

## Trying to make a difference

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## **TRYING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE; CHALLENGES FOR TILBURG UNIVERSITY\***

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**2 May 2014**

### **Abstract:**

I argue that, currently, as a consequence of Tilburg University (TiU) not having explicated its scientific values nor having specified its goals, the University lacks an academic identity. I also argue that TiU should explicitly recognize that it is a partnership of academic professionals and that it should organize itself accordingly. The organization should not be run as a firm, but by relying on faculty authority. I urge the University to explicate its scientific values and its goals and I advise it to focus on striving to be an excellent research university. TiU should formulate explicit and ambitious goals and, to reach excellence, it should steadfastly follow the strategy of imitating the best US universities. The paper concludes with a 10-point action plan that could be implemented immediately. I am convinced that, by doing so, Tilburg University can make a difference.

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\* This paper is the result of reflections, inspired by the fact that, on February 1, 2014, I was 25 years at Tilburg University. The document takes into account ideas and insights that were generously shared by colleagues of Tilburg University during the workshop “Inspiring Leadership, Good Economics and the Good Life” that took place at the University on 7 March. A first version of the paper was circulated on 2 April. I thank all those that commented on it and appreciate the general support for the ideas expressed in it. It goes without saying that I alone am responsible for the contents of this paper.

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## 1. Introduction

Tilburg University (TiU) is a small and specialized university. As such it is vulnerable, maybe more than many realize. At the end of 2013, the Executive Board of TiU produced a Strategic Plan for the period 2014-2017 titled “Making a Difference”. The Plan does not make clear *where* TiU makes (or will make) the difference, hence, it invites the question “What difference would it make if Tilburg University would be closed down?” At present, this question is unanswered. The aim of this document is to stimulate thinking, and subsequent action, on this question as well as on two more fundamental ones.

At the outset, it should be acknowledged that only few things really make a difference. Most of what we do causes only small ripples, if any. In the past, Tilburg University has made a difference at least once. When CentER was established in 1988, it was generally recognized that economic research in the Netherlands was in bad shape. For sure, the econometrics group in Rotterdam had been a world-wide leader and Jan Tinbergen had been honored with the Nobel Prize in Economics, but these were all things from the past. The Netherlands had fallen behind in economic research, with Tilburg being the bearer of the red lantern. Within a few years, the situation was reversed. Tilburg was generally considered the best in the Netherlands, among the very best in Europe, and had made connections with the top world-wide. Furthermore, other Dutch faculties of economics followed suit; they gradually caught up. The situation is healthy now. It could be much better, however, and it is not guaranteed that it will stay good.

This paper argues that Tilburg University is facing serious problems and that these problems arise from the University not having answered two fundamental questions:

1. What is the goal of Tilburg University; what does TiU want to accomplish?
2. What are the core scientific values that Tilburg University stands for?

The paper urges the university community to provide answers to these questions and it invites the governing bodies of TiU to then focus exclusively on those actions that further these goals and values.

My motivation for writing this document is that I strongly believe that Tilburg University can perform much better than it currently does. I believe that, as a result of the values and the goals not being clear, a lot of energy (and probably money) is wasted on actions that are only of secondary importance. Having clear goals and values allows specifying clear responsibilities and simple systems of accountability, allowing everybody to focus on his or her core tasks. In addition, a clear focus stimulates the development of a corporate culture, which enhances work climate and allows to do more and to reach higher quality.

Without having a firm answer to the first question, we cannot tell how the University is doing. Without a goal, we cannot know whether TiU is doing the right things; neither can we know whether it is doing well the things that it does. Without having a direction for the first answer (a vision), there is the risk of the University doing the wrong things, or it not being focused and doing too many things. Without a clear focus, we cannot separate core activities from marginal ones, and there is the risk of internal conflict and lack of external identity. Without having specified a target for the first answer (an ambition level), there is the risk of TiU doing things badly, and quality slipping and deteriorating over time.

Clearly, the goals should be consistent with the underlying scientific values. TiU does not have an answer to the second question, which is about its (scientific) identity and, hence, is more fundamental. In fact, TiU has evaded answering the second question by stressing other, but (in this context) largely irrelevant values, such as Christian and humanistic ones. It is only natural to think that the lack of clarity on scientific values has contributed to creating an environment in which such values were threatened and the associated duties neglected. This has harmed collective reputation considerably and has also posed a threat to individual reputations.

The fact that Tilburg University revises its Strategy every four years, without reaffirming the basic values, illustrates the problems and signals that the above-mentioned risks are real. With clear goals and values, the focus could be on the strategy to reach the goals, and on evaluation and improvement, rather than on formulating new actions and priorities. This would avoid time-inconsistency, waste of intellectual energy and would contribute to strengthen identity and enhance academic reputation.

Having worked at the Tilburg School of Economics and Management (TISEM) for more than 25 years, my assessment is based in part on a comparison of TISEM with other Departments of Economics and Business Schools. I think that some other Schools in Europe (HEC (Paris), UCL (London), Toulouse, Zurich), which were at a similar level as TISEM 25 years ago, have performed relatively better and indeed may be on a trajectory to close the gap with the top in the US. I am not convinced that, currently, TISEM is on a similar trajectory. I think that, although TISEM has done well, it could have done better. It seems that we have forgotten what the Queen told Alice: “it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”.

We definitely should be aware that the current position cannot be taken for granted. Examples of Schools sliding (far) back are easy to find. Researchers from all over the world have come to TISEM on the expectation that it will continue to improve its position. With expectations being frustrated, the fabric might unravel. University administrators that stress novel activities and the importance of local connections risk alienating these researchers and pushing them out. I think it is time to reaffirm our basic scientific values and to raise our ambition level again. Tilburg University still can make the difference. To survive, TiU needs to renew itself. It has no choice but to try to be an international leader in academic research and education.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 argues that a university is more similar to a professional sports club than to a profit maximizing firm. Accordingly, it should not be governed as a firm, as TiU currently is, but as a club, or as a partnership. Section 3 describes some signals of things being wrong at TiU. Section 4 explains that the problems are caused by TiU not having explicated its goals and values and that they are compounded by the University having adopted an inappropriate governance structure. Section 5 presents the top US University as a model. Section 6 gives hurdles to implement that model. Section 7 provides a basis for a discussion on goals and values for Tilburg University. Section 8 outlines an Action Plan and Section 9 concludes. Readers that agree with me that many things are wrong at TiU are advised to have a quick look at Section 2 and then to move to the Sections 7, 8 and 9.

## 2. An Analogy

On 11 December 2013 the local newspaper, *Brabants Dagblad*, published an interview with the President of the University, Koen Becking, with the title

“Leider van Tilburgse wereldklasse eist wel dat zijn mensen scoren”

The interview is interesting and deserves to be translated in English and to be put on the University website, so that it can be discussed. It shows that our President is ambitious. In the interview, he also says that he knows what he wants and that he will do what he thinks is good for the organization. There is nothing wrong with ambition, but history has amply shown that wrong-directed ambition can be dangerous. Do *we* know what the President wants? Is what *he* thinks is good for the organization indeed good for it? Is the President’s ambition well-directed? The interview does not give answers. It, however, shows some inconsistencies that give rise to thinking. For example, while the President acknowledges that a university is there for the long-term and that continuity is important, he also says that he wants to change many things. The voice of the President sounds like that of the CEO of a large company, but is a university comparable to a profit maximizing firm?

The title of the newspaper article invites a comparison of academia with sports. What does it mean to score? What are the goals? Who are the players? Who are the coaches? What is the role of the President?

As an academic institution, Tilburg University participates in two core activities: research and teaching. In this Section, I focus on the former, as university teaching can be seen as a derivative of research. This also (or especially) holds for TiU as the Strategic Plan 2014-2017 states that “Teaching at Tilburg University is research-based and research-driven”. Hence, *the* core activity is academic research (or science).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The relevant Dutch Law (WHW, 1992, article 1.3.1) formulates provision of scientific education and conducting scientific research as core activities, and mentions that universities also transfer knowledge for the benefit of society. Clearly, the latter is also a derivative of research.

Like sports, research is a world-wide activity. There is world-wide competition to be the first to publish original ideas and results in the top international journals. Indeed, many of the main questions (such as: how to stimulate creativity and innovation? What contributes to happiness? How to fight global warming? How to efficiently provide high quality care? What legal and other institutions best support society?) are global. For sure, there are cultural, regional and institutional differences, which can be a great source of inspiration, but the best solutions have world-wide relevance. Local implementations are best viewed as being derivative from global solutions. Furthermore, and equally important, scientists, like athletes, have global ambitions. They want to be the best in their field; they want to win the Olympics. This goes very far. Winning a gold medal on the 10K speed-skating is quite an achievement, but winning the gold medal on the 100m sprints in athletics counts more. Some sciences have their own Olympics, with Nobel Prizes as gold medals; all sciences have top journals which can also be seen as such.

Scoring in science means pushing further outward the frontier of what is known. In comparison to sports, science is much less spectacular as only experts know where the line lies; hence, in real time, only they will know whether a goal has been scored or not. That this creates problems will be obvious. There are many academic debates about whether indeed a goal was scored (the frontier was shifted) or not. Only experts will be able to decide and reaching the decision may take time. Outsiders can observe indicators of whether a goal might have been scored, but all such signals are highly imperfect. Examples of such indicators are publications in good journals (acknowledgements by referees and editors that a goal was scored) and citations (acknowledgements by peers that something worthwhile has been contributed). The better the quality of the journal and the larger the number of citations, the more reliable the signal, but it remains imperfect.

So the aim of the game of science is to shift the frontier of knowledge. This frontier can be shifted in many directions; new fundamental insights count, but also new applications (valorization). Even improvements count: explaining that the frontier has shifted, so that others see where it now lies and understand the shift, counts as well, as this allows more people making use of the new knowledge. The pioneers, the leaders, are followed by masses of ordinary soldiers, who are indispensable. This is just as in sports. There are more than a billion soccer players, but there is only one Messi; only one Cruyff.

The players are the researchers, the teams are the research groups, departments and schools. How is Tilburg University doing in this game? We have individual players that belong to the top and Schools that do better than could, perhaps, be expected. TISEM and TLS belong to the top 5 in Europe, and TISEM belongs to the top-25 in the world. I think that, in comparison, this may be better, or at least as good, as Ajax. Some of the TiU scientists may even be comparable to Irene Wüst. A few good players do not make a good team, however; one needs balance and a critical mass. The challenge is to attract more good players. As we do not have much money, we have to train and scout, and we have provide an excellent work climate. Talent attracts talent; the Matthew effect is real. It cannot be neglected, but it can be put to profitable use.

The coaches are the senior researchers. In contrast to the case in professional sports, they are player-coaches. The reason is that intellectual capacities do not decay as quickly as physical ones; hence, researchers are expected to remain active as players. They should continue to score. In addition, they should coach and lead the team by pointing to directions where important goals can be scored.

It will be obvious that, to allow the teams to perform, there needs to be excellent support. Just as in sports, all the non-players have the same goal: to support the players and allow them to perform optimally. Players should focus on their task (scoring) and the entire organization should be targeted at allowing the players to do so. Every goal that is scored is a result of team effort and everybody (players as well as support staff) rejoices in every goal that is scored. All efforts should be targeted, directly or indirectly, towards the scoring of goals and all such effort counts.

And the role of the President? I guess it is something like that of the *Chef de Mission* of an Olympic team, or the President of a soccer club. Who is the President of Ajax? Presidents are extremely important, but good ones know their place and stay in the background. One only needs to think of the Presidents of large Spanish soccer clubs to realize that they can make or break teams. The task of Presidents is supportive: they make sure that the entire organization is oriented towards the single goal; they provide funding and ensure optimal working conditions. In any case, they are not players or coaches.

### **3. Signals that Tilburg University has problems**

With the above as background, I will now illustrate that Tilburg University indeed has problems. I just want to indicate (signals of) the problems without going into too much depth. The core is that the University operates more according to a business firm than according to a professional sports club, or a partnership. As a consequence of the mistaken identity, TiU says, does and publishes things which any serious researcher can only consider as being (very) embarrassing and not fitting a serious university. Personally, I go a bit further. I see many things which I consider to be an insult to academic values as I understand them to be.<sup>2</sup> I can only infer from this that those responsible for those actions and publications either do not know what these academic values are, or that I have a fundamentally different understanding about them. I, however, has no reason to believe that my understanding is different from those of my direct colleagues at TiU or at leading universities.

The first indication of serious problems is the Strategic Plan 2014-2017 that I already referred to above. As I have written at length on it elsewhere, I can be brief here.<sup>3</sup> The main point is that the Strategic Plan does not show vision and does not make choices, the latter with the exception of the proposal to focus (more) on social innovation, which I consider to be misconceived; see below. Although the Plan recognizes that it is the people that make TiU (p.13), it contains so much nonsense, that one can only conclude that informed researchers have not been involved in the writing of it.

For example, it is written on p. 4 of the published version that “Understanding Society will be broadly recognized and understood as *our* distinguishing quality”, but this can

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<sup>2</sup> I admit that I use this term frequently in this paper, without describing these values. A short description is difficult; it is more something that you know when you see it, or better, that you clearly recognize when it is violated. Key aspects are: curiosity, outward orientation, the love for truth and understanding, respect for ideas, showing respect through criticism and debate, separation of people from ideas, modesty, pursuit of excellence (giving all the best you can), and an attitude of “try, if you fail, try again, fail again, fail better, ....”. Among the many good books about this topic, I can recommend Edward Shils “The Academic Ethic” (1984), Jaroslav Pelikan “The idea of the University” (1992) and Derek Bok “Higher Education in America” (2013).

<sup>3</sup> See my “Review of the Strategic Plan of Tilburg University 2014-2017” (5 January 2014), which I will gladly make available to anybody who is interested.

never work as trying to understand Society is precisely what science (including social science) is trying to do. Tilburg University does not have a monopoly on understanding society. On p. 5, the Plan recognizes the need for a “consistent set of core values”, but it does not identify and define these values. The Plan identifies 5 “clear choices” (quality, innovation, network, internationalization and effectiveness), but it is obvious that these cannot classify as choices as one simply does not have other options. How could one decide to put quantity before quality, inefficiency above effectiveness, localization above internationalization, isolation above network, or rigidity and conservation above innovation? What is now presented as action lines could already have been achieved long ago. For example, the proposal to “limit the number of international partnerships we engage in” was already pushed by the academics some 20 years ago, but not implemented by the administration then.

The Strategic Plan is devoid of substantive decisions. The document is inward looking; it presents social innovation as a spearhead and suggests that TiU is leading in this area, whereas, in practice, it may be lagging behind.<sup>4</sup> What is advertised as “the Tilburg method of social innovation” is not a method; it can only be laughed at, if it were not so painful to read it and then realize that it is my university that writes this.<sup>5</sup> The Plan does not show what scientific values Tilburg University stands for, and it indeed, in various places is in obvious conflict with such values. What may be even worse is that, even after this has been pointed out, the Executive Board has not been able to organize a constructive discussion on such fundamental issues.

A second illustration that something is seriously wrong is the frequency with which the University uses the terms “top research” or “top researchers” in its own PR. One better limits oneself to describing the research while leaving the use of such qualifications to others, allowing them to judge. It should suffice to describe and explain why the results are so exciting. As far as description of content is concerned, however, the popularization

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<sup>4</sup> In any case, TiU is a late entrant in this field. The Netherlands Center for Social Innovation (NCSI) started in 2006, with EUR (Rotterdam) as a participant. Interestingly, NCSI ceased its activities again in 2012. On the website of the government agency “Entrepreneurial Netherlands” ([www.rvo.nl](http://www.rvo.nl)) one finds a list of Dutch expertise on social innovation; many university research groups are mentioned, but none of TiU; <http://www.rvo.nl/onderwerpen/duurzaam-ondernemen/energie-en-milieu-innovaties/sociale-innovatie/universiteiten>.

<sup>5</sup> See the full version of the Strategic Plan, available on the Internet, p. 18

of research most frequently fails. What is more important: without having described what “top” means, everything can be classified as top. The University better first defines its ambition level. Rather than stating that it is top, it better be modest and stresses that it wants to become (much) better still. The University should first describe its mission and the ambition level which it has within that mission. Lacking a clear goal, we cannot judge how the university is doing and whether it focuses on the things that it should be doing.

A third signal of not having the priorities clear comes from the description of Tilburg University’s history “75 jaar waardenvolle universiteit” as it was published in 2002. The history comprises three volumes and in total covers more than 1000 pages. The reader searching for an answer to “What has Tilburg University accomplished? or “Where has TiU made a difference?” does not find any answers. The books focus on marginal phenomena; things like administrative issues, university politics, buildings, the library, democratization, sports, student life, etc. The books are based on studies of the University’s archives. However, a University does not live in its archives, it lives in the ideas that it generates, how these are shaped by discussion within the academic community and how they find their way to the outside world. Which worthwhile ideas has the University generated? The University also lives in the ideas that it communicates to its students and the values that it instills on them. Which students have made a difference, and what did TiU contribute to that? The three volumes are devoid of academic content. To see that it can be much different, and much better, one only needs to look no further than at the two books describing the history of Erasmus University.

A fourth indication of the University not knowing what it is (or should be) doing is given by the Honorary Doctorates that Tilburg University has conferred, as this is *the* way to showcase the values that it stands for. Although there are some outstanding honors, the University also decided to honor politicians and bankers such as Herman Wijffels, Noud Wellink and Al Gore. I am sure that most academics at TiU are quite embarrassed by seeing these names. Let us take the case of Al Gore, which, of the three, may be the easiest to justify. What could justify giving the Honorary Doctorate to him rather than giving it to the academic that pointed out the problems many, many years before him, and who maybe also hinted at how to solve these? What justifies giving the Honorary Degree to a popularizing politician rather than to an original scientist? Why do the persons that

decide on who should be honored not take more seriously John Maynard Keynes' insight that "The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually slaves of some defunct economist."? Why doesn't the University honor the creators of the ideas? Why, for example in economics, doesn't the University demonstrate its ability to recognize value and to show its distinction by honoring scientists *before* they are recognized elsewhere and *before* they receive the Nobel Prize for their academic contributions?

A fifth signal is again related to the Strategy of Tilburg University. If there is a spearhead for the period 2014-2017, then it is Social Innovation. Although the method is not clear, it will be clear to most academics at the University that TiU could benefit greatly by having university management based on tested scientific insights. The idea of innovating the university itself, including its governance and management, by incorporating researchers, scientific research and scientific insights, however, does not seem to have occurred to the writers of the Plan. Apparently, they think that research or researchers have nothing to offer, or that the University already operates according to best practices. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nevertheless, the University administrators do consider it the truth, which signals both lack of ambition, fear of innovation and looking down upon (social) science. For the last 10 years or so, every time the University made a new Strategic Plan, I suggested the Executive Board that they improve the functioning of the management by asking scientists for suggestions and by incorporating science-based methods. On every occasion, the answer was that the idea was nice, but impossible to implement. Even modest suggestions for improving the teaching process, such as ensuring that the blackboard in the lecture room is properly lit, or that teachers be provided with the names and pictures of the students in their class, proved impossible to implement. With Social Innovation now mentioned as a spearhead, there is a new opportunity. If you want to change the world, start with yourself.

#### **4. Why does Tilburg University have problems?**

In my view, the most important reason behind the above anomalies is that Tilburg University has not explicated its (scientific) values, nor specified its goals. With the mission being unclear, TiU has adopted a business model and a governance structure that do not match that of an academic partnership like a university.

Values are more basic, with goals arising from values; at least they need to be consistent with them. There is a lot of talk about values at Tilburg University, however, there is no discussion at all about *scientific* values, although these should be the starting point. For example, the Strategic Plan talks about Christian values and the humanistic tradition, but, for a university, such aspects are really much less important than the question of which are the scientific values that guide us.<sup>6</sup> That the latter values receive too little attention is also clear by scandals such as those related to Diederik Stapel, or the Executive Board wishing to prohibit a professor from openly criticizing a member from another School for having graded a Master Thesis with a 10 even though that thesis does not meet appropriate scientific standards (with the argument that such debate would harm the University's reputation.)<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Tilburg University has not specified its goals. In fact, every four years, it sets new priorities, which would not be necessary if it would have consistent values and be aware of these. In the end, a Strategy should not be about goals or priorities, but about ways to achieve the goals. The values and goals should be reaffirmed (in order to remind incumbents and inform newcomers), but they will not need extensive discussion. Not having clear goals and values, however, implies that new priorities are formulated all the time; this leading to lack of identity and the strategy being inconsistent through time.

Another factor contributing greatly to the problem is the fact that people, and management in particular, do not have well-defined task descriptions, nor clear targets that should be met, and that there is no clear accountability structure. Of course, without clear goals, it

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<sup>6</sup> Also see the Christmas present "Met het oog op goed leven; Cobbenhagen en onze universitaire cultuur", which we received in 2011. That book is internally oriented, it does not address where we stand within the academic world.

<sup>7</sup> Fleur de Beaufort: "Het ongelijk van hautaine 'wetenschappers'"; <http://teldersstichting.vvd.nl>. (Article 1.6 of the Law (WHW) protects the academic freedom.)

could hardly be otherwise: if you don't know what you want, it does not matter what you do. Nevertheless, there is a second factor that contributes strongly to this state of affairs. This is the University's governance structure, which, in my view, is completely faulty and dysfunctional, from the root all the way to the top.<sup>8</sup>

#### ***4.1 TiU's Failing Governance Structure***

Tilburg University has a governance structure that is not fitting for a university, and this has at least three undesirable consequences:

- i) the leadership of the University lacking vision, and ambition;
- ii) there being way too little contact between the University leadership and the best brains on the work floor; and
- iii) the University leadership and management not being accountable and not making themselves accountable to the academics within the university.

Below, I take up these points in turn. However, I first note that the governance structure follows from the Law “Modernising Universitaire Bestuursorganisatie” (MUB) which dates from 1997. Those were the days of the Purple Government and the responsible Minister was the economist Jo Ritzen. One prominent idea at the time was that, if competition between universities is fierce, then governance is not really important as competition will force universities to focus on their key tasks and to be good at it. This idea is sound in principle, but an economist will know that one really needs *very* strong competition for this idea to work and he will doubt whether this condition is satisfied in practice. Personally, I think that, in the Netherlands it is not. Ritzen's MUB, hence, nicely illustrates the quote from Keynes listed above. In essence, Ritzen's MUB imposes that universities adopt a top-down business structure and I am certainly not the first to argue that this structure is not fitting for a university.<sup>9</sup> However, I deviate from earlier critics in that I put the blame fully on the university administrators: they could have used the freedom of the law to respect university traditions and academic values.

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<sup>8</sup> In this paper, I do not discuss management at the School level, however, I believe that the overall top-down structure has corrupted also the management at that level, and even the lower ones. Evidence is provided by the (previous) survey of personnel, which showed many people being very disappointed by their School management. Certainly in my own School, TISEM, the management team has (or perhaps, had) the tendency to decide without consulting the academic staff first.

<sup>9</sup> J. de Beus, A. Klamer and H. Verbruggen “Universitaire bestuurders zijn losgeraakt van de wetenschap”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 2 september 2009, and J. Dronkers “School als bedrijf is totaal verkeerd”, *NRC Handelsblad*, 11 januari 2011

#### ***4.2 Lack of Vision and Ambition***

As the Strategic Plan amply makes clear, there is no vision on the University nor on its future. A vision originates with people, hence, the question is who has written the various sections of the Plan. The Plan reads as an administrative piece, hence, I expect that it has been written by people from the University administration. However, non-scientists cannot be expected to write a clear vision on research in the future. Most academics will have a vision for themselves: they want to get the most out of themselves, to shift the research frontier where they can, and to inspire the students with their lectures. Not all academics, however, will have the capability, or be motivated, to write a good vision for the future of the entire university. Writing a vision that also other academics recognize and consider to be a source of inspiration requires having an overview and a certain degree of maturity/wisdom. I conjecture that people with these characteristics have not been involved in the writing of the Strategic Plan. More generally, and more worrying, it seems that these people, of which the University has a considerable number, are not involved in strategic policy making of the University at all.

At the University level, no clear ambition level has been explicated. Without a vision, it cannot be different. If one does not know *where* to go, one also cannot say *how far* one should go. The absence of such goals, however, invites complacency. Furthermore, and perhaps more important, it frustrates the many very ambitious researchers at the University; at least, it does not invite them to engage with the University. Clearly, if researchers find the actions of the University embarrassing, they will not have strong appetite to engage in it. One does not want to engage in activities that one finds repugnant.

Furthermore, when there are no clear goals, it is hard or impossible to take people to task. The University needs to set high ambition levels for all its activities in order to keep all people focused, and to make sure that attention is exclusively devoted to essential things and that not too much energy is wasted on marginal aspects. Some schools of TiU have clear and ambitious goals. For example, TISEM has formulated that, in all areas in which it is active, it aims to be the best in the Netherlands, to belong to the top 5-10 in Europe and to be among the top-25 in Europe. These are very high ambition levels and no doubt TISEM will not reach all of them, but they are not completely unrealistic. It would be

desirable if other Schools of TiU and the university itself would set similar goals. Different goals for different units are undesirable. The University says that quality comes first, but it has not specified targets for quality. The Tilburg Law School (TLS) talks about ambitions with respect to the type of activities that it wants to do, but not for the quality.

### ***4.3 Management detached from Research***

A core reason for why Tilburg University has problems is that it does not succeed in making use of its strengths. A university is a community of scholars; a community of intelligent people, who have a lot of ideas and who like to discuss these ideas at high level. The University management does not succeed to tap into this pool. There is an almost complete separation of management/administration and research/teaching. The academics live in their world and the managers live in theirs. The academics discuss scientific ideas in internal seminars and with academic colleagues from all over the world. They do not mingle in internal administration or university politics as it is frustrating to do and does not yield benefits. The managers, on the other hand, do not seek the confrontation with these scientists; they happily live in their own world and discuss in the formal, democratic forums that exist. Very few leading researchers participate in these, however. There is no place in the University where there is room to discuss, at high level, fundamental issues about academic values and university governance.

I agree that there is democracy at the University, that there is a University council and that there are Faculty councils at each of the various Schools. However, I do not see the best researchers being active in these forums.<sup>10</sup> Democracy is the best type of political governance that we know, but we should also recognize that not all scholars are alike. True, we are all people, but not all of us are able to make a difference or to see what could make a difference. I already mentioned that few things really make a difference. I admit that a lot of research (including much research of my own) does not make a difference. Quality differences should not be underestimated and, in an intellectual activity as ours, they are probably just as large as they are in professional sports. One only needs to look at citations and differences in citation rates in order to be reminded of these differences. On the basis of my experience, I have come to believe that the best researchers generally are also those that have the best vision on what matters for a university. These researchers

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<sup>10</sup> The entry of TiU International in the University Council might change this.

also constitute the bulk of the human capital that the University has. The good thing about Ritzen's MUB is that it allows the Executive Board to consult not only with the formal organs but also with the academic elite of the University. As far as I know, although the Board sometimes consults academics on an individual basis, it has not formally installed some kind of Research Council to which it makes itself accountable. In my view, it would be highly desirable if it would do so.

#### ***4.4 TiU's Failing Governance Structure (Again)***

Of course, such discussions with the academic elite would be less needed if the University would be governed by strong leaders, strictly on the basis of academic values that represent those of the larger University community. With all respect for the current leadership, clearly, at present, at Tilburg University, this is not the case.

For one, at the very top, the University is governed by the "Stichtingsbestuur" which renews itself by cooptation and which consists of politicians and persons from organizations in society. There is not a single academic in this Board of Governance; in fact, there seems to be not even one member who earned a PhD-degree. When new people for this Supervisory Board are hired, the profile does not require to have any specific affinity with academic research or teaching. The profile mentions that members have to be able to identify relevant future (regional, national and international) developments in the university context,<sup>11</sup> but when one looks at the composition of the Supervisory Board, one can only conclude that this requirement has not been taken seriously. Who of the current members knows what is going on at the frontier of academic research? Who has contacts at KNAW? Who knows what is going on at NWO and on how to advise on changing procedures so as to make these both more fair and more in favor of TiU? Who has an informed vision on the threat of the MOOCs on the current business model? The current composition of the Supervisory Board is a clear signal of the lack of vision and the lack of scientific ambition of Tilburg University.

When one looks at the by-laws of the Foundation that exploits Tilburg University, one notes that this Foundation has a broad, but completely non-ambitious goal: to further scientific education and research in general and in Brabant in particular. The goal is to

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<sup>11</sup> Stichtingsbestuur, Besluit 98.10.06-6

ensure the continuation of Tilburg University; the goal is not to make TiU a university that we can all be proud of. As indicated above, one can even doubt whether the current Supervisory Board will be able to guarantee survival. Furthermore, the by-laws assign rights to the Supervisory Council, but no specific duties. Hence, it is completely unclear how the functioning of the Supervisory Board is to be evaluated; in fact, no evaluation seems to be required. Importantly, there is no requirement that the Supervisory Council makes itself accountable to the academics at the University. (It seems, however, that the Supervisory Board talks to the University Council twice a year.) Again, a lack of ambition is showing here; existing TiU practice is far from best practice.

Probably the main task of the Supervisory Board is to appoint the members of the Executive Board of the University. The Executive Board consists of the President and the Rector, with the President being responsible for strategy. Their task descriptions are not public and they do not tell us what they want to achieve. The Executive Board is accountable to the Supervisory Board. Like the Supervisory Board, the Executive Board does not make itself accountable to the scholars at the University, although it probably does to the University Council. As argued before, the latter is not sufficient. An Executive Board that takes scientific values and scientific insights seriously would realize this and act accordingly.

The current President, Koen Becking, is not an academic. In fact, this anomaly exists already for 17 years, since Yvonne van Rooij, a former politician, was appointed President in 1997. The rector, of course, is an academic. As might be fitting for Tilburg University, the current rector is a lawyer. Law takes an intermediary place between Social Science and the Humanities. However, compared to these disciplines, Law has a much more national focus and is much closer to practice. It should, therefore, not be surprising that the rector does not have many international publications. He also is not a member of the KNAW. Before becoming rector, he was dean of the Law School. His path to become rector was more an administrative one than a scientific one. Although the President and the Rector have ad hoc discussions with academics, they do not engage in strategic discussions with the key academics in the University on a structural basis. The avoidance of such discussions signals that academic values are not leading.

## 5. How Tilburg University could be

I am strongly convinced that most academics at Tilburg University (and indeed also the non-academics) want the University to be a place that challenges them, that induces them to offer the best they have, and that it be a University where they can be proud of. The better the University, and the more the University shows respect for its workers, the more one can be proud of it. I am also quite convinced that Tilburg University, by using its resources (mainly its human capital) more effectively, the University should be able to do much better than it is currently doing. Keeping the analogy from Section 2 in mind, it is easy to say what the University should do: it should respect its workers, support them throughout, involve them wherever possible and aim to be an excellent university. There are two questions:

- i) how to give content to excellence?
- ii) how to achieve excellence?

Before discussing the first issue, I first deal with the second one, which is easier.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. It is widely recognized that the US universities are the best in the world. This is not to say that all American universities are good, however, it is a fact that American universities dominate the top, however defined. It follows that the American university system must be doing something (or many things) right; at least it must be doing them better than other systems. No doubt, the intense competition of the American system (for money, students and staff) helps the quality, however, there are also other factors that contribute. If Tilburg wants to be a good university, it should imitate the (American) leaders wherever it can. It currently does not. In my view, every deviation from “American best practice” should be point of concern, investigated, evaluated and changed (in the good direction) if possible; every remaining deviation should be explained.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Some people say that top US Universities cannot serve as benchmark as they are private and have much more money. I strongly disagree. First, top Universities in the US have money because they are good, not the other way around. Secondly, money enables, but it is not all. Since we have less money, it is even more important that we do the other things right, that is, in the optimal way.

This starts at the top. There is strong evidence that the Board of Trustees of the best American universities being alumni-dominated contributes positively to their quality.<sup>13</sup> Alumni benefit (psychologically, and possibly also materially) from the university being successful, hence, their interests are fully aligned with those of the university. Alumni can help by providing good governance and by raising money for the university's core activities.

Top US universities are governed by academics at all levels. The higher the level, the more important the decisions and the more important the scientific reputation of the academics being responsible for these decisions. Presidents of the best American universities usually are academics having had a long and distinguished career; they have an excellent reputation and keep their professorship position. In my own field (economics), I only need to refer to Larry Summers (Harvard) and Hugo Sonnenschein (Chicago). Both are members of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and fellows of the Econometric Society; the latter is also a distinguished fellow of the American Economic Association and the former is a winner of the Bates Clark Medal. Presidents have an important role in fund-raising; it is their academic reputation that signals to donors that their money will be used wisely.

One level lower, the same academic credentials are requested from the Provost and the Vice-President for academic affairs. The Provost is a leading academic responsible for the smooth functioning of the organization. He or she directs the administrative staff; he or she is formally responsible and in the lead, being guided by academic values. The support staff executes; it does not direct. Importantly, there is no independent hierarchy for administrative staff; everything is subordinate to the academic hierarchy. Academic quality is important at all levels of the university hierarchy, down to the level of deans and heads of departments. At all levels reputation is important as reputation generates trust and allows the academic staff to focus optimally on the core tasks, research and teaching.

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<sup>13</sup> For example, see S. Mehta “Why Is Harvard #1? Governance and the Dominance of US Universities” 2012, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2039675>. There is an extensive literature on governance and competitiveness of US Universities. Relevant are also Philippe Aghion, Mathias Dewatripont, Caroline M. Hoxby, Andreu Mas-Colell and André Sapir: “The Governance and Performance of Research Universities: Evidence from Europe and the US”, NBER Working Paper 14851, 2009, and (by the same authors) “Universities”, *Economic Policy*, January 2010, 7-59.

The importance of trust should not be underestimated. Trust can be abused. Trust is fostered by transparency, simplicity and by making oneself accountable. Especially by being accountable to the leading academics does one maintain trust: if they trust, others can trust as well.

Top US universities are communities of scholars and students devoted to learning. Everything else is second to that. Support is what the word says: it supports. The role of support is to clear the way for the basic activities. Bureaucracy enables and stimulates; it does not stand in the way. At each level, academics are in the lead and academic values prevail. The role of academic management is to support the basic activities, to enhance and protect the common interests of the faculty and to execute the will of the faculty members. Basically, the model is bottom-up, which is in sharp contrast to the top-down (business) model that underlies the Dutch MUB. A university is not a firm, however; it does not work for shareholders, it works in the support of science.

Clearly, the bottom-up model can work (or work well) only if it makes sense to speak of “the will of the faculty”. Only if the faculty agrees on the goal, will the executive know what to do. Competition and mobility help US universities to solve this problem. American universities are, at all levels in the pyramid, to a certain extent, one-dimensional communities. There are large differences in quality *between* universities and the hierarchy is steep, but there is assortative matching: *within* a school, quality differences are much smaller than across schools. Remarkably, at the level of the individual researcher/teacher, there is upward mobility, but little downward mobility. Hiring is cautious and selective, and it takes a long time before a person gets tenure. This ensures relative homogeneity of quality within each school, which makes it (relatively) easy to agree on common goals.

In the US, within each School, everybody agrees on the goal: to perform as well as possible on the core activities. Equally important, everybody also contributes to the public good: management tasks have to be done and are evaluated by how well they support the basic activities, but they do not create distinction. Ultimately what counts is the extent to which one is an inspiring teacher and/or creative researcher. All faculty members are expected to continue to be productive at the core tasks. The only thing that counts is being an inspiring teacher and a creative researcher. Of course, older people may be inspiring

and creative in different ways, but one still looks at the core activities. The pressure remains on, but it is a pressure that is enjoyed as people are intrinsically motivated. Within each single school or university, there are clear norms for what it means to do well and what is required to remain in good standing; there are no career paths for others. There are no administrative tracks that convey prestige, and people leave out of their own initiative, when it becomes unpleasant to be in an environment where one feels one does not belong.

As compared to the US, competition is blunted in Europe, including the Netherlands. If it works well, competition rewards quality and punishes inefficiency. Where competition works less well, good governance becomes more important. It is important not only internally, but throughout the system. In the Netherlands, competition is “managed” through NWO. It is not clear that this system works to reward quality, as there is a lot of randomness in the decisions. The university administrators (Rector and Deans) should be responsible for ensuring that NWO functions well and that there is a level playing field, with the best researchers of Tilburg University getting grants in proportion to their quality. It is not clear that this presently is the case.

Absent intense and well-functioning competition on the market, a university can impose discipline on itself by adopting ambitious and clear goals. There should be an attitude of asking, in relation to each activity, what will this contribute to the ultimate goal? Important is also that the administration should support and not stand in the way. The attitude should be one of willing to serve; administrative values are subordinate to academic values, and everybody should realize that.

## **6. Threats and difficulties for implementing the “US Model” in Tilburg**

Can this “US Model” be implemented in Tilburg? Why not? I believe that we have enough ambitious academics around who want this and who would like to see this implemented. I admit, however, that I did not check this assumption. Clearly, I would be very disappointed if this premise turned out to be wrong and if the majority (or a sizeable minority) of researchers at TiU would prefer “a quiet life” to being a successful scientist. I also agree that there are some challenges and threats, and hurdles that have to be overcome.

A major challenge is that we are far from having the community culture that exists in top universities in the US. We have excellent academics, but they (rationally) decide not to mingle in the University politics. We do not have discussions on the academic values that guide us, without knowing why. Is it because we all share the same values and, hence, there is no need to discuss, or is it that we have very diverse values, so that it is too painful to discuss? Furthermore, as far as management is concerned, as long as the bureaucracy continues to dominate, a single individual will not be able to make a difference. Collective action, however, can make a difference, provided that those in power allow it to happen.

The formal power rests with the Supervisory Board and the Executive Board. It is hard to see why the Supervisory Board could not renew itself to make the change –an improvement- possible. Similarly, I do not see why the Executive Board should not be supportive. In essence, I do not question their ambition, but their vision. If we all agree on the goal, then we should also agree on the strategy when there is a single, distinguished instrument to reach that goal. As stated before, if people want to block improvement, they should motivate why.

A second challenge is whether there are enough academics with leadership capabilities to man the respective positions. Although, I am optimistic, I cannot answer this question as I have too little information. More precisely, I do not know how to explain that Tilburg University currently is not performing (much) better: is it because we have imposed too many bureaucratic restrictions on ourselves, or because the deans lack vision, or because the deans do not agree? Or, are we doing really well, but I am misinformed?; hence, does TiU only have a problem in marketing its research results? On the basis of my own personal experience (as director of TILEC), I certainly put considerable weight on the first explanation. I have experienced that, as academic director, one gets tied up in so many inessential things that one no longer has the energy to do those things that really make a difference. No doubt, this was also because of my own personal characteristics, but I have also heard other people complain about it, and I also know that good people have left Tilburg University exactly for this reason. In any case, to draw good academics (temporarily and part-time) into management positions, it seems that it should be made easier to really make a difference in these positions.

If the deans do not agree, the question is whether they disagree on fundamental aspects or on other things. It makes a big difference whether the underlying reason for underperformance is lack of agreement on the goal, or lack of energy to change the situation. The latter can be overcome. If the former is the case, then the question is whether or not the Schools represented by these deans have different goals or different value systems. If the latter is the case, Tilburg University might be in really serious trouble.

At the time of writing, apart from the Strategic Plan of Tilburg University, I only have access to those of TISEM and TLS. Even a superficial reader will notice how different these are. While the TISEM plan basically ignores the Strategic Plan of the University, the one of TLS is fully in line with it. Whereas TISEM focuses on the vertical dimension (within our core domain, it does not matter *what* we do as long as we do it (very) *well*), TLS focuses exclusively on the horizontal one (the *type* of activities). This is a big difference, which must be related to the underlying values. I am not in a position to say much more on this, but I think it should be addressed by the deans and the Executive Board. At the risk of exaggerating, let me state that there are two (extreme) ways to proceed: either one does agree on doing certain things and doing all this well, or one simply ignores the differences and accepts the risk of one School becoming irrelevant and the other non-scientific. Neither of these extremes makes doing interdisciplinary research very attractive. If I look at the uninformed and nonsensical views on multidisciplinary research exposed in the University's Strategic Plan, I am pessimistic about the Executive Board's ability to see any problem here, let alone to find a good solution to it.

The difference in emphasis (focus or quality) is not the only difference between the Strategic Plans of TLS and TISEM. Another important difference is with respect to valorization of research. Whereas TISEM sees valorization as an (inevitable) by-product of good academic research, TLS seems to see it as being of independent value. The latter is in line with the Strategic Plan of the University, which has smuggled in valorization as a primary activity, in addition to research and teaching (p. 10). This is not only being dishonest (as valorization is not explicitly mentioned as one of the five choices that is made), but it is also a very debatable choice; one that, furthermore, is not supported by all

Schools. Given all the “quasi-academic” nonsense that is written in the Strategic Plan,<sup>14</sup> I cannot see the *real authority* of the Executive Board to impose such a choice on the members of the research community (although it may have the formal authority, whatever that may mean.) On this aspect, I fully support TISEM’s position. I think it is possible to do research that is both academically path-breaking and societal relevant, but I am also convinced that research cannot be societal relevant if it is not scientifically sound, and that scholars who are not able to do original research of high quality might impose more of a threat to society than an opportunity. Without a solid scientific foundation, valorization is impossible.

To me, admitting valorization as an independent primary activity is a great threat. There are other threats and challenges as well. Change is easiest when the outside environment is supportive. It is not clear at present whether, with funding coming from NWO and the government having a short-term vision, this is the case. Unfortunately, NWO is also putting undue weight on valorization.

## **7. The key questions**

Throughout this paper, I stressed two fundamental questions, which in my view are urgent for Tilburg University to answer:

1. What are the goals of Tilburg University? What does TiU want to accomplish?
2. What are the scientific values that Tilburg University stands for?

I cannot answer these questions for the University, but I can at least indicate what answers I would give when I would be asked.

### ***7.1 Goals in General***

I think there will be little discussion that doing (excellent) academic (and societal relevant) research and providing stimulating (and useful) education are the two core activities of the university. I stress that I do not mean to say that all research should be directly relevant for society; if that would be the interpretation, I would skip the “societal relevance” from the previous sentence. The relevance may be indirect, and can possibly be

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<sup>14</sup> I am referring here to the complete Strategic Plan that is available on Intranet, and not to the abbreviated version that has been published in hard-copy.

judged only long after the research was conducted. A similar remark applies to the usefulness in relation to education.

### ***7.2 Goals for Research***

The goal is clear: to shift the frontier of knowledge. I have already discussed this extensively in Section 2.

Whether valorization of research should be a core activity, separate from research, is a question that requires serious academic debate. As indicated above, my own position is in line with the one of TISEM: valorization is a (possible) inherent aspect of doing academic research; it should not be viewed as a separate core activity. In any case, not all researchers should be forced into valorization.

My arguments for this position are two-fold. The first is that valorization focusses on the short-term while much academic research is for the long-term and takes time to mature. Research leads to other research that ultimately may be valorized; as far as I know, there is no evidence that “direct valorization” is more beneficial for society than “indirect valorization.” It should also not be forgotten that what has given rise to the demand for valorization is the “knowledge paradox”, the fact that, although European research is very good, it is not taken-up that much by European industry users or the government sector. It is too easy to put the blame for this mismatch solely on the supply side and it should also not be forgotten that there is no knowledge paradox in the US. In the US, valorization is not a core activity for universities, but there are no problems with valorization.

The second argument is that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, universities are the *only* place where research for the long-term is done; as such, they have a special responsibility for such research. I think that a university researcher may, or may not be, best placed to valorize research, and that many will be inclined to it, given adequate incentives. However, I also and strongly believe that a person who cannot do creative research should not be hired by a university, no matter how good he or she may be at valorization. Similarly, an academic who is good at popularizing research but is not able to do original research himself should not be viewed as having added value for the University. Likewise, a person who is very good at providing guidance to what is happening in the world (and, in particular, in the

economy or in the business sector), no matter how valuable as a social service, should not be paid by the University if the person is not doing original research. The point is simple: academic research and the teaching of research methods (with advanced applications) are the only activities that are reserved for universities. These are the core activities and the university only pays for these; other activities can better be done elsewhere.

### ***7.3 Goals for Education***

What about education? There is no denying that nowadays university education is for the masses: most students will spend at most 5 years at the university. What should they remember from their time at the university, other than dating, drinking parties, sports and personal friendships?

In my view, students should learn that they can make a difference; that they can accomplish certain things if they try; and that relaxing is more pleasurable if one has a feeling of accomplishment. In addition, they should learn an attitude; they should learn to appreciate academic values, and should remember that they learned a method; “the” scientific method. They should have internalized that method and have used it, and be able to use it in the future, in order to acquire advanced knowledge in a certain domain. They should know that they should always be critical and that much of what is said or written is “social talk” that does not survive serious scrutiny. They should remember that they learned insights that they did not have before, and that these insights are useful. They should know “the” scientific method and that it may reveal novel truths; that applying that method may be hard, but that it is the best method (for finding the truth, or for what works) that we have, and that it can be used by everybody, now and in the future. They should know that it is good to be modest, but that one also can be confident. Knowledge is always tentative and there is always more to learn, but we have the ability to do so, and should indeed do it. Students should feel proud and privileged that they had the opportunity to spend some time at the university and that the investment of time was worth it.

The Strategic Plan 2014-2017 states that “Teaching at Tilburg University is research-based and research-driven. This means that our lecturers incorporate the latest scientific findings into the education process and involve students into setting up and conducting

research.” (p. 12). I am all in favor of the latter, but very critical of the former, as the latest scientific findings are by no means those that are most useful (or most easily useable) for students and since a focus on recent findings prevents students from acquiring an overview and presents a barrier for critical reflection on the own field. For the vast majority of students, university education is a kind of advanced elementary education. Similar to learning how to count and add at elementary school, one learns techniques that will be useful in later life and that, indeed, will (or should) be used. The current system indeed teaches techniques and insights, but it does not guarantee that these will be used. I think there should be more emphasis, especially in the Master Programs, on usability. I am in favor of teaching being research-based (how could it be different?), but I do not think it should be research-driven; I think that more can be achieved if teaching sparks curiosity and is curiosity-driven. From my readings of University and School documents, I can only conclude that there is no clear vision on these points, and that maybe they are not even approached with an academic attitude.

Some students are special. They participate in Honors Programs, or other extra-curricular activities, or they participate in Research Master, or PhD-programs. For a teacher, it is a privilege to interact with such students and they deserve special attention. Through working in smaller groups, these students can benefit from closer contacts with their teachers and fellow students. It is these students that are especially privileged, and they should come to realize this. Many do. Nevertheless, the University does not always make clear to these students how privileged they are to be allowed to interact so closely with their teachers. To put it bluntly, in its own Honors Program, Tilburg University does not counter adequately the idea that what is gotten (almost) for free cannot be very valuable. I think that many students will agree with me that the University could challenge them more.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Recently it was announced that Gerard Sanderink, owner of IT-company Centric will leave his fortune (estimated at about €500 million) to Twente University. He says “Als ik terugkijk op mijn eigen studententijd denk ik dat het heel belangrijk is dat goede studenten zich volledig aan hun studie kunnen wijden. (...) Wat wij nodig hebben zijn studenten die het ver willen schoppen en die daar veel voor over hebben. Die wil ik ondersteunen” (Brabants Dagblad, 14 March, 2014). I think that Tilburg University needs the same type of students and should try to attract these.

#### *7.4 Scientific Values*

What are the scientific values that Tilburg University stands for? As far as I know, the University has not explicitly answered this question. It has to be admitted that it is a difficult one, but this is no excuse for avoiding it.<sup>16</sup> From the actions of the University administrators, one can gauge some of their answers, for example, that valorization or popularization should be valued more than creativity, or that bureaucratic management should get more weight than academic freedom. Indeed, such a reaction from administrators is only natural, as research itself may be too specialized or too complicated to be understood and to be appreciated. As a consequence, marginal phenomena are considered more important than core business. At least, that is the trend that I perceive. In my view, this trend should be reversed as quickly as possible.

A university is a community of scholars and pupils. Its core values should be the core scientific values. Tilburg University focuses on social science and the humanities. Social science is mainly positive and discovers regularities about the world in which we live. Often such insights are only acquired after hard and long work. Tentative insights may not be robust, and may be misleading. Social scientists should not be encouraged to share such insights prematurely; they should not be induced to mix science with speculation or value judgment. They should be evaluated as they are evaluated by their (disciplinary) peers. The humanities are more normative, and deal with difficult questions about “what should be?”. The scientific methods in this domain are very different; there is more focus on discourse, and, again, the answers, frequently, are tentative. In some sense, the methods and the answers are less “hard” than in the sciences and some social sciences. Differences should be respected. Nevertheless, the way to evaluate scholars and activities is the same in the humanities as in social science.

Scientific values show up in how one answers two important questions: (i) how to separate science from non-science?; (ii) how to separate good science from bad? This is not the place to deal extensively with these questions; they deserve much more extensive treatment. Nevertheless, it is useful to recall that a scientific statement is not just an

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<sup>16</sup> See footnote 2 and parts of Section 3.

opinion<sup>17</sup> and that not every intellectual is a scientist, or vice versa. Speculation may be useful, but it is not scientific, even if it is informed speculation. To clarify, it may be useful to make a distinction between serious researchers and *Roepoeters*. Serious researchers are researchers who are taken serious by (sufficiently many) other serious researchers, or are Nobel Prize winners. *Roepoeters* are able to attract the attention of the outside world or the popular media. Both types of persons may be very useful for society. In the first instance, however, the university is the home of the serious researchers, and those that aspire, and have the ability to become serious researchers. Some of these serious researchers may be *Roepoeters*, which is no problem as long as they remain serious researchers who are committed to scientific values. However, long before they turn into “Dr. Klavans” they should be reminded of academic values and of their academic duties. The University should praise *Roepoeters* only when they are serious scientists. The University should know and recognize the differences between the various categories. When a serious researcher criticizes a *Roepoeter* for having forgotten his scientific roots, the university should not intervene to protect the latter.

## **8. An Action Plan**

One need only agree with a very small part of the foregoing analysis (in fact, one can completely disagree with the opinions that I gave and the value statements that I made), and still conclude that there is much work to do at Tilburg University, and that there are other, more important priorities than those listed in the Strategic Plan 2014-2017. In this section, I list the most important action points as I currently see them.

### ***1. Reorient Tilburg University by putting science and academics first and central***

To accomplish this, many things actually need to change. For one, the separate administrative hierarchy (with people from the administrative staff being managed and directed by other administrative staff) should be abolished. Support staff works to support the academic staff; therefore, as a rule, only the academic staff can direct.<sup>18</sup> Related, TiU

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<sup>17</sup> Even if our King seems to think (or has thought) differently; <http://www.ius.org/nieuws.php?action=fullnews&id=307>

<sup>18</sup> As with any rule, exceptions are possible. For example, to support the core activities, excellent facilities for sports, culture, recreation and food and drinks should be available. While these are essential, they can be separated from research and teaching. In these cases, academics do not need to direct, but they should have an important say in the matter. Core activities can only be directed by academics.

should acknowledge that the *real* authority rests with the researchers working at the university and that this should be reflected in also giving them *formal* authority.

## ***2. Identify the “will of the academics of TiU” and follow that will***

This is also part of the reorientation mentioned above: rather than following a top-down process (as, for example, was the case with the Strategy 2014-2017), a bottom-up one should be followed. This identification will also reveal whether the TiU researchers indeed aim to be world-leading in the social sciences and the humanities. Thirdly, it can contribute to create a corporate spirit and culture.

## ***3. Adopt clear goals and high ambition levels***

Clear goals are necessary to know where you stand and what you should be doing. It also allows an evaluation of the activities that the University currently undertakes and abolishing those that are not directly related to the core mission. High ambition levels are necessary to remain focused and avoid complacency.

## ***4. Make explicit the academic values underlying the goals and activities***

Having the values explicit avoids conflicts and discussions and protects the reputation, both of individual researchers, and the collective reputation of the University. Tilburg University is lagging far behind in this domain. The focus currently is on avoiding scandals and excesses such as those in the case of Stapel, but these are minimal conditions; they just demarcate fraud from honest behavior. As argued in section 7, academic values go much further; a university also needs to know how to separate science from non-science, and how to separate good science from bad. It should appreciate only what is based on good science.

## ***5. Act in accordance with the academic values***

In essence this amounts to praising and rewarding according to the underlying values. In some of its actions, the University currently signals that it values more the people that actively participate in public debate or in valorization than the researchers who stay in the ivory tower, but who, monitored and inspired only by other scientists throughout the world, work diligently on long-term solutions to important problems. Not knowing the University's values, I do not know whether this is this because the University's values are

like this, or because the University administrators are not or insufficiently aware of the value of these pure scientific contributions. If TiU acts on the previous issue I will know. Having values explicit is necessary, however, not sufficient for acting upon these values.

#### ***6. Manage Diversity***

There are at least two dimensions to diversity. One is at the horizontal level, corresponding to the different Schools of TiU; the other is at the vertical level, corresponding to quality. The first deals with mutidisciplinarity and the question of how to create value by exploiting complementarities. Currently, the TiU does not have a vision on this; it naively assumes that, whenever complementarities exist, they will be exploited by miracle. The second aspect is even more important. I conjecture that quality differences in science are larger than those in professional soccer, hence, that the ratio could easily be something like 100:1. Although this does not imply that the ratio is this large in Tilburg, it does imply at least two things: (i) differences should be acknowledged, respected and made use of, (ii) over time, the ambition should be to reduce the quality-difference ratio. As leading researchers typically are better informed (among others as a result of having better contacts) and have a better or more penetrating vision, it also follows that their opinions should be given a higher weight in decision making processes.

#### ***7. Have clear task descriptions, make everybody accountable for his/her tasks and assign all important tasks unambiguously***

Ultimately, only people can be taken to task. If the University has goals, it is the persons in the University that have to achieve them. Therefore, persons need to have clear tasks. Moreover, everybody needs to be accountable to the University. Obviously, while recognizing that there are some “public tasks” that should be allocated fairly, everybody should focus on the core tasks as much as possible. For some tasks, responsibility currently is not uniquely assigned. In such cases, there is the risk of the bystander problem, or the free rider problem. To avoid these problems, there should be a clear assignment of final responsibility.

#### ***8. Science-based management, including evaluation***

As a scientific research institute, the university should be managed by using state-of-the-art scientific insights. This implies that actions should be taken only after thorough

analysis and that action plans should always be evaluated according to scientific criteria. In order to allow for scientific analysis and evaluation, the University should make more work of systematic data collection and intelligence.

### ***9. Improve the work climate***

This point is really an application of the previous one. Research shows that a good work climate contributes significantly to creativity and productivity.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, to reach its goals, the University needs to create an optimal work climate. This includes granting all the benefits that are associated with academic freedom. It goes without saying that such freedom comes with significant responsibilities, which follow from the academic values. Importantly, it should not be forgotten that a major factor determining the quality of the work climate is the number of original ideas that are “in the air”. A high quality academic staff generates more stimulating ideas and makes it easier to attract other high quality researchers; the higher the existing quality, the lower the salaries that are needed to attract good additions.

### ***10. Change the governance structure and the composition of the Supervisory Board***

This follows from everything that has been written in this paper. More use should be made of the insights of the leading researchers. The Supervisory Board should consist of experts in the field of higher education and research, and should preferably be dominated by alumni of the University.

## **9. Conclusion**

Society can insist that universities be productive; only productive universities deserve to survive. Aghion et al. (2010)<sup>20</sup> show that that autonomy and competition, *combined*, enhance university productivity, but they also argue that autonomy *alone* may be counterproductive. They write: “Frontier research is a complex thing that a university can only pursue effectively if it has the discretion to direct resources towards what it believes are the most promising paths”. Competition helps in identifying these most promising paths, among others by punishing those universities that lose their way and deviate from

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<sup>19</sup> For some references, see Eric van Damme “Gelukkig aan het werk”, *ESB*, 99 (4683), 18 april 2014, 239.

<sup>20</sup> *Supra*, note 13.

the right track. Autonomy increases risk; it allows following many paths, including the most promising ones, but also those that reach dead-ends.

Where a university ends up depends on who has authority. Masten (2014)<sup>21</sup> shows that performance (productivity) of universities is positively correlated with faculty authority. As he argues, this is quite natural. Administrators lack the relevant knowledge, hence, they cannot judge research quality and cannot identify the most promising research paths. With research becoming more important as *the* factor with which a university can distinguish itself, the relative competence to make decisions shifts from administration to faculty. Hence, to do well, authority should shift in the same direction. At present, Tilburg University has considerable autonomy, but it does not have faculty authority. Theory and the available empirical evidence suggest that this combination is not viable.

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<sup>21</sup> S. Masten (2014) “The enterprise as community: firms, towns and universities”, in A. Grandori (ed.), *Handbook of Economic Organization*, Edward Elgar Publishing; [http://www.e-elgar.co.uk/bookentry\\_main.lasso?id=14110](http://www.e-elgar.co.uk/bookentry_main.lasso?id=14110)