

## Speech by Rutger Engels, Rector Magnificus Erasmus University Rotterdam

Opening of the Academic Year, 3 September 2018

### 'Mirroring the diversity of Rotterdam'

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start by telling you the story of Diederick van der Wijk.

Last year, straight after graduating cum laude from Rotterdam School of Management, this alumnus founded Refugees Forward, a foundation aimed at helping refugees start a business here in the Netherlands and making them financially independent.

This year, the first Incubator Programme of Refugees Forward took off. More than twenty students and over forty business people now support this initiative every week. One-third of the refugee-entrepreneurs have already registered their businesses. Several others have actually made their first business deals.

When I heard the story of Diederick and his Refugees Forward, I was impressed, inspired - and proud. As Rector, it fills me with joy to see a former student using his knowledge to address one of today's biggest societal challenges: the integration of refugees.

Making an impact by meeting societal challenges, that's what's in the DNA of Erasmus University. It's what characterizes this institution, and has done since 1913.

Kristel has already referred to that topic this afternoon. 'Impact' is the third pillar of this university, alongside education and research. Just think of our Erasmus Initiatives – multidisciplinary projects centred around the big issues of today and tomorrow.

We're particularly trying to make an impact here in our hometown, Rotterdam. We have a responsibility and obligation to the city in which we were founded 105 years ago. But because Rotterdam is highly

international, our impact here is not limited to this city. Rotterdam issues are often worldwide issues. So by addressing challenges in Rotterdam, we are also creating worldwide solutions.

Rotterdam is in the fabric of our University, just as we are part of the story of this beautiful city. There are plenty of examples, but I would like to mention just a few:

First, recent research as part of the Generation R project by scientists at Erasmus Medical Center shows how Rotterdam children are affected by particulate matter and noise in their environment. And last year, Generation R Next was launched, focusing on preconception interventions. Insights of these studies have direct implications for the people here in Rotterdam.

Second, a new report from the research institute DRIFT, working on sustainability transitions, describes how Rotterdam can become emission-free. More green spaces, better water management and cleaner air will make this city more vital and attractive.

And finally, students and faculty of business and economics are continuing to develop new smart solutions that help companies in the Port of Rotterdam with increasing digitalisation, automation and the transition to renewable energy in the supply chain sector. Their work helps the Port to be one of the most advanced container terminals in the world.

Are all these efforts and initiatives enough?

Do we meet our responsibilities?

The answer, ladies and gentlemen, is 'no',

Why? Because I think we're too modest about what we do. We should tell more about it. Not so we can boast or congratulate ourselves - absolutely not -, but to inspire others. So we can inspire and encourage others, just as we are encouraged by initiatives coming from the world around us.

We also need to clearly measure our impact. And I think we should do even better in creating impact, based on excellent research with high standards of scientific integrity.

How can we improve the transfer of knowledge to society? This calls for a more systematic and holistic approach and an even closer cooperation with everyone concerned, with public as well as private parties. In the years ahead, we will have to work hard to achieve more impact.

Let's start by giving everyone an opportunity to become part of our academic community. Our university must be really inclusive. Our student population should truly represent the very diverse city of Rotterdam. Sadly, that is not yet the case. Our data show that once at the university, the neighborhood young people grew up in, is not predictive of study success. That is very interesting and actually encouraging. However, our classrooms unfortunately do not represent the city we are part of.

I was fortunate to be raised in a loving family with parents who encouraged me in my school career, even though they had no academic background themselves. Once at a school reunion, I noticed that some of my fellow classmates who performed really well in primary school, hadn't gone to university. That could have been a deliberate choice. But if it wasn't a conscious decision, then something had apparently held them back.

That shouldn't happen anymore. That should not happen here in Rotterdam. I believe we should encourage gifted young people to make the most of their intellectual qualities. That's why I'm very enthusiastic about initiatives like the IMC Weekend School for primary school children and our Science Education Hub – 'Wetenschapsknooppunt'. We invest in outreach programmes like the Pre Academic Programme, led for many years by Gerard Hogedoorn, empowering students and giving them a good start at the university.

But we need an extra push for talented young 'Rotterdamers'. We should give everyone the same opportunity to follow an academic education. Erasmus University is more than willing to be a driver in that effort, together with other institutions in this city. We want to step up our efforts. By reaching out to prospective students when they are still at secondary school. Making them realize: this university welcomes all talents, especially yours.

Ladies and gentlemen, diversity and inclusion are key in the story of Diederick van der Wijk and Refugees Forward. Like in the stories of many others at our university. But diversity and inclusion demand continuous reflection and work from us all, together. I hope you will join us in our effort to become truly diverse and inclusive in our composition.

With that wish, it is with great pleasure that I now declare the Academic Year 2018-2019 officially open. I wish all our students and academic staff every success in this festive year.