Speech by Kristel Baele, President of the Executive Board of Erasmus University Rotterdam

Opening of the Academic Year 2018-2019, 3 September 2018

‘Imagining tomorrow’s university - Strategy 2024’

Your excellencies, dear alderman Kasmi, dear Mrs. Goncharova, our guest speaker, dear members of the Supervisory Board, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

It is with great pride and pleasure that I welcome you to this magnificent, historic venue to celebrate the opening of the new academic year with us.

The Laurenskerk stands for the resilient, indestructable and optimistic nature of Rotterdam and its people - in the past, present, and future.

But first, please join me in the tradition of honouring the memory of colleagues and fellow students from within our community who in the last year have sadly - passed away. If possible, may I invite you to stand.

We deeply regret the tragic loss of the following students:

• Richard Feng
• Paula Valevičiūtė
• Dirk Jan van Silfhout
• Bart Migchelsen

We also mourn - the loss of colleagues and - former colleagues:

• Katherine Rothwell
• Wibo van Rossum
• Ferry de Goey
• Hans Wichers
• Lorike Hagdorn – van der Meijden
• Sam Adams
• Vicky Balsem
• Loet Mennes
• Wim Dolman
• Kees Rijnvos
• Harry Crijns
• Peter Carel Levendag
• Arie Verberk

We will always consider them to be part of our community. Our thoughts are with their loved ones, in deep appreciation.
Thank you ladies and gentlemen, please be seated.

On this day, the start of the celebrations of the one hundred and fifth anniversary of the Erasmus University, we find ourselves in an exciting and challenging place.

We are at a crossroads in our progression.
Where do we go next?

We can take things as they come (the business as usual model or we can assert our collective vision for this fine institution and retain, maintain and further build on its rightful position which is here, at the very heart of society.

It is from here, at the very heart of society, that we can play an active role in helping find the solutions for today’s and tomorrow’s complex challenges.
It is from here that we have the best opportunity to contribute, to give back, to make a positive impact on societal change.

So how are we going to achieve this? What will be our strategy for the coming years?
Well, it is my greatest pleasure to launch the Erasmus University’s new Strategic Framework today. This is the foundation for our strategic plan 2019-2024.

Later, I will share with you some of the reasons why we need this new strategy, how we have defined our strategic framework with our mission, and chosen strategic priorities. And then briefly, how we will finalise our strategic plan with measurable goals and objectives.

But first -
In the ‘here and now’, I wish to publicly congratulate and applaud all our faculty, staff, students and alumni, on all of their wonderful achievements and successes of the last year.

You are the fabric of this university.
You are the reason why we are already regarded as an internationally driven, ground-breaking and world class institution.
We are already contributing to the quality of society through integrating academic top research - with excellent - challenging - inspiring - education!
Well done! Thank you.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are good.
In fact, in some areas we are excellent.
We can be proud but we can’t afford to become complacent.
Ambition is in our DNA.
We plan to continue to be successful in what we do.
So we need to strategically position ourselves to enable our university to be a front runner in the areas in which we excel.

In an ever-changing world, our focus should be – ‘advancement for the better’. Advancement means, as a university, coming up with answers to highly complex challenges such as sustainability, digitalisation, migration, inclusion, and poverty. To guide us and provide focus, we need a robust strategy. And that is what we are developing.

Starting out on this journey of strategy making, we felt we needed to make an honest and realistic assessment of ourselves. When we assessed our current focus and perceived effectiveness, we consulted with and listened to a representation from all of our stakeholders on and off campus.

I’m going to share with you some of the feedback we received – some of it makes for quite uncomfortable reading.

We have students on campus, who feel that we do not prepare them sufficiently for the world of tomorrow. Many of the younger generation have accused us of failing to act strongly enough, especially with respect to sustainability.

The members of our community recognise the many things going wrong in the world. They urge us to - ‘please step up - and act’. Furthermore, they say:

- ‘Improve your communication with us’
- ‘Move along with the times’
- ‘Be more externally orientated’

These Comments resonate with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s statement on the future of universities, which reads; ‘Universities have positioned themselves on the outskirts of society and are looking in, without playing an active part’.

Our stakeholders correctly see us, the Erasmus University, as a place where research is performed, where global issues are studied and where talent is educated.

However - we clearly have a problem. We are not yet - perceived by many as being an active and contributing part of the solution to modern day problems.

I say ‘It is time to act’! We simply cannot continue in the ‘business as usual’ mode. It is crucial that we have a crystal clear understanding of why our university exists.
What is it that we wish to achieve? What is our common purpose?

And we are acting.

We looked at what we are good at because we want to contribute our very best. We looked at which societal challenges we can address with our particular areas of expertise and how we can best do this.

And we came to the conclusion that we need to increase our multi and interdisciplinary efforts, while at the same time maintaining, improving and building on our strong mono disciplines. We will contribute using the full extent of our scientific disciplines.

We have already launched our three Erasmus Initiatives which are focused on solving contemporary societal challenges, both in our own Rotterdam urban delta – as well as further afield. Looking again now at these Initiatives, through the lens of our new mission, we conclude that we have made excellent choices here.

But we can do more.
We must do more.

Today, we are in the middle of the fourth industrial revolution which is driven by digitalisation. This revolution is fundamentally changing our economy and our society. It is fundamentally changing the way we manufacture, communicate, learn, research, work and do business.

We cannot yet predict the impact of, for example, advanced robotics - such as a ‘social humanoid robot’ called Sophie with her 50 facial expressions. We don’t know the effects that augmented reality, Artificial Intelligence and data science will have. But there’s an indication in examples such as Jill Watson, the digital teaching assistant created at Georgia Tech to answer students’ questions online. Apparently, even computer science students could not tell the difference between Jill, the digital ‘bot,’ and a real online human teaching assistant.

As well as understanding the implications of digitalisation, we must also embrace it. These examples might sound like the ingredients for a good science fiction novel to some people right now. But the reality is that we are living in the digital era.

It poses great risks for those who stand on the sidelines, those who would rather wait - and see, and those who get stuck in endless discussions. And if not managed properly, the progress of digitalisation will deepen or trigger inequalities.
But it offers great opportunities for those who actively shape it. I believe we should seize these opportunities.

Based on stakeholder input and our knowledge and awareness of the global impact of digitalisation, we will explore a fourth Erasmus Initiative — The social impact of digitalisation;

But it is not only digitalisation that is influencing our contemporary world. Another world-wide challenge is - sustainability.

The Netherlands is a signatory to the Paris Climate Agreement and has set itself one of the world’s most ambitious climate goals. The current intended target is to achieve a 49% reduction in emissions of greenhouse gases by 2030 - compared to 1990 levels, and a 95% cut by 2050.

The City of Rotterdam wants to be a leader in this endeavour, and the Port of Rotterdam has adopted the same national goals. The Port alone is already responsible for almost 20% of all the Netherlands emissions. It is working in partnership with others to become - carbon neutral.

As an academic institution that is proud to be located in the city of Rotterdam, Erasmus University aims to partake in these ambitions and fulfil its responsibility - to be an example for others. Therefore we include ‘sustainability’ as one of our strategic priorities, in education, research, campus development and personal goals.

This can only work when we actually ‘walk the talk’. When we actively change our behaviour. And set the goals that determine our actions.

Some steps are relatively easy, such as avoiding printing out documents. However here is one document we felt it was absolutely right to print out – a summary of the Strategic Framework. You will receive it on leaving the church. Here we lay out, not only our mission and our long-term aspirations, but also - how we will get there.

We have worked hard over the last few months, to formulate the new mission and our seven new strategic priorities.

As I mentioned earlier, we have done this by, among other things, listening to people of various ages, backgrounds, gender, expertise - all of whom know the university well - and - have a good sense of what society needs a university to be.

We also installed a Green Team of students and junior staff to challenge us and asked the University Council to do the same.
Based on these findings, Rector Magnificus Rutger Engels, Eddy Hus and I have had a series of working conferences with our deans.

I’m going to highlight the results of those conferences now:

Our mission, is -

To make a positive impact on societal changes.
We will strive to understand and make progress toward solving complex societal challenges, in alignment with our core activities of research and education, and in close cooperation with our partners locally and globally.

Our mission will serve as our compass: it will focus our attention – inspire us in our daily activities and provide direction when we are faced with - strategic choices.

Because strategy is all about making choices.

Together with the deans, we have identified seven strategic priorities for the coming years:

1. (Ensuring our education is future proof):
Our students will be given the education and inspiration needed to make a positive societal impact on today’s and tomorrows’ world.

2. (Steering excellent research embedded in society):
Our research will have a greater impact on societal challenges. To do this, we will invest in the quality and relevance of our academic disciplines, both fundamental and applied. We do have the means to invest, but it also requires national finance schemes to allow for education and research at the highest level.

3. (Fostering our societal impact identity).
We will address societal challenges from a broad perspective. We will track our impact and substantiate it as we go along.

4. (Making the most of our interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary potential):
Societal challenges can hardly ever be solved through the lens of a single discipline – an interdisciplinary approach is needed. We will build on our existing interdisciplinary efforts and encourage and explore new collaborations.

5. (Investing in our talent for the future).
Our mission is an ambitious one and needs a new approach to attracting, nurturing and developing talent, at the same time, acknowledging and developing different forms of talent.
6. Stepping up professional services:
It also requires investing in a cooperative, ‘continuous improvement’ mind-set within and between our professional services and our schools.

7. Upgrading our sustainability efforts.
And we plan to increase our sustainability efforts in everything we do, and cooperate with strategic partners in order to contribute to a sustainable society.

From now until December, we will continue working on building the strategy within our community. We will set goals for the 7 priorities - in - seven Strategic Design Labs - SDL’s, comprising inclusive teams of students, staff, and external stakeholders.

These teams will be completing the strategy in line with our new mission.

I invite each and every one of you to join in, helping formulate concrete goals and approaches for these strategic priorities. You may register on MyEUR.
The results of the Strategic Design Labs - will be realized by all of us in the coming 4 years.

To wind up -

I am inviting you to picture a university that provides its students with future proof education. Picture a university that walks the talk on sustainability.

Imagine an institution with the skills, mindset and capacity to help solve the problems - of today and tomorrow.
All this while staying true to our own identity and the values of Desiderius Erasmus.

We are confident that with this mission and these seven strategic priorities - we will become a frontrunner among leading universities.
We will be able to provide the answers to complex world challenging questions.
We will be a highly relevant, sought after, responsible and responsive societal partner.
We will remain rooted in our Rotterdam urban delta, focused on both local and global challenges. Because there is no difference between them.

We want YOU to join us in providing answers for today’s and tomorrow’s issues and to help make the world a better place.
We want you to join us - to join in creating an even better Erasmus university.
We want you - to look towards the future - with resilience and optimism that is grounded in good science.

I invite you to honour the indestructible traditions of our university.
Let’s debate, question, research around our strategic themes!
On behalf of the Executive Board - I wish you all - an inspiring; creative - and - successful; new academic year.