied Sciences, the City of Tilburg, the Persgroep and ourselves in setting up Mind Labs, where students can train in Cognitive

Science and Artificial Intelligence, fields that will play an important role in the near future. As another example, we also work together with Brainport in jointly recruiting international students who can stay and work in the Netherlands for a while after graduation. I would also like to mention how the Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences is engaged in academic research with as many as fourteen Dutch hospitals. Moreover, we regularly talk with organizations, the business community, the Province, and municipalities on the development of the Brabant region.

These examples of cooperation show that the university is increasingly connecting with the world outside academia in order to achieve joint objectives, in education, in research, or in enhancing society. But we are not there yet.

As a result of the rapid and disruptive developments brought on by the digitalization of our society, Tilburg University is faced with a similar challenge as 90 years ago: are we able to develop and educate adults that can take responsibility in modern society? In the years to come, we definitely want to answer this question with a strong yes. To that end, we are developing a new Strategic Plan 2018-2021 in which we continue to take our responsibility and expand our connection to the outside world.

A university operates in a quickly changing landscape. The importance of networks in the information society was already pointed out in 1996 by Manuel Castells. In his book *The Rise of the Network Society*, in which he discusses, among other things, how capital and information have become intertwined, what influence globalization has had on people, and how this affects the fabric of our society. Information is power, but an information overload can have a paralyzing effect. And it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine what information is correct and what is not.

As I stated at the beginning of my speech, the importance of transparency is increasing rapidly, as is the call for accountability. Tilburg University, too, gives Governance, Risk, and Compliance a prominent role in its management and governance. Honesty compels me to admit, however, that there was also a less than pleasant reason to do so. As you know, a serious case of financial fraud was uncovered at this university. When suspicions arose, we immediately took action and, of course, proceeded with care. In cases like this, we also take our responsibility.

So networks and accountability are two elements of the rapidly changing society. Thirdly, I would like to mention the growing importance of empowerment, referring to the endeavor to enable social groups and individuals to take their lives into their own hands.

Making them resilient and striving for a resilient society are definitely in line with the university's goals as well.

Today's context requires adaptability because, no matter how trite, change is the only constant. On the one hand, there are considerably fewer personal guarantees and an increasing number of stakeholders in our world, and more monitoring as a result of massive control systems, on the other, of which public scrutiny by the media and society is an example. All this has led to a call for what I refer to as "delivery". Delivering and living up to expectations also fall within the concept of "taking responsibility".

These are some challenges everyone is faced with, public leaders, institutions like our university. To come back to our public role for the future and to look at the answers our university can give, I would like to speak about the importance of public value creation: it contributes to solving wicked problems, problems that have many causes, are hard to define, and for which there is not one single answer. Public value creation occurs on many levels: at global, regional, national, provincial, and urban levels. I have spoken many times of the importance of the city for public value creation, so it suffices to emphasize our desire to considerably intensify our collaboration with the city of Tilburg in all possible ways. Mayor Noordanus and Tilburg's aldermen have always supported us in this matter.

Last year, we announced that “the digital society where people matter” would become the guiding theme for the Dutch universities. It is with pride that today, the Dutch universities present part two of The Digital Society: our ambition to make the Netherlands a global guiding country and playground for human centered information technology.

Today the Dutch universities present our ambitions for the digitalization in and of academic education. Think about new programmes on datascience, digitalisation, privacy or robotics. Secondly, digital competencies for our students and thirdly, make use of online and blended learning. This asks a lot from teachers professionalization, infrastructure and educational development, but it is not the question if, but how we can do that!

All in all, more than enough ambitions and we are doing well! According to our students, we have performed very well, as can be seen in the results of the annual National Student Survey. We are very proud of that. We already celebrated this with cake, but allow me to thank you once again, and I would say: Keep up the good work. Shortly, we will have more good news concerning the Times Higher Education ranking.

We are 90 years young; a respectable age, that you celebrate with friends and family. Our main festivities will take place in the fall, during the Dies on November 16, when I hope to meet you all again. And I would also like to welcome some new colleagues with whom the number of women who joined the university's Leadership Team has increased: Cecile Vos as the Managing Director of the School of Humanities, Abigail Vermeulen as the university's Secretary General, and Jantien Schuit as the new Dean of the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Welcome and good luck! Jantien is the successor of Klaas Sijtsma, who has done an excellent job in the past years. Klaas, we owe you so much, thank you very much!

Let me come to an end. Tilburg University takes its responsibility and will continue doing so in the future. Let me say a few words on the Strategic Plan that is presently in the making and will be implemented from 2018 until 2021. In an extensive process, we have spoken to many parties inside and outside the university. We have read and applied relevant literature; we have looked at societal developments; and allowed ourselves to be inspired by other universities. All of this has led to a draft strategy for the university as a whole. And, together with the Deans and the Managing Directors, it has also led to separate yet compatible strategies for the Schools and Divisions. It has led to an ambitious dot on the horizon.

But what are these new ambitions all about? First of all, we have tightened our vision and our mission, as you can see here on the screen. Our University's ambition has been defined where it concerns, please excuse me for using the term again: taking responsibility. The vision, mission, strategy, and ambition have led to strategic spearheads as regards education, research, impact, profile, growth, location, culture, governance, and operational excellence. These strategic spearheads have been translated into concrete objectives. These are the main elements of the proposal. As part of the decision-making process, it will be submitted, in the coming months, to all formal boards and councils, including, last but not least, our university council consisting of students and staff, who are great and effective consultation partners.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is 90 years ago that our founding father, Martinus Cobbenhagen, stood at the cradle of a school that wanted to educate students to enable them to contribute to society in a meaningful way. He wanted a socially-oriented university, educating students with character who stood up for their ideals. We will continue in his spirit!

It is therefore our conviction that the new Strategic Plan will move Tilburg University into a new era and will provide us with new challenging perspectives that remain grounded in our traditional

values, whilst facing the challenges and opportunities in a rapidly changing society that requires all its partners to take responsibility. We will be prepared.

Thank you.

I would now like to introduce the next speaker: Margriet Sitskoorn. Margriet is professor of Clinical Neuropsychology. Her research focuses on the relationship between brains and behavior. She works at our School of Social and Behavioral Sciences and is a frequent and popular speaker.