Your Royal Highness, Your Excellency, mr Mayor of Rotterdam, distinguished guests, dear colleagues and students,

Welcome to the opening ceremony of the Academic Year 2012-2013. A special word of welcome to our guest speaker, His Royal Highness Prince Constantijn. We are honoured that you have accepted our invitation to speak about the importance of Europe and internationalisation and we greatly look forward to your comments. Before reviewing some recent highlights I would like to honour the tradition of reflecting on the names of those from our university community who passed away last year. We deeply regret the tragic loss of the following students:

Auke Sluijs, student of Business Administration
Hugo de Ruiter, student of both Economics and Dutch Law
Lieke Castenmiller, student of Business Sciences
Ilja van der Wal, student of Psychology
Karin van Etten, research master student in Health Sciences
Mercy Mellouk, student of Psychology.

I cannot imagine anything worse than losing a child. Our thoughts are with their parents and loved ones, many of whom are here today.

We also sadly lost the following colleagues and former colleagues:

Professor A.N.A.M. Boons, RSM Erasmus University
Professor G.P. Hoefnagels, Erasmus School of Law
Professor A.E. de Moor, Erasmus School of Economics
Leo de Oude, whom I should have mentioned last year for his invaluable role.

We remain grateful for their dedication to Erasmus University. Would you please rise for a moment of silent reflection. (...) 

Thank you, please be seated again.
Highlights and lowlights of 2011

1. Academic excellence: Erasmus University is world leader in a number of research areas, which is still one of the best kept secrets of the Netherlands. This year, Erasmus MC’s ground breaking work in virology received worldwide recognition and attention, both desired and unwanted. The ‘bird flu study’ could not be published without an export licence. We protested strongly against this inappropriate political pressure to curb academic freedom. The crisis in the eurozone offers plenty of opportunity for our economists who feature prominently in the media. They experience their finest hour when their knowledge informs policymakers and influences public opinion. On behalf of my colleagues in the Executive Board I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate and thank all of our researchers. Erasmus owes you everything.

2. Erasmus graduates: The economy may be fragile, but our graduates are very successful on the labour market. They are academically sound, critical thinkers and practical doers, adaptive to change. Three out of four find a job within three months of graduating. This suggests that even when times are tough, an education at Erasmus University offers excellent career prospects.

3. Study success: As much as we like to think of ourselves as a research university, our entry ticket to political endorsement lies in the quality of our education. This is where we are held accountable through performance contracts. My colleague, rector magnificus Henk Schmidt will speak about our innovative approach to increasing study success, our number one priority. We have the wherewithal to lead the pack. Part of our philosophy is a compensation system where low marks in one subject can be set off against high marks in another. As you might imagine, this has led to many a heated debate. Surely we cannot send off doctors without demonstrable knowledge of anatomy? Surely our economists cannot graduate without expertise in statistics? Well, no, but a grade point average system has been common practice in top universities around the world for many decades. And it used to be common in Rotterdam, too. In his 1970 opening speech, former rector magnificus Professor WJ (Wie) Slagter of the Nederlandse Economische Hogeschool (NEH) referred to the famous student riots. A few professors from the University Medical Centre in Paris had been held hostage by students for refusing to compensate low marks. But in Rotterdam, nobody needed to be deprived of his freedom; compensation was already fully accepted. More about this later in today’s session.

4. Erasmus University College: The curriculum has been developed, approvals have been secured, we have a beautiful building in the city centre: there are no major obstacles left (other than some remaining funding needs) to start our flagship Erasmus University College next year. A fine example of partnership between Erasmus University and the city of Rotterdam. We are developing a donation and sponsoring scheme that will allow alumni, business partners and other friends of Erasmus to participate in a fiscally friendly manner. This way, Erasmus University College will have many founding fathers, in the spirit in which 100 years ago three visionary entrepreneurs founded the Nederlandsche Handels-Hogeschool.
5. **Campus redevelopment**: you are bound to have noticed the major construction works currently taking place. The campus of the future causes noise and nuisance, but the rewards will be sweet. A sincere ‘thank you’ to our facility management team for keeping everyone well-informed of progress, for dealing with complaints with a smile on their faces and most importantly, for keeping the project on time and within budget. On the video wall behind me you can see pictures of campus developments, including Erasmus MC’s brand new education centre, the new standard in medical education facilities.

6. **Breaches of integrity**: This brief review would be incomplete without also mentioning the lowlight of the year. A couple of cases of fraud and academic misconduct have shocked us all. Henk Schmidt will speak about measures we are contemplating to prevent future breaches of integrity. Even with the perfect control framework in place, it remains a matter of personal and institutional values: as a university, integrity is all we have, without it we are lost and adrift.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Political developments in the Netherlands

We are one week removed from the fifth general elections in ten years. Many political parties have embraced education as “pet theme”. They promise to invest billions. In fact, they promise whatever hits the buttons of the financial models deployed by the Central Planning Bureau. It is easy to become cynical these days. The previous governments were highly intervention prone. It is likely that the next one will be too, regardless of its political colour. We fully anticipate that our sector will suffer further cutbacks and austerity measures. Sadly, the excellent performance of Dutch universities seems largely to be taken for granted without any recognition of what is needed to maintain our success rate at current levels. For the last 20 years, student numbers have only increased and funding has decreased, most recently from €6,000 to €5,600 per student. Universally embraced ideas for improvement, such as the ‘Veerman’ agenda of 2010, have since faded into oblivion. Who in politics today is still seriously committed to the dream of becoming a top five innovation nation? The ink on the national innovation agreements is still wet, and already most political parties are distancing themselves from the commitments made. The fate of the so-called “long study fine” is still unclear. Over 2,000 of our students are now liable to pay a €3,000 penalty. The forces of political gravity continue to pull us down.

Admittedly, there have also been a few unfortunate incidents in higher education. As a result, governmental control has intensified. The quality Czars rule and have created a plethora of indicators for universities to comply with. We are moving from light to heavy accreditation regimes coupled with a stronger inspection mandate. Autonomy has become a luxury these days. And yet, it is this precious autonomy, both individual and institutional, that enables researchers to win Nobel Prizes, as any laureate will confirm. It is worth fighting for.

If these are the forces of gravity, how do we respond? I would suggest we defy it. Strengthening our immunity to political whims becomes increasingly important. Reducing sensitivity to further funding reductions may well be one of the best things we can do for the sake of our students and the future of society. Self-reliance requires that we find new avenues to revenue growth. There are roughly four strategies we can and will pursue:

(1) Growing the number of (international) students,
(2) increasing third party revenues,
(3) improving our success rate in securing European research grants, and
(4) strengthening our infrastructure and capabilities for commercialising knowledge.

If we succeed in changing the funding mix by aiming at market related income of 35% - 40% of total turnover, we will significantly boost our financial immunity in the years to come.
What lies in store?

As we position ourselves as a truly international university, and we continue to recruit overseas, we will need to adapt our ways of working to deliver on the promise to our international staff and students. Even today, 25% of our students are of non-Dutch origin. Holding this opening ceremony in English for the first time in our history is a first symbolic step to creating a more inclusive, outward looking, international environment.

And of course we do not forget our roots. Rotterdam is where it started, and where our heart is. We are deeply committed to our partnership with the city of Rotterdam. A new “Rotterdam Scriptieprijs” will be launched; an award for the best master thesis about a Rotterdam-related topic. It is easy to find inspiration in Rotterdam: a metropolis that harbours over 170 nationalities. It boasts the largest seaport in Europe, although when I went to school, I learned that the harbour of Rotterdam was the largest in the world. Rotterdam deserves the best brains for its economic development. Brains without borders, just like its many challenges are borderless.

Last year, I announced a strategic alliance with Delft University of Technology and Leiden University. Responses have been predictably mixed. Some rejected the idea outright that this might bring anything valuable to anyone. Others were sceptical about our collective ability to make tough choices or implement such a complex venture. But we have also found plenty of support and enthusiasm for the opportunities that emerge. The three universities presented their joint plans to the Ministry in July. We have freed up resources to fund several joint projects. Deans are encouraged to propose joint bachelor and master programmes. Nanobiology is only the first step. Next in line are joint Graduate schools.

Research themes have been developed in a bottom-up process. They target Grand Challenges. Healthy ageing is an obvious one in the context of Medical Delta. But consider for a moment the Port of Rotterdam, the largest producer of CO2 in The Netherlands. Will they succeed in converting CO2 into ethanol using novel enzyme technologies? Leiden, Delft and Erasmus promise new combinations of biotech, med tech, clean tech and social technology. A new centre for sustainability research can contribute to creating a circular economy in the region. Brains without borders.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to new students

I have saved the best for last: a warm welcome to our new students. We do not exist for our own sake, we exist for yours and we will do our utmost to give you the best university education you can possibly get. But it takes two to tango, so our expectations of you are equally high.

You have chosen a university that takes its name from the philosopher and humanist Erasmus. Born in Rotterdam, at home in the world, he was a European ahead of his time, and our university is still inspired by his thinking. I invite you to make the most of your time in this fascinating metropolis. Yes you can have it – almost – all. In many ways, you are a privileged group: we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of Erasmus University next year. To give you a sneak preview of what’s in store: we will be hosting the European Universities Games in 2014, with 4,000 student athletes from around Europe competing in several sports. And we are organising a ‘street university’. The streets of Rotterdam will turn green with thousands of Erasmus ambassadors sharing knowledge with the people of Rotterdam. On soap boxes in the park, in pubs, in schools, at home or in the supermarket. It is one way of giving back to society. I trust your time here will be enriching in every meaning of the word.

Introducing our guest speaker

Our guest speaker needs no introduction. Like Erasmus in his time, His Royal Highness Prince Constantijn is very much at home in the world. Since 2010 he has been working for the Cabinet of Neelie Kroes, Vice-President of the European Commission and responsible for the Digital Agenda portfolio. Recently, he has been appointed Deputy Head of Cabinet. His blend of vision, wisdom and humour is unique. Today, he will share it with us. Dear Constantijn, the floor is yours.