



Speech by Rector Magnificus Professor Rutger Engels

105th Dies Natalis Erasmus University Rotterdam, 8 November 2018

'Advancing Science, Impacting Society'

[VIDEO Dan Schley]

Ladies and gentlemen, scientists like Dan Schley make me proud to be Rector of this beautiful and valuable university. Stories like this really inspire me. Dan won a prestigious NWO Veni grant last year. This grant gives highly promising young scientists the opportunity to further develop their own ideas.

Later on, I'll be showing you two other examples of young, talented researchers who are making a positive impact. Because that – impact – is what I want to talk about during this Lecture.

But first, also on my behalf a warm welcome at this Dies. A very special one for me. It's our 105<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and it's my first one as Rector.

Now, 5 months into my Rectorship, I know it is an excellent decision to come here. I have seen wonderful examples of impactful research in all our schools and all our institutes. Examples like the ones I am going to show you in 3 video's during this speech. 'Advancing Science, Impacting Society' is the theme of this year's Dies. I strongly believe in this combination. Excellent quality of research and education is my point of departure. Societal value is the destination.

So, it's not either/or, it's both research and positive impact. They are inseparable.



This combination shows in our current three Erasmus Initiatives: interdisciplinary research-programs that have that special combination of research and impact. They contribute to solving some of the significant societal issues of our time. The three eminent scholars that we are honouring today were nominated by each of these Initiatives. Of each nominated scholar, it's easy to find evidence and narratives, demonstrating passionate research and influence on societal challenges.

Debra Satz is dean and professor of Philosophy at Stanford's School of Humanities and Sciences. She has demonstrated extensive societal impact in the complex triangle of Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy, and Public Policy.

Professor Nina Glick-Schiller is the Director of the Cosmopolitan Cultures Institute and Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. Her impact identity shows in important societal themes of Migration, Urban Development and Transnationalization.

Professor George Davey Smith is a clinical epidemiologist and Scientific Director of the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children. He is passionate about discovering the causes of health inequalities that help to improve the effectiveness of health care interventions.

Today we honour these great examples of truly engaged scholars and how they advance research and make an impact on society.

Interest in science, and the value of it, starts very early. Our students, nearly 30,000 of them, are coming to the university to learn, to be inspired, and to feel the purpose of what we do. We do that through discussions on academic research. We



do that by addressing how collaborations with public and private partners is needed to ensure that essential insights and breakthroughs in mono and multidisciplinary research create value for society. It is about mindset, it is about talking with students about our shared responsibilities. So far have not achieved this optimally. Yet we have a chance to do better. Therefore, I am really happy that I can announce today that the Van Beek Foundation, part of our Trust Fund, will contribute to a new honours program for students who want to focus on pressing topics, within the Erasmus Initiatives.

I've also discovered from my own experiences how rewarding it is when research improves young people's lives. It has motivated me during my personal career transition towards engaged senior scholarship.

Just to give two examples: I have conducted research on the harmful effects of early onset of alcohol for adolescents. I was really proud when the research directly helped to formulate and implement a new law in The Netherlands, banning the sales of alcohol to people who are under 18. Second, it fills me with pride when I see the careers of my former PhD students– as scholars and as professionals outside of academia.

Impact is most often created through collaboration and co-creation with societal partners. Governments, companies, NGO's. This collaboration implies a continuous partnership, each with their own role. It does not mean just publishing articles and leaving it up to the public to get them. The collaboration starts early in the process. How? By asking relevant questions and challenges predictive models regarding



societal challenges. This is shown on a daily basis by talented young researchers at Erasmus University, in all fields.

Like by Professor Renske Keizer. She has a incredible career, acquired impressive personal grants over the last years: both a NWO Vidi grant and an ERC Starting Grant.

[VIDEO Renske Keizer]

What an amazing work on fatherhood, right?

So how does this ambition of advancing both science and society fit in the current state of affairs in academia? What does it mean to be a truly impact driven community of scholars? And what are the consequences for the faculty proficiency and support organisation in our university? These are pivotal issues, right now in academia.

Right now, we are developing the strategy for the next 5 years, as you can see on this slide. We are in phase 2. To answer the questions I just mentioned, we have established an interdisciplinary lab group with a variety of people from the university to come up with a framework and concrete measures. I am truly excited about the enthusiasm, creativity and smart ideas, I have been hearing when I talk with our academics in the last months. We will present this new strategy at the start of the academic year. We are still working on the topic so, I can't be too explicit about the trajectories we will take.

But I do want to share some things with you.



You are well aware of the dominant publication culture in academia. Scholars are mainly valued for their output, the number of publications, PhD's and citations.

Don't get me wrong: I think publications and PhD's are very important. I am really proud of our outstanding achievements. Understand me, they are a crucial part of our impact identity.

But, we are not in the counting business. I'm glad we are at a crossroad in academia. Many researchers have already made the so-called "responsible turn". Engagement in solving the societal challenges of today and tomorrow have become central in many people's academic identity. This doesn't happen overnight, and it doesn't happen without effort.

We need to develop 'impact literacy' in the early careers of scholars. This can help them to master the craft of shaping and altering behaviours, policies and paradigms. For our senior full professors, it's vital to invest in impact leadership. From experience I can tell you that true engagement is a fundamental enrichment of your intellectual capital. We are role models for young researchers. Investing in impact literacy and impact leadership will help our faculty to become resilient and relevant scholars. Your university will fully support you in this endeavour.

It's time to think about societal validation and engagement at a strategic level. This also takes into account the pressure being put on researchers, getting articles published while trying to get funding, and doing well in education. We should be really careful; we want to keep our fantastic faculty in good shape.



We are doing this together. Next week, November 15, we will be kicking things off during a work conference on societal impact in Arminius Church. Core faculty members from all schools will discuss in what domains we can excel, how we can measure impact, and how it should fit in our HR strategy. As you can imagine, the results of this conference will provide vital input for the new strategy towards 2024.

I hope you, like me, are inspired by the two young researchers you saw in the videos today. I'd like to show one more: Vidi grant-winner Sander Herfst of the Department of Viroscience at Erasmus Medical Centre. His research on viruses has an impact on people across the globe. Another perfect example of advancing both science and society.

[VIDEO Sander Herfst]

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's my goal as a scientist to keep striving for impact. Join me, join us in our efforts in creating impact, in adding new value to both science and society.

Thank you very much.