Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, trustees, dear colleagues, students, ladies and gentlemen,

I am glad I can welcome you, on behalf of the Executive Board and the Deans, to this 104th Dies Natalis of Erasmus University Rotterdam. I extend a special welcome and of course congratulations to our honorary doctor, Professor Christopher Hood.

I am honoured to celebrate this anniversary with you, the academic community of this great university.

This year's Dies theme is ‘For the benefit of all: Making society work’, and this afternoon it’s all about contributing to society, improving lives and taking care of people.

This echoes the impressive work of Professor Christopher Hood, the influential British academic who will receive an honorary doctorate later today. He has made a great contribution to the intellectual and empirical development of the study of public administration.

‘Making society work’ also touches on research and education at the Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, the faculty that takes centre stage this
year. I’m looking forward to the Dies Lecture by departing Dean Professor Henk van der Molen.

For now, I’d like to talk about our role – as a university – in making society work. And I’d like to discuss the challenges that society presents us with – and what it takes to meet those challenges.

Let me start by illustrating my idea of a university’s role in society. I guess you’re all familiar with the idea of a university as an ivory tower, filled with omniscient scientists, working in undisturbed academic bliss.

Yes, I do believe that peace and quiet are beneficial for creating scientific knowledge. However, I strongly reject the idea of an ivory tower. Why? Because it’s a concept that’s not viable. A university is an integral part of its surroundings: it’s a part of society. Science cannot prosper if it’s isolated from this working environment so I reject the idea of the university as an ivory tower, but I’d like to think of a university as a main port of knowledge, closely connected with the outside world.

Let’s extend the metaphor using Rotterdam, our home town and the main port for Europe. Ships from all over the world deliver cargos here, and then continue their journeys to all sorts of destinations, filled with new cargo. In Rotterdam itself, goods are being processed and produced.

Just like a busy shipping port, a university is a place where knowledge is received and processed – where knowledge is created too – and then sent out into the world.

The connection with our social environment is – entirely – the foundation of our university. It’s in our DNA. 104 years ago, the people who agreed to establish a
Handels Hoogeschool in Rotterdam – now Erasmus University – did so to enhance the entrepreneurial spirit of the city and the port of Rotterdam.

Here you see a picture of the founders – and as you can see, a lack of diversity was already an issue back then!

Ladies and gentlemen,

We make science work.

For people – for colleagues, consumers and patients

For the advancement of knowledge and for society

For our future

The question arises: how do we become a linchpin in the future of our society? How do we ensure and enhance our future as a university in the real world? How can we make sure our research, our education and our university increase their relevance?

Ladies and gentlemen, it’s vital that we address the major challenges of our changing society. Society needs answers. We, being a main port of knowledge, are perfectly positioned to provide these answers. We’re the number one option.

At last year’s Dies Natalis I introduced the Erasmus Initiatives. These are ambitious plans that help us to streamline our scientific endeavours to meet important societal challenges. We chose three subjects for our Erasmus Initiatives: Smarter choices for better health, Vital Cities, and Citizens and Dynamics in Inclusive Prosperity.

The first is about the healthcare industry and its struggle between increasing demands and decreasing budgets. It means finding smarter choices for better health, choices that are based on medical solutions AND economic principles.
Then there’s Vital Cities and Citizens, which we talked about at the Opening of the Academic Year in September. It focuses on quality of life when lives are becoming more and more urbanised.

And finally, Dynamics in Inclusive Prosperity is about creating welfare and economic development, without downsides. We must think of creating sustainable societies and economies as well as preventing social and political exclusion.

I’d like to show you a short video, in which scientists from each of these three Initiatives describe their research (video)

These are all formidable challenges. These are difficult questions - and there are no easy answers.

Still, I’m certain we can meet these challenges. How? The key, ladies and gentlemen, is in working together, in interaction, in connecting with others.

That might sound familiar. You’re right. Connecting and making connections has been my goal as Rector Magnificus. I’ve been talking about this ad nauseam over for the last four years.

Making connections is the goal because science is no longer the individual pursuit of knowledge. It’s a team effort, a team sport. And to be successful we have to play well together and play well with others.

First of all, we have to make connections within this university. If we as a university can’t work together as a team, how can we expect to score goals, to have real impact in the outside world?

At last year’s Dies Natalis I talked about the relationships and connections between science and society, between theory and practice, knowledge and experience.
These relationships and connections are stabilised by bonds inside every department and faculty, and by interactions between all the professional groups.

Within the three Erasmus Initiatives, our researchers are generating and spreading new, multidisciplinary knowledge. I’m glad to see that all three are well underway.

Secondly, for this university to make connections it must work together with the outside world, with our environment, with society. Earlier in this introduction, I’ve used the metaphor of the university being a main port of knowledge, well-connected the outside world. To meet societal challenges, we need the co-operation, the ideas and the input of everyone involved from alumni, governments, companies, civil society organizations, from all kinds of people outside this beautiful campus.

And that means you too. You can become the driving force to meet societal challenges, to make our Erasmus Initiatives a success. For our university, for our society, for our future.

Today, we’re launching a campaign so everyone can contribute to our effort in meeting these societal challenges.

For this campaign, we’ve joined forces with Erasmus Trustfonds, the foundation fund that has been our natural partner and has supported research and education ever since the inception of this university 104 years ago.

To tell you more about I’d like to ask Michiel Muller, Chair of Erasmus Trustfonds, to join me on stage.

Michiel, the floor is yours.