

Speech by Rector Magnificus Professor Rutger Engels

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‘Answering questions that matter’

Madam Minister, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues and students,

Just before I started here in Rotterdam, I visited the Kunsthal. There was an exhibition with works by the Danish artist Michael Kvium. Kvium called this one ‘The beach of Plenty’.

A picture of a nice day at the beach – it could be Hoek van Holland – and there, in the middle of all this sunny normality, arrives a boat with refugees, and a man is struggling in the waves.

But nobody reacts, nobody moves in to help.

Is it learned helplessness or indifference?

Is it self-preservation or disinterest?

And it provokes another question: what would I do?

Because every day we are confronted with people struggling, fleeing, suffering. Every day we are confronted with the major challenges in the world.

Not literally on the beach, but on the news, online through our tablets and smartphones.

Even in our own little world, on this campus, the rest of the world is never far away.

Especially here in the port city of Rotterdam.

We do not look away. We do not lock ourselves up in the ivory tower of science.

Because not only the concrete of Erasmus University is standing in the middle of a city; we all are part of that city, that society.

Universities have to be socially relevant and responsible.

That is why I am very impressed with the Erasmus Initiatives, and with Challenge Accepted.

These are programs that combine fundamental science and education, problems and solutions, theory and practice. A multidisciplinary approach to make sure that science is used to solve real problems. Not only with fellow scientists, but also with private and public parties. With governments and with leading industries.

It is my experience that research and education are always team efforts. You get interesting and relevant findings, when you work from a strong disciplinary orientation towards a common language, a common goal. It is an approach that encourages researchers and students to keep asking questions, never take any model for granted, and work towards results that matter.

For science and for society.

And yet, the present is not as bleak as we think or fear.

In his most recent book 'Enlightenment now', cognitive scientist Steven Pinker states that people consistently underestimate the progress humanity is making. To discern the true state of the world, Pinker claims that we should use numbers.

Then we see that the world is about 100 times wealthier than it was 200 years ago, and that wealth is more evenly distributed. Fewer people die in wars, and more people live in democracies than they did 200 years ago. And the belief in equality has increased in every part of the world.

Yes, all true, but sometimes hard to believe. In fact, there was a Dutch report of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (in Dutch: SCP) last year that was just like this – it was so positive about the social state of the country that it was hard to believe it was true.

This does not mean we should ignore local and global challenges. For me it shows two things. First, we can follow the advice of Steven Pinker: always start with the facts rather than with sentiments. Second, it is legitimate to have a positive view on our potentials to change.

The societal challenges are complex though, and need thorough and deep analyses. For instance, how is it possible that according to the World Health Organization, Dutch teens are among the happiest in the world, while in fact we also know that a significant number of youth suffer from psychological disorders. How can we understand this?

We have to dare our students: dare them to understand what the problems are, and help them to find solutions.

We have to teach them how to break problems up into manageable parts, so they don't become overwhelmed but become creative and focused.

We have to teach them to embrace teamwork, because social problems are never one-dimensional, and can never be solved through monodisciplinary approaches.

We have to teach them to make the most of new technology, to use it to communicate effectively, to produce useful co-operations, and to manage the digital transformation of society.

At Erasmus university, we facilitate this process. Students for Students - as part of the Community for Learning and Innovation – and the Sustainable Food lab are very strong initiatives to stimulate this reconnection and to teach students the necessary skills.

To nurture talent, to trigger young people to ask questions that matter, to dare to understand, we have to start earlier.

We have to reach out to pupils from secondary schools, even from primary schools, to get them interested in science. The Science Education Hub – 'Wetenschapsknooppunt'- is a very good start. Especially because it also gives Erasmus University the opportunity to be socially relevant, inclusive and responsible, to give something back.

To give something back to Rotterdam, the city that is our host and our home. A city that is always on the move, driven by entrepreneurship and curiosity.

As famous Rotterdammer and poet Jules Deelder once said, and I quote in Dutch: “Het is leuk als je het einde van de straat kunt zien, maar leuker nog is het ook af en toe eens om de hoek te kijken.”

That is what we can learn from this city: endless curiosity, the will to change, to do better all the time.

To answer questions that matter, to make a difference, to nurture talent.

To become not the Beach but the University of Plenty.

I want to be the Rector who makes that possible.

With your support, guided by your ideas.

Huib Pols, you took the first – very important - steps. I am very grateful for your energy and ideas, your perseverance and skills that guided this university towards an – even more – relevant and – more – responsible role in society.

I support your appeal for more free range thinking.

I also want to thank you, and you all, for making me feel welcome here from day one. I realise I am a newcomer at this great university, but the open-mindedness I felt in the last couple of weeks really made me feel part of this vibrant community. I am impressed with the dedication, energy and spirit, at this university. I look forward to working with you all!

And I already love having a coffee or beer in the sun on one of the terraces, here on this beautiful campus.....

Finally, I wish you, Huib and your wife Lientje a wonderful retirement.

Thank you!