Speech by Kristel Baele, President of the Executive Board

Opening of the Academic Year 2017-2018, Monday 4 September 2017

Educating resilient citizens

Mr. Mayor, your excellencies, dear guests, staff and students, trustees.

On behalf of the Executive Board, welcome to Erasmus University Rotterdam’s opening of its academic year 2017-2018. It promises to be another exciting year, filled with both challenges and opportunities alike.

I would like to extend a special welcome to our guest speaker, Mr. Ahmed Aboutaleb, Mayor of the city of Rotterdam. Thankfully, you’re hardly a stranger to Erasmus University. The city of Rotterdam and the university are good partners and we are delighted that you have accepted our invitation. We are looking forward to hearing your address on the subject of ‘Vital Cities and Citizens’.

Remembrance

But first, please join me in the tradition of honouring the memory of those from our university community who have passed away during the last year. I invite you to rise.

We deeply regret the tragic loss of the following students:

Césanne Cosijn
Arianne van Heusden
Levi Murg
Maarten Oomes
Corno van der Steen
We also mourn the loss of the following colleagues and former colleagues:

Rolien van Duijvendijk
Leo Kroon
Bart Leijnse
Tom Masslink
Marc Michel
Jan Pool
Henk Saeijs
Gerrit van der Schoor
Max Sparreboom
Volkert de Villeneuve
Piet Vlaar
Jan Vollering
Ko Warnars
Jan Zuidema

Our thoughts are with their loved ones, in deep appreciation.

Thank you, please be seated.

Dear guests, staff and students,

Today, I am going to talk to you about our university’s role in helping to build vital cities and empower vital citizens - the theme of this year’s ‘opening’, but let me start by taking stock.
In this year, leading up to our 21st lustrum, our university is doing very well. Just to mention a few achievements we are proud of: We have received ERC Starting Grants for Professors Xandra Kramer and Renske Keizer, and there is European recognition for our active collaboration with the universities of Leiden and Delft with acceptance of our joint application for a Marie Curie Cofund for 90 post-docs. Furthermore, eight talented researchers received a Veni grant. Congratulations to you all!

In education, Erasmus University was also awarded seven educational innovation projects under the Erasmus + programme of the European Union - a significant success.

We also launched our ‘Vision on Education’, which builds on our proven strength in motivational education. More about this later. We have also made substantial progress in the renewal of our campus. We have recently opened the beautifully renovated University Library. And, what was once a dull parking lot is now a pleasant green zone, ‘Park Noord’. Soon, we will reopen the refurbished Sanders Building which will house our Law School and our Support Services.

These were our achievements. But we have also had challenges in the past year.

Last autumn, our university’s ICT security and privacy was threatened when our website was hacked. To counter future cybercrime, we are now replacing the current web infrastructure.

Dear guests, staff and students, you realise that all of these achievements – and much more – have been made possible because of the consistently high-quality input delivered by our students, academics and support staff, and the valuable and
constructive dialogue with the university’s various participatory and consultation bodies.

I would like to thank them all for their very important contributions.

It was at last year’s Dies Natalis that my colleague in the Executive Board Rector Magnificus Professor Huib Pols introduced the three Erasmus Initiatives. These are multidisciplinary research and education programmes that provide a platform for our talented researchers and students to cooperate on issues of essential importance to both society and science.

Today, I’d like to elaborate on one of these Initiatives - Vital Cities & Citizens. I believe we can play a major role in building vital cities and empowering its citizens by educating them to be ‘resilient’. Our contribution will have an effect on cities worldwide but for now, I would like to start in our hometown, Rotterdam.

Recently, the municipality of Rotterdam published ‘The story of the city’ (‘Het verhaal van de stad’). Here you see Alderman Hugo de Jonge – who is here today – presenting that story. The city had conversations with almost 9,000 Rotterdam residents including students and employees of this university, and used them to create one story. What should the city look like in twenty years’ time? How will we live in 2037? What are the dreams, ambitions and expectations of ‘Rotterdammers’?

This story is very relevant to Erasmus University, and I’d like to explain why. It’s not just because we are rooted in this city, having been established here in 1913.

It is not just because we share the same DNA, the entrepreneurial spirit, and the ability to meet challenges head on.

‘The story of the city’ is relevant to us because of its results.
The people of Rotterdam have been asked: What should the city invest in?

**Education** is the number 1 priority, as this top 10 list shows. According to the residents, the city should invest particularly in fostering the talents of young people. ‘The future belongs to the young’, is what they say.

Of course, this result covers all levels of education, from primary education to education for adults. I don’t want to brag, but with over 25,000 full-time national and international students here on campus, and more than 4,600 students following short courses or a post-experience master, we certainly play our part.

This is apparent in the next slide.

The people of Rotterdam have been asked: What should Erasmus University contribute to the city? I’m pleased that a lot of people mention our research and knowledge, as well as our role in innovation and start-ups. But the majority (31 percent) value us for educating talented young people.

With responsibility for such a major role, the questions arise: how should we educate these young people? What core values do we want to instil in them? And how can we empower them in putting their knowledge and skills into daily practice?

A couple of months ago, we presented our university’s Vision on Education.

Inspired by our namesake Desiderius Erasmus, who stood for values such as freedom and tolerance, our vision on education is based on the three sets of core values:

- Expertise, open-mindedness and having a critical stance
- Entrepreneurship, effectiveness and innovation

And finally:
- Self-reliance, commitment and inclusion

These three sets of core values are closely linked to the international, multicultural and entrepreneurial metropolis that is Rotterdam. They reflect the resilient character of the city.

Last year, Rotterdam joined the Resilient Cities Network, a network of 100 cities worldwide. In doing so, Rotterdam is preparing itself for the physical, social and economic challenges that are a growing part of the 21st century. Mayor Aboutaleb will address these issues further in his keynote speech.

We are keen to assist our students to become resilient individuals. World citizens who are ready to face tomorrow’s challenges, in Rotterdam and far beyond.

So what does ‘being resilient’ mean - for students, for the academic staff and for the learning environment?

Applying our core value of ‘expertise’ our approach here is to educate students to take active roles in developing and applying their academic knowledge and skills. We are very successful with this approach. Later on in this ceremony, Mayor Aboutaleb will present student Dee Dee Smits with the Rotterdam Thesis Award. Dee Dee’s research into single mothers in Rotterdam is a perfect example of how students can apply their academic knowledge for the benefit of cities.

On the subject of entrepreneurship, I would like to mention the ‘star’ of our ‘Student in the Spotlight’ category. This year it is International Business Administration student, Teodor Catanciu. Teodor has established a technology school for refugees to learn web development here in the city of Rotterdam. Not only has Teodor shown exceptional entrepreneurship in applying his knowledge but he also offers participants the chance of a future in technology.
We have recently renewed the partnership agreement between the city of Rotterdam and Erasmus University. Contributing to preparing the city and its residents for the future is central to that partnership. As part of this renewed agreement, our researchers will continue to contribute knowledge to help build the resilience of the city and its inhabitants. But we have also agreed that our students will be more deeply involved in the development of new solutions for metropolitan issues.

Validating another core value: educating citizens to be resilient subscribes to the idea that the development of knowledge and skills is an ongoing process. One’s education does not stop on the day of graduation. For a long time, we’ve taken an active part in educating people who have already started their careers. This fact has not escaped the people of Rotterdam: in ‘the story of the city’ there are many references to the importance of lifelong learning, and this need to offer education not just to full-time students, but also to those who have already started out in their careers.

I want to talk about another of our core values, one that is close to my heart: inclusion. Preparing ‘future-ready’ students also requires a study environment that is diverse and inclusive. We believe that a diverse university population and an inclusive culture contribute to the personal development of student and staff and to an inspiring environment.’ To help strengthen diversity and inclusion within Erasmus University, Diversity Officers and Diversity Teams have recently been appointed in all our schools.

I am looking forward to the results of their work.
Finally, embracing the significance of innovation is an important part of our Vision on Education. Digitalisation is one of its driving forces. It has major consequences for the labour market and impacts greatly on our students’ futures.

How can we prepare them for the rapidly changing global labour market?

Today, the universities in the Netherlands are proud to present part two of their joint Digital Society programme: our common ambition to give the Netherlands a leading position in the field of human-oriented digitalization. Last year, we focused on research, with researchers – also from Erasmus University - jointly working on themes like Big Data.

Now, we present our joint ambitions for education. The Dutch universities want to make the most out of the opportunities that digitalization has to offer by becoming a ‘living lab’. For example, all universities will explore the possibilities of digitalisation, improving the quality of the student experience. We are going to improve the digital skills of both our students and lecturers by adapting the curriculum and giving extra training. Furthermore, we will strengthen the ‘digital resilience’ of our students by paying attention to the ethics around digitalization. And finally, we’ll explore the possibilities of adding more flexibility to our education.

Here at Erasmus University, we are constantly working on developing and applying new formats for education, using digitalisation. Take for example the massive open online courses. We now have 7 of them, from Econometrics and ‘Serious Gaming’ to ‘The Politics of Skepticism’ – and we expect to double that number by this time next year.

Later, I will present the prestigious ‘Top Support Award’ to our DWLO-team (Digital Work and Learning Environment), who have excelled in creating a contemporary
digital learning and working environment for students. And towards the end of this ceremony, Rector Huib Pols will tell you about our newly established Community for Learning and Innovation.

Our keynote speaker Mayor Aboutaleb has said about ‘the story of the city’: “We will continue to talk to each other. Because tomorrow’s day is different than today (..) Because we make the future together.”

Dear guests, staff and students, I’d like to request your help to build an inclusive university that is relevant to society. An innovative, diverse institution that educates students to become resilient citizens, in the spirit of Rotterdam.

It is the collective creativity and input that transforms our ‘Vision on Education’ from just a piece of paper to a living mantra.

Only you can make that happen!!

On behalf of the Executive Board, I wish you all an inspirational and successful new academic year.

Thank you.