Speech by Professor Huibert Pols, leave-taking Rector Magnificus
Erasmus University Rotterdam, Transfer of Rectorship, 15 June
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‘Farming free range academics’

Madam Minister, Rectores Magnifici of the Dutch universities, colleagues
and students of our Erasmus academic community, ladies and
gentlemen,

January 1st, 2000 was an interesting date, for reasons many of you will
remember.
That day - that night - was the night of the much feared Millennium Bug,
the Year 2 K.
On that first of January in the year 2000, I started my new job as Head of
the department of Internal medicine at Dijkzigt Hospital, now known as
the Erasmus Medical Centre.

The night all computers would go wild, crazy and crash.
As many of you will also remember: nothing really happened. because of
the huge amount of preparation work
But I was there, in the hospital, all night. Because I felt that this was part of my commitment and responsibility as new department head.

Of course, I already knew about commitment and responsibility. I was a doctor after all.

But this really felt different.

I was not only responsible for my patients and my own performance, but for all the patients and all the doctors, nurses and administrators in my department.

A different kind of responsibility.

A different kind of commitment.

January 1st, 2000 was a real U-turn in my career because of that responsibility.

A career that brought me here, almost five years ago, to become your rector magnificus.

A big title that comes with a big responsibility.

But unfortunately, not with a ‘big stick’ you sometimes need and maybe wish for...

As your rector, I have always felt responsible for, and committed to change.
Change towards a more connected, more inclusive, more socially involved university.

A change to develop in a better way. A university that nurtures talent and skills.

A university that is relevant now and will remain relevant in the future. For our students, for our scientists and for our society.

I soon learned that the best way to make that journey into the 21st century is to avoid marching alone up front, hitting a big drum and making a lot of noise, but to mingle among my fellow travellers and listen to and try to understand their music.

Listen, to hear and to understand. And I do fully admit, dear deans, that this has been difficult for me.

But still, I put all my effort to engage and interact in a dialogue.

And accept and respect that many small steps can make one giant leap…

Especially in a big organisation, a big community like our university.

As our namesake, Desiderius Erasmus, once said: “A big city means great loneliness”.

And, ladies and gentlemen, he was not only referring to loneliness at the top…
The large scale of our growing university creates loneliness, separation between students and teachers, between faculty and staff, between science and society.

But - as I said before - in this day and age, science is much more than the individual pursuit of knowledge. It is a team effort, a team sport.

To be successful we must play well together and play well with others.

Be nice!

This is especially true with our shared awareness that the world, our world, is much bigger than this campus.

I made it my mission, my responsibility to bridge the gaps, on this campus and beyond. It became my challenge.

And it was a real challenge!

Our university is literally and figuratively built of concrete.

Of the reinforced, almost indestructible variety – except in the floors of the Polak building of course….but that’s another story and challenge.

Reinforced concrete in the academic world is also known as ‘tradition’. the beautiful ceremonial traditions, the ugly habitual kind.

It took much effort and time as well as patience and passion, to reduce - some of – this obstructive concrete to rubble.
Unrealistic governmental policy in particular was more of a hindrance than a help: more students and less money combined with regulations for time spent on education and research. All lead to growing work pressure, frustration and ultimately risk to the quality of our science and education.

This is when I longed for that stick …. A big one.

Despite these internal and external obstacles, we, travellers in a 21st century inclusive, confident and relevant University, did not retreat into academic isolation. Quite the opposite I am proud to say!

We have taken definitive steps to connect.

To make connections.

With the three Erasmus Initiatives we encourage our researchers to generate and share new, multidisciplinary knowledge, to connect with other research groups and with external stakeholders. With the Community for Learning and Innovation we are now able to bring all our expertise on education together. By working as a team in this community, we have created a great opportunity to further increase our focus on an even better quality of education.
Third, I want to mention the Challenge Accepted campaign. In close collaboration with the Erasmus Trust Fund, we were able to raise the Trust Fund’s endowment considerably. I am grateful to all those who supported us. They really showed that the notion of ‘Learn, Earn and Return’ also exists in the Netherlands …. And we can also conclude that this is a typical great example of the Rotterdam “can do” mentality.

From the start of my rectorate I made an effort to support talent from different disciplines and faculties.

Liesbeth van Rossum’s Obesity Center is a prime example.

As is the Catalyst Lab that was founded by Payal Arora.

Liesbeth and Payal both told their stories a short while ago.

Stories about blood, sweat and tears – about hard work, perseverance and success.

What they do and what they achieve is an inspiration to us all.

This is the teamwork we need.

This is the multidisciplinary work that will generate answers to multidisciplinary questions.

This is the inspirational work that will attract and deliver talent.

Teamwork and talent that we need to keep our university relevant in the 21st century.
We also need something else.
To bring mind and matter, problem and solution, theory and practice together, we need space.
Free range space - in Dutch I call this “scharrelruimte”.
Space to let our creative juices flow,
Space to give our imagination free rein.
You know ….. those moments when you find yourself talking with a colleague from another faculty and you suddenly look at a challenge from a completely new perspective.

Erasmus said: “Those who do not frolic about have a short childhood.”
I am convinced that providing free range space, the freedom to think and interact, is essential for an academic climate and academic success.
That is why I propose to turn our campus into a farm for free range academics.
A place to think great thoughts while doing small things.
A place to have small thoughts while doing great things.
A place where you can go at your own pace in order to grow.
A place that makes me think of that wonderful movie from 1979 with Peter Sellers, ‘Being There’. It’s about the simple, sheltered gardener, Chance, who becomes an unlikely adviser to the US president. When the president asks how he can stimulate growth, the gardener answers: “As
long as the roots are not severed, all is well (…) In the garden, growth has it seasons. First comes spring and summer, but then we have fall and winter. And then we get spring and summer again.”

Let me be very clear on this though;
This free range farm is more than just a home for roosters and cockerels. On the contrary, I sincerely hope that our Erasmus free range farm will not be built from that male chauvinist concrete that I know and abhor. To stay relevant we have to be diverse. That means more female professors, more female managers, a more diverse campus and a more diverse classroom. Or even better: a more diverse, more international classroom. There are more than 170 nationalities living in Rotterdam; we can and we should mirror that in our classrooms, because that is the only way to mirror the real world. We did make some progress in my five years as rector, but I am fully aware: those were only small steps. I truly hope the daring first … What we need is a giant leap into our diverse future.

My successor Rutger, hopefully will continue this journey.

So dear Rutger,
Congratulations on your appointment!
The last few weeks, while you were still a ‘Rector in Training’, we worked closely together. I appreciate your enthusiasm, your eagerness to learn our ways and means, to become a Erasmus person, also known as a real Rotterdammert
I can tell you that being a Rotterdammert is a wonderful feeling.
I wish you all the wisdom and patience you need!
Remember the words of the President in ‘Being There’: “Life is a state of mind.” Or as I like to think; “Rector magnificus is a state of mind.”

And, Rutger, you will be with others. The perceived loneliness is out.

During my time in office I was fortunate to receive great support from my colleagues in the Executive Board and the members of our Supervisory Board.

And of course I also want to thank the whole Erasmus community, students and staff for five wonderful and very interesting years. I hope that you will equally support Rutger as he takes on his role in our community

Thank you all for your help, support, advise, love and trust.
For me, this is the moment to look back on a long and very rewarding career.

Now, I am looking forward to a next long and very rewarding career: retirement.

With my wonderful family and of course a lot of “scharrelruimte”.