

Speech Dies Natalis Erasmus University Rotterdam – 10 November 2025

Prof. Dr. Ir. Jantine Schuit, Rector Magnificus

From Listening to Connecting

Dear attendees,

Last year, here on this very stage, I proudly and honorably accepted my role as Rector Magnificus at this wonderful university. In my address, I made a plea for sincere and deep listening—something I regard as an essential ingredient for building strong connections, both internally and with people in society.

That call to listen arose from a sense of urgency: the world around us is changing at lightning speed. Societal challenges are becoming more complex, and the demand for effective solutions and knowledge about “how?” is growing. At the same time, we see that in some parts of society, distrust in science and knowledge institutions is increasing. Where we were once regarded as an unquestioned authority, academic institutions are now more often questioned or criticized. Yet the need for academic engagement is louder than ever. But how do we make our added value visible? And how do we ensure that our knowledge truly contributes to solutions for society? It starts with our core: excellent education and research. That forms the solid foundation on which we build to be a university that not only listens but also connects.

Today, I want to show that with our new strategy we are taking a step further—and how we can do this together. Each in their own way, but collectively. In this way, we build a university that is increasingly seen and appreciated. Where we create positive impact in Rotterdam—on the people and businesses in the region, the Randstad, the broader society, and internationally.

This requires something from all of us. It calls for curiosity, the ability to build relationships, create networks, and develop questions based on mutual understanding from which knowledge emerges. As a driving force behind change. That is why today, on the birthday of our university, the 112th Dies Natalis, this theme takes center stage: *Curiosity connects, knowledge transforms*.

Erasmus University has invested heavily in wonderful projects and programs in recent years. In Rotterdam and the wider region, in the Convergence, in the areas of resilience, digitalization, societal transitions, and in medical technology—both in our research and our education. But the question that occupies my mind is: what does the average Rotterdammer notice of this? What would random passersby in the city center answer if asked about the impact of the university on the city? And what can we do to connect more with the city and its residents?

You just saw in the videos that there are many different ideas about this. From “an asset for Rotterdam” to a source of knowledge that is not always visible to everyone. From embracing the university to resistance that was very visible in one person.

That raises the question: what does it actually mean for a university to be connected to the city—and how do we shape that together?

From our new strategy toward an Engaged University, we have already decided: we must stop thinking that we need to bring the university and the knowledge within these walls to the city. That we, as academics, can provide answers in isolation to the questions that exist among citizens, businesses, and social organizations. How fitting were the words of the authors of the Rotterdam South lecture, where roles were reversed: not the city as spectator, but as co-decision maker. Not one brilliant mind, but collective imagination. Where South is not only seen as a problem area but also as a source of knowledge and strength.

It is time to use language that connects rather than alienates. That means listening better to the people in the city. Let them tell their stories, sketch their ideas. Instead of talking about target groups, interventions, and problems, we must talk about people with dreams, values, and stories. Rotterdam is full of talent, energy, and creativity. We want to unlock that, give it space, and develop it together. Not incidentally, but sustainably. That is Engaged University.

How do we do this? This requires a fundamental change in how we operate as a university. Not only in our projects but especially in our attitude. Within our community, we already see inspiring examples of this new role. The Young Erasmus Academy and our Erasmus Professors also show what “engaged” work looks like. They work transdisciplinarily, closely with societal partners, and focus on urgent issues that truly matter. Let us not only appreciate them but also actively deploy them as guides and inspirers within our university.

More on that later.

Connection with society is at the heart of our Strategy 2030—a strategy you can feel.

An inspiring example of connection in practice is The Bildung Climate School here in Rotterdam. Here, young people from vocational education (mbo), universities of applied sciences (hbo), and research universities (wo) work together on climate issues. They earn ECTS credits, but just as important: they build mental resilience and a sense of purpose in a world that feels complex and uncertain to many young people. They learn not only about climate, but also about themselves, about each other, and about how, as a young generation, they can contribute meaningfully. This project shows how powerful it is when we connect educational levels and give students the space to learn, reflect, and grow together—as human beings and as citizens. We are continuing this movement with full conviction, among other things through our partnerships with Albeda College and Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences.

But this is no exception.

We have already achieved a great deal in recent years. Within the Convergence alone, there are 125 projects in which we collaborate on themes such as health, technology, and urban resilience. Think of initiatives like HefHouse. But also the Erasmus Connects program, in which our students help solve problems in the city and the port, such as poverty and the energy transition. Current challenges in Rotterdam society that find their way into the lecture hall and help students develop while

simultaneously contributing to the city. We have learned a lot from all these programs and projects, but it is time to move from experimenting to embedding. From isolated initiatives to a sustainable infrastructure based on a solid relationship of trust.

That is why we are investing in sustainable open innovation networks: ecosystems in which we, together with societal partners, businesses, and citizens, not only share knowledge but also jointly identify new questions and develop solutions—each in their own way. These networks focus on the five impact domains of our strategy.

We are also creating space for new forms of education. New forms of education are important, but always rooted in our ambition to provide excellent education and research. That is the foundation on which innovation can flourish. The future demands students who can think and collaborate across boundaries—within and beyond their own discipline. Skills that prepare them for the future. That is why we are strengthening collaboration with TU Delft, Leiden University, vocational and applied universities. We are also developing education for our collaboration partners within these networks. In this way, we fulfill our societal mission: together with the city and its residents. That is a truly Engaged University.

Engagement is not only for researchers or our students. It is something that concerns all of us within this university. It doesn't matter what role or position you have—whether you are a student, lecturer, or professional. Everyone within our university can contribute. And by this, I do not mean that everyone must constantly be in contact with the outside world. Internal connection is also very important. Having the curiosity to know what your colleagues are doing—whether they are doing interesting things that could improve your work, or whether you are doing things that could improve theirs. Step out of your comfort zone. The people I speak to who do this experience that they gain new knowledge and become better scientists or professionals.

I would like to invite everyone to take a moment of reflection and think: what does my work or my study at this university mean for my colleague? And what does my work, directly or indirectly, mean for society?

And that does not have to be something very big for everyone. It is about the awareness that we are part of a larger movement. That we are building together a university that is at the heart of society. A university in which everyone, in their own way, but above all collectively, contributes to societal impact. This can also be the case if you do fundamental research, or if you work in IT or in the library. And more sense of community. It is much more pleasant to work together toward this higher goal. But with insights and intentions alone, we will not become an Engaged University. If we truly want everyone to be able to contribute, then we as a university must also organize our structures accordingly.

Contribution can take different forms, not everyone needs to directly participate in open innovation networks; fundamental research that ultimately leads to impact is also highly valuable. Many of the people who commit themselves to societal connection do not yet fit the classic academic profile. In addition to publishing, they also build bridges, create networks, and make impact. That calls for new routes to professorship, for other forms of recognition, and for a culture in which collaboration

and societal relevance are just as important as publications. This is an ambition I will work hard for in the coming period.

That is also what One Connected EUR is about: a university in which we are flexible and resilient, in which people feel seen and valued, and in which we actively create space for new career paths and forms of impact—even across faculty boundaries.

I mentioned them earlier: the Erasmus Professors. For me, they are role models of this movement in practice. They show how you can collaborate transdisciplinarily on societal challenges. In teams where academic excellence goes hand in hand with engagement, collaboration with societal and economic partners, and interdisciplinarity. From diverse disciplines, but connected by shared Erasmian values.

I am therefore very proud that—alongside Eveline Crone, Moniek Buijzen, Jun Borrás, and Frank van Oort—we can welcome a fifth Erasmus Professor today. And that is Vincent Jaddoe; pediatrician and professor of pediatric medicine–epidemiology at Erasmus MC.

In his research, Generation R, researchers from more than twenty different disciplines come together in the field of child health, enabling problems to be detected and addressed earlier. An important contribution to a healthier and more equal society.

Vincent, in the next part of the program we will take more time to reflect on this, and we warmly welcome you to the stage.

Because I want to offer a stage. And that applies not only to Vincent, but also to the other Erasmus Professors. You are role models for us in the movement toward a more socially engaged university. But also role models for connecting people within the university. And besides you, there are many more scientists at Erasmus University Rotterdam who can be a source of inspiration.

Because everyone can take the stage—in their own way. As I mentioned earlier, by being curious. By asking questions. And by regularly asking yourself the question: what does my work mean for society? And how can I contribute to or learn from the research of my colleagues? And if you have an answer to that? Share it. Show it. Inspire others.

Because we do not build the engaged university of the future in silence, but in connection and dialogue.

Thank you very much.