

Dies Natalis, November 16, 2017, 90 years

Speech Koen Becking

Dear colleagues, rectors of the Dutch universities, King's Commissioner, your excellencies bishop De Korte and Hoogenboom, mayors, Professor Luc Sels, rector of KU Leuven, and Professor Wim de Villiers, my rector at Stellenbosch University, many other respected academic partners, my colleague from our partner Eindhoven University of Technology, Jan Mengelers, our partners from the Brabant region, students, and friends.

I wrote these words of thanks last week in Santiago, Chili. As part of our internationalization strategy, we travel twice a year to visit the countries and institutions with which we have long-term collaboration agreements. Those few days in Chili made quite an impression: the culture, the universities, the people, the city of Santiago, and the political history of the country. After only two days, the Deans and I traveled on to São Paulo, Brazil.

I am telling you this because it is an example of something which I, as President, am very proud of: our international collaboration – which our people have worked so hard for over the years. At the same time, it is an example of a strategy with which Tilburg University distinguishes itself: international, inclusive, welcoming. An apt illustration, too, of our motto of 'Understanding Society'. I always hasten to add that we are not only a world player, but also firmly rooted in our own region. Both are important, and I think that we have struck an excellent balance between the two. It helps us to create a better world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

90 years ago, this university started with 28 students and a handful of teachers and professors to become the Roomsche Katholieke Handels Hoogeschool. Now, almost a century later, we host more than 14,000 students and employ 200 professors. And we are growing every year; our prospects are very good.

In these 90 years, we have gained a good reputation because of our expertise in the fields of social and behavioral sciences and the humanities. We aim to make a difference at the heart of society. Today, I would like to express my gratitude for and pride in the fact that this university has been able to flourish, to educate several generations, to spread knowledge, and to make a true impact on society. In short: to be able to respond to wicked problems and to aim to make this world a better place. To contribute to the ideal of a good life for everyone, as our catholic founding father called it.

However, we cannot be complacent. In 2016, Stephen Hawking said that 'more than at any time in history, our species need to work together. We face,' he said, 'awesome environmental challenges: climate change, problems with food production, overpopulation, the decimation of other species, epidemic disease, acidification of the oceans. Together, they are a reminder that we are at the most dangerous moment in the development of humanity. We now have the technology to destroy the planet on which we live, but have not yet developed the ability to escape it. [So] ... we need to work together to protect our planet.'

Almost a year ago, the world woke up after hearing the Orwellian phrase of 'alternative facts' being used in the White House for the first time. The response was an outcry: the administration was

heavily criticized for deliberately spreading misinformation and telling all-out lies. The sale of George Orwell's book *1984* went up by 9400 % in a few days' time. Since then, rumors have been circulating about hacks having influenced the American and French presidential elections and about large amounts of fake news swamping the news channels. This has made us more aware of the vulnerability of facts and news and also of checks and balances.

Does that help our planet?

The public's trust in the media as well as in politicians has sunk to a new low. Scientists, on the other hand, are still high on the ladder of trust. Does that surprise you? Can we say that trust in science has eroded? Quite the opposite, I would say. It may even have grown. And of course it is our responsibility to protect our authority and safeguard our reputation. The traditional tools are peer reviews, double checking sources and facts, transparency, etc. I am convinced that at Tilburg University we are very aware of the great qualities of science, especially in the wake of the Stapel Affair. Self-reflection has led us to become very strict at every level of the university in the field of integrity. And we have become successful, as is shown by the growing numbers of students that enroll at this university. If you are trustworthy, you will receive trust.

I would like to take this opportunity to say that, for me personally and as lead negotiator with publishers, open science with open data and open access is a great stimulus in contributing to transparency and the reliability of science. The best way to share your knowledge is to make it directly and freely accessible to the rest of the world. The Dutch universities and the Dutch government are globally at the forefront in this respect.

In the past few years, we have made great steps forward, I am proud to say. But we are not there yet. Therefore, we have outlined the new Strategic Plan, to guarantee our future by respecting our foundations and our 90-year-old heritage.

Today is our birthday. I would like to thank you all for being here, for celebrating with us, and for placing your trust in us. We will continue to work hard to earn the trust of future students, scientists, and the public at large, in order to create a better world. It would mean a great deal to me if, ten years from now, we can look back and observe that, as a result of smart collaboration with all our partners in the southern Netherlands, we have really made a difference in the world of higher education – solving social issues as the best evidence of sound collaboration.

I would now like to conclude with a word of thanks to people who have helped us in recent years. First of all, Ingrid Doerga, a member of our Board of Governors, whom we have already said goodbye to. Secondly, I would like to thank Jan Hommen, who will step down as Chairman of the Board of Governors on January 1, 2018. Jan, we have a special and durable farewell gift for you that we would like to unveil on the campus at a later moment.

I would like to especially thank former mayor Peter Noordanus of the city of Tilburg. And former mayor Ton Rombouts of the city of 's-Hertogenbosch. Thank you both for our strong partnership in the past years. I would like to ask you to step forward and receive the special medal of the university.

Finally, I would like to present the essays about our educational and research visions to Wim van de Donk, Professor at Tilburg University and King's Commissioner in our Brabant region. And Wim, would you be so kind as to say a few words about Brabant and our university? Thank you.