

**Presidential Speech – Prof dr Annelien Bredenoord, President Erasmus University
Rotterdam 31 August 2026**

It is good to be here with you again, at the start of a new academic year.

At the heart of this afternoon lies one question. How can we foster societies that turn change into an opportunity for greater resilience and progress?

Each part of today offered a different perspective.

Creativity. Education. Student leadership. Research. Public leadership. And the collaboration between universities, governments, businesses and society. Each added a piece to the larger whole.

And yet none of them gave the full answer. That is precisely what the question mark means. The question mark remains because there is no blueprint for resilient societies.

Anthropologists call this a liminal time. The old is gone, the new not yet shaped. That brings uncertainty, but it also creates room. Room for new narratives, a new order. Room for new ways of living together. Room that calls for creativity and moral courage, and for people and institutions willing to make a difference in it.

As we open this new academic year, that question mark becomes an invitation. An invitation to show, in this very time of transition, what we at Erasmus University Rotterdam have to offer.

Let us shape that future together.

To understand what resilience requires from us, we first need to look at the world in which we want to build it.

Because resilience never arises in a vacuum.

Over the summer I re-read Yuval Harari's 21 Lessons for the 21st Century. He is not alone. More thinkers see how developments are converging and reinforcing each other. Rapid technological change, especially AI and biotechnology. Climate change. Geopolitical tensions. Each already far-reaching on its own. Together, they interlock in ways that are transformative.

In that uncertainty, two images of the future are offered to us.

The first is a promise.

"Technology solves our problems. Acceleration is always good. Innovation is progress by definition. Anyone with concerns simply does not understand yet".

The second image is what that promise actually delivers. "Technology does not adapt to the human. The human adapts to technology. Whoever cannot keep up with the acceleration becomes the problem. And a society becomes divided between those who keep pace and those who fall behind and loses its grip and control over the technology."

The first one, the promise, is sometimes sold as technological accelerationism. It sounds like optimism, but it is a vision of the future in which the human loses control over technology to a handful of Elon Musk-style entrepreneurs.

Other researchers warn of the same risk. And they take it a step further. Not only that machines are becoming more like us, but that we are becoming more like machines. That we start to see learning as data processing, creativity as the rearranging of what already exists. The human as an algorithm.

Here we touch something fundamental.

Not only what technology does to us. Also, what we risk to forget. That societies, in the end, run on trust, on connection, and on human creativity.

As an ethicist, I learned two things. Beware of arrogant technological optimism. But don't fall into doom-thinking either, as if technology always alienates humans. It is a two-way street. People and technology shape each other. But we are the ones who decide what role we give it in our lives.

And I am not alone in this belief. Governments and companies should invest in the social ground where technology lands. Just as much as in technology itself. Public values belong at the design stage.

This touches a question that is essential for universities.

Not only: what can we build? But above all: what kind of society do we want to build?

Between technological optimism and pessimism lies the space we must fill ourselves. The space for a third image. The capacity to deal with change. And to shape it.

Resilience.

Resilience is sometimes explained as resistance. Standing firm. Holding on. Clinging to what is.

That description is too narrow.

Resilience is about learning. About returning and adapting after a shock. About recovery. And about renewing when circumstances demand it. It is also about inventiveness and curiosity. About finding paths that were never taken before. As humanity, we have been

adapting for centuries, and we do so because we are strong together. We do not only weather storms. We also look for new paths through them, and beyond them.

The resilience researcher professor Ann Masten, who received an honorary doctorate from Erasmus University in 2022, called resilience “ordinary magic”. Not because resilience is easy, but because it arises in everyday places. In groups, in communities, in institutions that learn to deal with uncertainty. By experiencing setbacks in small doses, in an environment where someone stands beside you.

For human development, resilience is what the immune system is to the body. A capacity to absorb disturbances, to recover, and sometimes to come back stronger. And that is precisely where the role of our university lies.

A year ago, at the start of the academic year, I stood on this same stage and presented our new Strategy 2030, with five impact domains. You can see them behind me.

[shown on screen:

- Resilience and robustness of our society*
- Sustainable entrepreneurship and inclusive prosperity*
- A just transition to a sustainable society*
- Healthy society and accessible & affordable healthcare*
- The responsible use of technologies]*

Resilience. As the first and a connecting thread. Whether it is about health and our health care system, about technology, about just transitions, about the economy or about strong communities, we always come back to the same question. How do we help people and societies to adapt and to flourish in times of uncertainty and change?

And here I want to be firm.

There is no resilient society, not even in the sense of defence, if people cannot live together well and if the questions of coexistence, of living together, are not in order. Resilience is not only about systems, about infrastructure and about technology. It is in the end about people.

An emergency plan does not work if neighbours do not know each other. Public health, a vaccination campaign for example, does not work if people have no trust. People won't accept technology if inequality grows too great.

Behind every system are people who must carry it.

That is why we choose at Erasmus University for human centred and inclusive innovation. Not the promise of a utopia. Nor the acceptance of dystopia. But the ambition to contribute, step by step, to a more human, more inclusive and more resilient society.

That is what we work on, through our five impact domains.

This is what that looks like in practice. Let me begin with our own city, Rotterdam.

In this city, we already feel the challenges heading our way. Heat stress. Sinking ground. Grid congestion. They look technical, but they are deeply social. They involve human behaviour, public values, economic choices, governance, and questions of justice.

For example, they do not affect everyone equally. They widen the gaps that are already there, between neighbourhoods, in health and in life expectancy.

That is why we work with the city of Rotterdam, Erasmus Medical Center, Delft University of Technology, Hogeschool Rotterdam and Albeda MBO on a different way of working. Not knowledge that emerges within the university and is then brought out into the city. But research that begins with the question as it is asked in the neighbourhoods and in the municipality. And teaching that connects to those same questions, at every level, practical, applied and theoretical. Together, we form an urban ecosystem.

What we learn is not just for Rotterdam.

The questions we see here, our partner cities in Europe see them too. As Erasmus University, we lead the European university alliance UNIC, working with nine other universities in post-industrial cities. From one of those cities, Zagreb, we were pleased to welcome the mayor among us today. Cities with a different history, but with strikingly similar societal challenges. The post industrial transition, co-existence, technology, inclusion and democracy.

Mario Draghi noted in his report on European competitiveness that talent and knowledge are among Europe's greatest assets. And that we too often fail to make real use of them. That is not a finger pointed only at politics or business. It is also a task for universities. We are the place where that talent is formed and where that knowledge is created. Including international staff and students - the news this morning showed what we already know and has been addressed through our report last year: that international students should be seen as an investment, not a cost.

That brings us back to where we began this afternoon.

The question of how we can foster societies that turn change into an opportunity for greater resilience and progress.

We didn't get a full answer today. But we do have a sharper sense of where the answers are to be found. In people. In communities. In institutions that learn to deal with uncertainty. Local and global at the same time.

So, no utopia. And no dystopia either. But a direction. And the confidence that this lies in our own hands.

I would like to wrap up with two conclusions.

First. In a world shaped by rapid technological, environmental, and geopolitical change, resilience is not about resisting change. It is about adapting, learning, and emerging stronger from it.

Second. Technology alone cannot create resilient societies. Innovation must be guided by human values. By trust, inclusion, and collaboration.

For Erasmus University Rotterdam, this means contributing to a future that is neither utopian nor dystopian. One in which technological and social innovation go hand in hand. To help people and communities thrive in times of uncertainty.

We are a community in motion as well. And our university will need to move with the changes coming at us, changes we are already in the middle of. And so, we will take that work forward in our Future EUR project throughout the academic year 2026-2027. That is why the question mark remains where it belongs. As a symbol of curiosity.

Before we open this year, I would like to thank our speakers today for the perspectives they shared with us. Our guests from the municipality and from Zagreb for engaging in conversation with us. The colleagues who worked on this programme, on stage and behind the scenes.

Thank you to our students, researchers, teachers, staff and to all of you for your attention.

I wish you all a wonderful academic year. A year full of curiosity, moral courage, good questions and real connection with one another.

Thank you.