

Prof. dr. Emile Aarts, rector magnificus

Symposium 'Entrepreneurship in the 21st Century'

March 9, 2018

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted – and indeed honoured – to welcome you to this very special occasion, the inauguration of our very first distinguished Professor of Practice in Business, Ronald de Jong. Ronald will of course have an opportunity during his inaugural lecture to tell you more about himself and his plans for his professorship, but it is my privilege to start off this afternoon's proceedings by setting the scene for you.

Let me tell you a story. Back in 2015, the United Nations challenged Tilburg University to find a way of improving the UN's supply chain with the aid of data analytics. Operations Research Professor Hein Fleuren took up the gauntlet, with the help of a talented research student called Koen Peters.

The UN's World Food Programme helps people in crisis situations. One of the most important issues today is how, on a given budget, it can supply as many people as possible with food that is as nutritious as possible. Koen Peters developed a model for this, incorporating a wide range of variables. What kind of food does a person need every day? How much of it? What are the current food prices? Where can you obtain sufficient quantities of the right foodstuffs? What are the logistic requirements? And what costs are involved?

Rather than working with a step-by-step approach to the supply chain – starting with a food package and moving through purchase and shipping to distribution, Peters brought all the variables together in his model. The idea being to build a model incorporating as many pieces of the jigsaw puzzle as possible.

So he built it. It's incredibly complex and today's version is by no means the finished article. It's still being improved, as is the user software. But what we already know is that, thanks to the findings generated by the model, the World Food Programme has been able to significantly improve food supplies in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Ethiopia, thus saving millions of dollars in costs.

The model is now used in four or five major food relief operations a year. It has helped to save over 20 million dollars to date.

So why am I telling you this? Because I believe, ladies and gentlemen, that, as a form of value creation, it is a perfect illustration of our own understanding of entrepreneurship. But why should we as a university feel the need to include entrepreneurship in our curriculum? In short, there are two main reasons. First, society needs us to. And second, students want us to.

Let's look more closely at the first aspect. As you may know, here at Tilburg University the word 'society' is more than just a reference to our operating environment. When the university was first established 90 years ago in 1928, it was as a Higher Business College. A number of big companies from the local area – many of them textile manufacturers – got together to form what was in fact a training institute for talented young managers. The idea was to prepare the leaders of the future. In other words, business is our backbone.

But it was not simply a pragmatic choice based on the needs of the local labour market. Our founding father, Martinus Cobbenhagen, was a man with a mission. As both a teacher and a priest, he believed that his business college should be firmly rooted in society. His creed was that what was good for society was good for the economy (and not the other way around). And so it was that our educational remit covered both business and society and the college gradually evolved into a true university incorporating faculties of law, public administration, the social sciences and the humanities.

For many years, encapsulating the mission set for us by Martinus Cobbenhagen, our slogan was 'understanding society'. There are close ties here with the Humboldtian model of all-round higher education, which sees education not just as a preparation for the job market, but as the creation of good, upstanding and well-informed human beings and citizens. Which is why our educational vision consists not just of the transfer of knowledge, but also of the acquisition of skills and – perhaps most importantly today – the formation of character.

Character, here at Tilburg University, is all about personality, resilience and a sense of collective responsibility for the future. It's a key aspect of our work in the field of entrepreneurship. Young people today can no longer assume that a lifelong career with a big industrial company or government organisation awaits them after graduation. More and more graduates will need to draw on new skills and new character traits in order to forge a career for themselves in tomorrow's rapidly changing society. Alongside the now familiar range of 21st-century skills – such as collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking and problem-solving – they will also need to be resilient, to persevere in the face of adversity. Ronald de Jong will be talking at greater length later this afternoon about how society has changed over the years as we have

moved through a series of industrial revolutions. But let me take you to the second reason for our interest in entrepreneurship: the students themselves.

The story I have just told you about UN food logistics in Syria and other countries is an excellent illustration of the sort of thing we get up to here in Tilburg. And it's also illustrative of the type of student we want to attract – and shape – in the future. So what are our expectations in this respect? Well, basically, we want to attract entrepreneurial students and shape them into entrepreneurial thinkers. They need to meet three key requirements in this respect:

1. first, they need to be creative thinkers, prepared to challenge perceived wisdoms, long-term strategies and 'deadly beliefs' (more about that from Ronald);
2. second, they must possess passion. They must be prepared to go the extra mile and focus all their energy on a single, narrow objective;
3. and third, they must be resilient. They must have and show character and perseverance. They must be willing and able to pick themselves up again after every setback.

Ladies and gentlemen, my own personal hope is that our ideas about entrepreneurship in our curriculum will lead to the creation of a social science park, a unique place where ideas for new forms of social enterprise will take root and flourish. The new social science park will provide an inspirational setting in which – as in the Triz theory of inventive problem-solving developed by Genrich Altshuller in the 1940s – ideas can float freely around, ready to be grasped by people searching for repeating patterns from other times and other fields. The focus will be not so much on teaching as on encouraging and stimulating creativity. And the social science park will deliver people who help shape the future.

In conclusion, we have seen a rapid rise in the number of entrepreneurs here in the Netherlands in recent years. Paul de Graaf, one of the researchers at the Tilburg School of Business, claimed that there are three important reasons for this:

1. firstly, the computer revolution, which has lowered the cost of coordinating economic transactions and helped to create networks between large multinationals and small companies;
2. secondly, increasing prosperity, which has fuelled the demand for individualised, specialist products and services, thus making it much harder for businesses to gain economies of scale;
3. and thirdly, the fact that the government has adopted policies aimed at encouraging enterprise.

Ladies and gentlemen, having started out with the aim of ‘understanding society’, we at Tilburg University recently expanded our remit to include ‘advancing society’. It’s an ambitious aim. And to achieve it, we need ambitious people. Ambitious teachers and ambitious students. We want to have an impact on society. We want to help solve the wicked problems of today. That means shaping entrepreneurial thinkers with character – people who are capable of devising new forms of social innovation and social enterprise.

Thank you.