

“RESEARCHERS FIRST, FOR A BETTER TiU” EIGHT MONTHS LATER

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On June 18, we started the petition “Put Researchers First for a Better TiU” (henceforth referred to as the Petition), which can be traced back to a meeting that took place on March 7 this year.² In this meeting, a larger group of academic scholars concerned about the future of Tilburg University came together to discuss questions such as: What is a good university? What is good leadership? What is good science? More than eight months have passed since this meeting took place and it is now time to stake stock of what happened since.

The Petition was addressed to the Executive Board (and managers) of TiU. However, the Petition also made an appeal to other employees of TiU, in particular to the academics. The Petition states: “We are worried by researchers no longer bothering about the public good and increasingly focusing exclusively on their individual work, because they think that nothing will change in any case. We fear a trend of researchers increasingly turning their back on the management, with bad consequences both for the management and the academic climate.” In 2013, the discussion meetings on the new “TiU Strategic Plan 2014-2017” only attracted few academics. The same is true for the discussion meetings on the new TiU education profile that were organized in the fall of this year. We see that many people, throughout the University, are concerned about this, but have given up hope that they can actually change the way things are going. This paper is addressed to all those that are working at TiU, managers, support staff and academics. By publishing this paper, we hope to generate and regenerate ideas on how TiU can

* The text of this document was finalized on 20 November 2014 and has not been modified to take into account developments since then. On 20 November, Philip Eijlander announced that he will step down as Rector because of health reasons. On 21 November, Koen Becking and Eric van Damme met to discuss how to proceed, following the Petition. (The invitation had been sent by Koen on the 13th.) Koen explained that there had not been time to meet the initiators on November 4. On 26 November, the Executive Board of TiU requested Academic Forum to organize a debate around the issues raised by the Petition in the spring of 2015 and asked to be kept informed about the progress. This footnote was added on 30 November.

¹ This footnote was added on 31 December 2014. It replaces footnote 2 of the November 30 version, which has been dropped at the request of the two initiators of the Petition from June that are not authors of this paper. That footnote explained why they did not co-author this paper. No other changes have been made.

² The Petition, which can be found at <http://www.change.org/p/executive-board-of-tilburg-university-put-researchers-first-for-a-better-tilburg-university>, was signed by 161 persons before it was closed on July 3. The text of the Petition: “We request the Executive Board of TiU, and indeed the managers of TiU at all levels, to take into account more what the researchers of TiU have to say and to act more in the interest of these researchers as we believe that, if they do, TiU will perform better on its core tasks and serve society better.”

become the inspiring place it could and should be, and to stimulate discussion on these ideas. Clearly, people may have different ideas on any given point and, given a forum, this might invigorate both the discussion and the move forward.

Although we certainly do not want to claim any credit for them, we are definitely very much encouraged by such recent positive developments as the presence of TiU International in the University Council, the report of the TiU action team on a vision on education, the “Report Task Force Student Enrollment” by Jaap Abbring and Bart Bronnenberg that diagnoses the unfavorable development in student numbers at TiSEM, and the analysis of Niels Noorderhaven, Rik Pieters, Arthur van Soest, Arjen van Witteloostuijn and Patricia van der Kammen of TiSEM-level financial future scenarios. These all illustrate our main point that a more active involvement of academics in (supporting the) administration can bring much good. Note that we are not saying that we fully endorse all proposals of these committees; that cannot be expected. Indeed, we disagree with some specific proposals, for example, concerning the details of the education profile.³ However, we applaud that high-quality academics are involved, that their work sheds light on the issues at hand, and that wide discussion on their proposals is encouraged. But still, much remains to be done to realize the expressed preference of many for a more active involvement of academics. We regret that not more open discussion is taking place. In particular, we note that our Petition has not yet led to open discussions at TiU, although it clearly raises issues that deserve urgent university-wide discussion. This document is yet another attempt to trigger that discussion across our community.

Thus far, we ourselves did not take this discussion forward. We had hoped that University management would take the initiative. The President of TiU asked us not to discuss publicly via the media during the summer. In a meeting that we had with him on July 14, we agreed on University-wide discussions after the summer and we were promised that we would get “a position in the debate”. However, this open debate has not started yet. After the summer, the initiators of the Petition met a few times to discuss the initial responses to the Petition (see below) and on how to proceed. Although we did not agree on all points, we definitely do agree that more action is needed, that adequate action can only result following open discussion, and that such discussion is urgent. The four authors of this paper believe that the discussion can

³ For the arguments of one of us (Eric van Damme), see the “Comments on the proposed “Tilburg Education Profile”” that was mailed to the chair of the action committee and the Rector on 30 October 2014. Similar concerns have been raised by other academics.

benefit from a second attempt at a jump-start. This discussion paper aims to serve that purpose. It describes our current thoughts, but definitely is not intended as the final word. Rather, we hope that now, at last, a campus-wide exchange of arguments will be launched, to the benefit of us all.

This document first restates our main aims and worries. Next, we discuss the initial responses to our Petition, which, in our view, only strengthen our case. After having put the Petition in a broader context, we then make proposals on how to make progress on the “TiU Strategic Plan 2014-2017”, after which we mention some other strategic issues that, we think, should be discussed as well.

Aim and main worries

The main worries that were expressed in the March meeting and in the Petition were:

- i) a (perceived) growing distance between management and academics at the University;
- ii) with central management running the University mainly as if it were a firm (or a bureaucracy), trying to strengthen its grips on the University through its efforts (partially justified) to create unity and uniformity;
- iii) with these actions missing a clear direction and displaying an ambition level that is lower than the one of the leading academics at the University;
- iv) with a lack of effective cooperation between academics and support staff, with the latter seeming to get more influence on the direction and the functioning of the University, rather than sticking to its main function of facilitating – and hence being subordinate to – the primary processes;
- v) with academic values being squeezed as a result of all of this.

The aim of the Petition was to signal these worries and to plead for a reversal of the (perceived) trend. The Petition makes a plea to restore the idea of the university as a community, including the integrity of research and management, with support staff exclusively devoted to serving the primary processes. The Petition argued to strengthen and protect the academic values by making them explicit, recognizing that a university is first and foremost a community of scholars and students, and that all that a university does should be evaluated by the contribution that it makes to science and education: researchers (and students) first for a better understanding of society.

A colleague from TLS has expressed our worries better and more succinctly than we ourselves had done. As he argued, our discontent corresponds to one that characterizes professional organizations in a modern society more broadly, a discontent that results from the separation of formal and real authority at the university – from the separation of “macht” (power; held by management) from “gezag” (authority; held by academics).⁴ Our aim is to undo this separation. Of course, this can only be achieved if academics want it and contribute actively to achieving it; the saying “*Elk volk heeft de regering die het verdient*” applies.⁵ If each academic focuses exclusively on her or his own career, and academics do not take their responsibility with respect to the public good, then the void will be filled by non-academics. As we wrote, we strongly believe that a university can do well only if also high-quality academics contribute to the public good of good management. With some important exceptions (such as those mentioned above), the important changes are yet to come. For this to happen, there also has to be a proactive stance by the Supervisory Board of TiU, the Executive Board of TiU and by the Deans.

Follow-up to the Petition: unfortunate misunderstandings and invalid arguments

We very much appreciate to have been invited by the Board of TLS to share and discuss our ideas with them and with the Heads of Departments of the School. Our Petition has also been taken seriously by the Supervisory Board of TiU, the Executive Board of TiU and by the Deans, and we have had discussions with representatives from each of these bodies. However, there has not yet been an adequate response – at least, we have not yet seen it. There may have been discussions behind closed doors, but there have not been open discussions.

Throughout the University community, a dominant response has been that the Petition instrument should not have been used, as it should have been clear to us that it could only damage TiU’s reputation. While we acknowledge that we underestimated the effect of the Internet and apologize for statements that may have been (or were interpreted as being) too personal, we wholeheartedly disagree. What damages a university’s reputation is the absence of critical discussion, not the fact that there are different views and that these are openly discussed.

⁴ See Philippe Aghion and Jean Tirole “Formal and real authority in organizations”, *Journal of Political Economy*, 105(1), (1997), 1-29, for an insightful economic contribution to this issue.

⁵ This saying is attributed to Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859): In a democracy, the people get the government they deserve. The original is “*Toute nation a le gouvernement qu'elle merite*” (Joseph de Maistre, 1753-1821): every nation deserves the government that it deserves.

After we handed over the Petition and the list of signatures, we had discussions with the TiU President (Koen Becking) and with the Chair of the Supervisory Board (Jan Hommen). The latter showed a listening ear, but stressed that his task is one of supervising, not managing, and, hence, that he would be monitoring the management's responses. Koen Becking told us that he regretted very much the form that we had chosen to express our worries, but that he could support the general aims. As stated above, he also agreed to have open discussions at TiU after the summer. On September 9, we had a short (one hour) meeting with the Deans and the Executive Board to exchange views, and we were asked to leave our agendas free for another meeting on November 4.⁶ It was stressed that the chosen form was inappropriate, while it also became clear that several persons felt personally attacked, and in a manner that they deemed unjustified. It was never our intention to attack persons; rather, it is the structural failings that we wish to address. We regret that our wording seemingly was not succinct enough to prevent such unfortunate misunderstandings.

As far as substance is concerned, we have had no reactions of persons that fundamentally disagree with what we wrote. The large majority of responses have been supportive. Disagreements relate to misunderstandings or invoke arguments that fail to address our concerns. We will give examples of each to show why these responses actually strengthen our arguments, rather than weaken them.

Our Petition has been much misunderstood (for which we are largely to blame, and which we hope to correct with this document), and it has also been misrepresented. Some people have read "Researchers First" as "Research First (and Only)", but that, of course, is a very different message. For us, the ideal is of research and teaching to be integrated. It also goes without saying that it is research that distinguishes a university from schools of higher vocational training. In our documents, we stress quality differences, because this is a fact of life (some researchers are better – i.e., more creative and/or more productive – than others) and this needs to be taken into account and managed well. Rather than ignoring this fact, we think it should be used to the University's benefit.

⁶ Subsequently, we did not receive an invitation for such a meeting.

Our statement (in a national newspaper) that, as a rule, better researchers are also better teachers, has created commotion, but has not been refuted.⁷ There is (some) evidence in favor of this statement,⁸ – e.g., in work of Jan van Ours (for PhD-level teaching), and of Arthur van Soest (for students in Econometrics). In our view, what should be discussed are questions such as: What do we actually mean with the quality of a teacher or the quality of a course? Does TiU currently measure the quality of teaching?⁹ If we want to be more competitive on the student market and want to attract more, or better, students by offering high-quality teaching, what should we do? At the very least, our hypothesis directs attention to questions such as these.

We have heard the rather cynical argument “let the situation deteriorate” because then the growing disconnect between central-level management and academics on the work floor will lead to weak central management and, hence, allow the different Schools of TiU to do as they please. This is a real possibility, but we do not evaluate it favorably; it signals a (too) low ambition level. Allowing each School to do as it wants will not automatically lead to all Schools doing well. We are in one TiU together and, therefore, in our opinion, there needs to be a common (and high) ambition level. The weakest link has a strong impact on the overall University reputation.

What is the role of the Law (MUB) in this regard? It has been argued by some that the MUB does not contribute to the current disconnect between academic and support staff (as we had stated), but actually was meant to facilitate or enable integrated management. However, it does not really matter who is correct in this regard. If it is not the Law that encourages such disconnect and that leads to support staff having its own hierarchy, then it is our own management that has let it happen and has institutionalized it. Either way, action must be taken.

⁷ Damme, E. van, C. Fijnaut, M. Groenhuijsen, S. Lindenberg, A. van Witteloostuijn and A. de Zeeuw, “Visie? Bij ons op Tilburg University gaat het om geld” (Vision? At TiU, it is money that matters’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 11 juli 2014, p.16. The wording “De beste onderzoekers zijn de beste docenten” (The best researchers are the best teachers) may have given rise to misunderstandings. Clearly, at the individual level, it is easy to find counterexamples. However, it should have been clear that the statement was meant as a statistical one; after all, most of social science is about general (statistical) relationships, without denying the fact that much can be learned from individual cases.

⁸ Call it a hypothesis, if you prefer.

⁹ Quality is insight added to students, which TiU does not currently measure; hence, there is room for improvement.

It has also been argued that the Petition is emotional. True, it appeals to emotion as well as reason. However, the underlying analysis is analytical and rational. What is emotional is the urgency of the appeal to all members of the academic community to care and not be paralyzed by the seemingly rigid structures around them – structures in which many of them cannot recognize an acknowledgement of their academic identity.

Reflecting on the responses and University policies more generally, one thing stands out: the need for all members of the academic community to ask the right questions and to be open to factual, scientific arguments that are brought to bear on the issues. We all have our opinions, but there seems little hard information. How do we evaluate the performance of TiU? Did TiU do the good things? Did it achieve what it could have achieved? If not, why not? The strong impression is that there are many things we do not know and that TiU should devote much more attention to evaluating its performance ex post.

Background: the wider discontent and its neglect

Our Petition is not an isolated signal; it should be seen as one of the expressions of discontent about the current governance and functioning of universities and professional organizations more generally. Similar concerns to ours have been voiced in other sectors, as well as at other universities. The discussion is not restricted to the Netherlands. The concerns are also not new. For example, De Beus et al. (2009) already complained about disconnect five years ago, arguing in particular that the Rector should be the leader of a university and that the Rector should be elected by the academic staff.¹⁰ As they wrote:

“Nu ligt de macht vooral bij de voorzitter van het college van bestuur (...). De rector magnificus vertegenwoordigt de wetenschap, maar is ondergeschikt aan deze bestuurder. Het wordt hoog tijd dat de macht terugkeert naar de wetenschap. (...) Het is onze wens de universiteit te herstellen als eigen cultuurkring waarin studenten onder leiding van geïnspireerde wetenschapsbeoefenaren zich laven aan alle kennis die de wetenschappen te bieden hebben, waar de onderzoekers zich betrokken voelen bij het wel en wee van ‘hun universiteit’, en waar de rector

¹⁰ Jos de Beus, Arjo Klamer and Harmen Verbruggen: “Universitaire bestuurders zijn losgeraakt van de wetenschap” (University administrators have become detached from science), *NRC Handelsblad*, 2 september, 2009.

gestalte geeft aan een gemeenschap van getalenteerde en eigenzinnige waarheidszoekers.”¹¹

Their wish is the same as ours; hence, our arguments are not new. Also the argument that a university should not be managed as a firm is not new.¹² However, thus far, no action has been taken, with the consequence that the discontent has remained; in fact, it has increased. The pressure is mounting. Recently, in the Netherlands, several new initiatives appeared. A common element in these bottom-up initiatives is the discontent with the governance of Dutch universities, and the separation of formal power from real authority.

One such recent initiative originates with Willem Halffman (Nijmegen) and Hans Radder (Groningen) who have written about “The University in Crisis” and who established the “Platform for the Reform of Dutch Universities (H.NU)” in 2013.¹³ Earlier this year, Ad Verbrugge and Jelle van Baardwijk (VU) published the book “Waartoe is de universiteit op aarde-wat is er mis en hoe kan het beter?” (What are universities for? What is wrong and how can it be improved?), which has attracted quite some attention.¹⁴ The platform “Science in Transition”, that exists since 2013, has addressed broader issues related to the functioning of the scientific system and the negative effects of strong publication pressure.¹⁵ We repeat that, although there has been discussion, there has not yet been enough action. Without action, the complaints will continue to resurface, as the problems are real and do not vanish by themselves.

At Tilburg University, thus far, there has not even been open discussion. As stated, we perceive that this is because there is some fear (at least on the side of management) to discuss such fundamental matters. In our view, at TiU, there is all the more reason to discuss and to take action. The way TiU has thus far dealt with integrity issues provides a good illustration. The University did well in the immediate management of the “Stapel Affaire”, and it is to be

¹¹ “Currently, the power is primarily in the hands of the Chair of the Executive Board (...). The Rector Magnificus represents the academic community, but is subordinate to this manager. It is high time that power returns to the academic community. (...) It is our wish to restore the university as our own cultural circle in which students under the leadership of inspiring academic scholars absorb all knowledge that the scientific community has to offer, in which researchers feel committed to the ups-and-downs of ‘their’ university, and in which the Rector gives shape to a community of talented and quirky finders of the truth.”

¹² Jaap Dronkers: “School als bedrijf is totaal verkeerd” (School as a company is totally wrong), *NRC Handelsblad*, 11 januari, 2011.

¹³ <http://platform-hnu.nl/goals-of-platform-h-nu/>

¹⁴ <https://www.uitgeverijboom.nl/boeken/algemeen/waartoe-is-de-universiteit-op-aarde-9789089534125/>

¹⁵ <http://www.scienceintransition.nl/>

congratulated for taking a firm stand, but it did next to nothing to address the deeper issues associated to it and did not even bother to send the Dutch Code of Scientific Practice (or a link to where that code can be found¹⁶) to the academic staff. It seems that, in this domain, the actions of university administrators are guided more by what the outside world demands than by what insiders expect; they are signals to the outside world that TiU is taking a stand, rather than being an integrated measure related to a TiU mission concerning the value of science.¹⁷ This is also illustrated by what happened to the recent initiative of the DJA (De Jonge Academie; The Young Academy) of the KNAW (Koninklijke Nederlandse Academie voor Wetenschappen; the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences) to have a play *Gewetenschap* about integrity dilemmas in science. The play is performed at all Dutch universities. At TiU, very little attention was devoted to this play, and at least one School did not actively advertise it, even though the School's management had been asked to do so. Accordingly, the number of academics attending the play was quite small, and the discussion afterwards quite limited, much smaller and more limited than at other Dutch universities where the same event was organized.

Although (fortunately, and a clear sign of our viability) there is a lot of discussion going on in the various academic seminars at TiU (about academic business as usual), there are hardly any open discussions on broader academic matters or on matters of scientific policy. There have not been fundamental discussions on what is the scientific mission of a university and the consequences that follow from that. When we met with the President in July, he told us there should be university-wide discussions on the matters that we raised, with, among others, involvement of Academic Forum (which is advertised on the TiU website as “the place for exchanging and closely studying current topics in science, society and people's life”). After the summer, however, these plans were put on hold, until the Executive Board had been able to discuss matters internally. This is where we still are. No debates are scheduled for this year. Hopefully, they will take place in 2015. Academic freedom is our highest value; accordingly, discussion should be encouraged at all times, even if it is it is rocking the boat.

¹⁶ [http://www.vsnul.nl/files/documenten/Domeinen/Onderzoek/Code_wetenschapsbeoefening_2004_\(2012\).pdf](http://www.vsnul.nl/files/documenten/Domeinen/Onderzoek/Code_wetenschapsbeoefening_2004_(2012).pdf)

¹⁷ In relation to the Code, the Executive Board has urged academic staff to report on outside jobs that are done on top of the university job, but it did nothing else. It is telling that the request was communicated by means of a mail of the President, not of the Rector.

The TiU Strategic Plan 2014-2017 and the need for an integrated scientific mission

Although the worries expressed in our Petition resonate with a broader sentiment in the Netherlands and abroad, there are also aspects that are specific to TiU. We already mentioned that one of our points in the Petition was the lack of ambition that we perceive.¹⁸ We note that the official documents of TiU only describe a very low ambition level: the by-laws of the Foundation behind TiU just state that the aim is to maintain an institution for scientific education in the region of Brabant. Most of academic staff wants much more than just that, and they would like to see their ambitions reflected in those of TiU, and in the actions that follow from these ambitions.

One immediate reason for starting the Petition was the new Strategic Plan 2014-2017 of TiU that was published in December 2013. During the meeting in March, it was generally perceived as being very weak, with it not making any real choices and not addressing the really important issues that TiU is facing. The criticism extended to the process that had been followed by the Executive Board, this leading to mainly support staff participating in the strategic discussions, with top researchers of TiU being absent. It was also noted that the mere fact that TiU produces a new Strategic Plan every four years is not a signal of vision or commitment. Hence, both the procedure and the Plan itself contradict the first important choice mentioned in the Strategic Plan: Quality Comes First. There is a more general issue here: what is said (or stated on paper) is not always the same as what is actually done, and this is very worrying.

Key is that the Executive Board of TiU has not clearly committed itself to a mission and an ambition level.¹⁹ Moving one level higher, the Supervisory Board has not communicated (to academics and support staff) what tasks have been assigned to the Executive Board. We believe that, in all organizations, management, at all levels, should be accountable, and we believe in 360 degrees feedback.²⁰ This holds with even more force for professional organizations. Lacking a clear mission and specific ambition levels, we have to infer these from the actions that are taken, but these sometimes make an erratic impression, and do not always signal a high

¹⁸ It has recently been claimed that this characterizes Dutch universities more generally; see “Universiteit is te snel tevreden” (“University is satisfied too quickly”), *Brabants Dagblad*, 30 August 2014.

¹⁹ On the importance of a good mission statement that is also integrated into the governance of the entire organization; see Julian Birkinshaw, Nicholas Foss and Siegwart Lindenberg “Combining Purpose with Profits” in the *MIT Sloan Management Review* (February 19, 2014).

²⁰ This does not mean that management should be tightly monitored and have (only) measurable performance targets, but that management is accountable to all around them – hence, also the academics.

ambition level. We consider this to be problematic. We would like to have clarity on what TiU wants in order to evaluate what it is doing and to know whether it deserves our support.

In particular, we call attention to the strong international orientation of many of our leading researchers *vis-à-vis* the almost exclusively local experience of administrators and heads of support staff.²¹ There is a world of difference, with neither side (probably) knowing much about the norms and conventions of the world in which the other lives. Such lack of common experience is kept alive by lack of interaction, which gives rise to frustration on both sides; it certainly does so at the academic one. There is a responsibility here of top management to see to it that those within their own ranks without much international experience are informed on how the international academic world functions. As our world is global, our outlook should be so as well.

From our discussions, we have learned that at least some Deans share our criticism on the Strategic Plan. We also know that the University Council was not happy with this document, but accepted it on the argument that it is better to have something than nothing at all. We have learned that such lack of agreement among TiU leadership is a reason for there not being clear choices in the Strategic Plan. Clearly, a situation of disagreement at the top cannot continue. For now, it seems to be almost unanimously accepted that the Strategic Plan can only be viewed as an outline; it should be made more specific as soon as possible.²² We give some leads below. Thereafter, we discuss some aspects that are not in the Strategic Plan, but that do need urgent attention as well. Again, we do not pretend to be correct all the time; rather, by stating positions, we hope to trigger a wide debate regarding the critical strategic issues our university is facing.

Quality comes first?

As will be clear, we fully agree that quality should come first. However, we have two concerns: (i) does it at present?; and (ii) what is quality? Concerning the first question: is it really true that TiU puts quality first? Look at the announcements that were made at the opening of the

²¹ Strikingly, although the University claims to be very internationally oriented, by far the majority of policy documents produced by central support staff are still written in Dutch.

²² A few follow-up documents have been or will be produced by task forces. However, we are not overly optimistic that this will up-lift the University's strategy very much. The valorization follow-up document is of unimpressive quality; the education document not only proposes four main characteristics (which should be discussed), but also gives many detailed recommendations that are not evidence-based; the BEST program is executed badly (see the main text); and the research document was still under production at the time of writing (but see footnote 31).

academic year, do the new initiatives put quality first? To focus thoughts, note that TiU has awarded its Center of Excellence label to four of its research institutes, but that none of these deal with Big Data or Entrepreneurship. If we look at the latter topics, can we claim that we are leading in these areas, even if we restrict attention to the Netherlands? If we are not yet leading, do we have the connections to develop TiU into a leading player in the future?²³

What is quality? We already remarked that TiU does not measure teaching quality. What about research quality? Do Schools agree on what counts as quality? Looking at the large differences between TiSEM and TLS, for example, we have every reason to doubt this, and then we have not even included the Humanities. It is clear to us that, if policies are to be developed at the central level, a first necessary requirement is that there is agreement on the definition of quality. It goes without saying that quality can only be determined by looking at actual content and that one should not overrate criteria that are simply easy to measure (such as numbers of publications or the H-factor)²⁴.

Valorization

The second priority according to the Strategic Plan 2014-2017 is to further develop “the Tilburg method of Social Innovation”, which should be interpreted as the intention to concentrate more strongly on urgent social issues. We have read the TiU policy documents on this matter and find them unbalanced. What is missing from these documents is mainly recognition of the fact that the most urgent problems may not be the ones that are most promising to be solved by scientific methods at this point in time. Here clearly the commitment to science as a value on its own is lacking. Most urgent is not the same as most important. In our opinion, it is especially in this area that academic input has been missing and we wonder to what extent academics can be, or will feel, committed to this priority.²⁵ In our view, a balanced approach should take into

²³ A small anecdote can help to focus thought. If there is one Big Player in Big Data, it is Google. Less than five years ago, the chief economist of Google visited the Netherlands and gave a presentation on “Nowcasting”, which refers to using the Big Data that Google has to predict what is going on in the economy now and what will happen in the near future. One of us (Eric van Damme) was invited and he approached others at TiU to find out whether there was an interest; no one at TiU showed interest in the topic then.

²⁴ For a discussion of these criteria with the empirical evidence on how they work see M. Osterloh and B.S. Frey (2014), “Ranking games”. *Evaluation Review* 1-28 DOI: 10.1177/0193841X14524957.

²⁵ This question can also be raised for the priorities related to education activities. The action team that was charged with initiating the discussion on a new TiU education profile writes in its report “The interviewees indicated that they are experiencing more and more pressure on their sense of professional responsibility. (...) the recently introduced performance targets and other measures have placed demands on teaching staff that the lecturers interviewed by the action team consider to be nonsensical.” See

account both desirability as well as feasibility. Again, it should be addressed to what extent, or in which fields, TiU has a sustainable (hence, strategic) advantage. It should also be acknowledged that TiU might be a latecomer to the field of social innovation, even in the Netherlands.

A second aspect that is missing from the TiU valorization documents that we have seen is attention to the question as to how TiU could itself make use of the research that TiU produces, or from the knowledge that researchers at TiU have. That the question “Could we make (better) use of our own research?” does not seem to be on the radar of the administrators is a clear signal of what is wrong at TiU. We think that TiU could benefit from administrators signaling their willingness to take research seriously – for example, by acting as an eager early adopter of what is produced by academics on campus.

Our final comment under this heading relates to the value of science more generally. We agree that science should be useful to society where it can, but we deem it dangerous to take the view that science only becomes valuable whenever “something” is done with it.²⁶ Valorization is a worthy aim, but not a criterion for good science.²⁷ We would like the Executive Board to take a stance for science itself, and to be firm about it.

<http://www.tilburguniversity.edu/web/intranet/organization/current-developments/creating-education-profile.htm>

We think that academics will not be willing to commit to things they consider nonsensical. Hence, university management should not commit to these things in the first place; if such commitments have to be entered into, because of external pressure, this can only be done after intensive discussions with those that have to implement them.

²⁶ The report “Publieke kennisinvesteringen en de waarde van wetenschap” (Public investment in knowledge and the value of science), KNAW (2013), identifies four different functions of science: contributing to the development of tradable products and services, contributing to the solutions of societal problems, signaling issues and getting these on the agenda, and contributing to a better understanding of the world. The report stresses that the value of science does not just derive from the first (or the first and second) function. See <https://www.knaw.nl/nl/actueel/publicaties/publieke-kennisinvesteringen-en-de-waarde-van-wetenschap>, where also a summary in English can be found.

²⁷ In a speech on the occasion of the opening of the current academic year, the State-Secretary for Science and Education stated “Wetenschap is geen doel op zich. Net zoals kunst pas kunst wordt als het wordt gezien, wordt kennis pas kennis als het wordt gedeeld.” (Science is not a goal in itself. Just as art becomes art only if it is seen, knowledge becomes knowledge only when it is shared’. He mentions sharing with students, societal organizations, firms and everybody who is just curious, but he does not explicitly mention other scientists. We think that this is an important omission, as scientific insights may require much further development by other scientists before being usable end products; see <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten-en-publicaties/toespraken/2014/09/01/opening-academisch-jaar-leiden.html>.

Networking

The third choice in the strategic Plan is to expand the network of the University. Again, this is a very generic action point. It should be realized that TiU is a very small university – and hence, that expanding the network will be relatively costly and might yield relatively little on a per-capita basis. The question, therefore, is whether this should be a priority at all. In any case, rather than expanding its network, the University would do well to reflect on how it can make better use of the existing networks of the academics working at the University.

Internationalization

The fourth choice is to build a sharper profile by building on our international orientation and our academic relations. We can repeat what we said above: this is not really a choice and it does not distinguish TiU from other universities. Perhaps even more importantly: is what the University actually does (strengthening its relations with TU/e by establishing a joint Graduate School in Den Bosch) consistent with what it states? Is moving to Den Bosch consistent with “Quality Comes First”, or does it rather diminish one of our key strengths, namely that we have a compact and beautiful green campus? We repeat that we think that also in this area the University could capitalize more on the international networks of its academic members, in particular since, in some Schools at least, a large fraction of the academics are non-Dutch. Related to this, one might also think about how the University can contribute to making the Tilburg area more attractive for our colleagues coming from abroad. In any case, the establishment of “TiU International” offers good opportunities to further develop TiU’s international profile.

A single effective university: the BEST program

The fifth priority in the Strategic Plan 2014-2017 is to create a more effective organization. Of course, this is an extremely important operational goal, but it is not something of strategic importance: every organization should aim to be effective (that is, to achieve its goals) and to be efficient (achieving its goals at low cost). Since the Strategic Plan was announced, most emphasis has been on this last priority, but then mainly in relation to the BEST-program, which

focuses on (the reorganization of) support staff.²⁸ In our opinion, there could (and should) also have been more attention for academic staff. For example, it is well known that people with higher overall life satisfaction are more productive, hence the question: what does TiU do (and what can it do) to increase the well-being of its workers? Is TiU using the most relevant academic insights in its HR-policies, benefiting from the high-quality academic HR expertise available on campus?²⁹

Returning to BEST, we note that no less than 13 working groups have been formed, which have all reported progress to a steering group. Soon we will know more.³⁰ As lack of effective cooperation between academics and support staff was one of our main worries, we are very interested in the developments in this domain; however, we do not have any recent substantive news. We only are aware of a decision-making procedure that is likely to cause trouble whenever decisions are made without seriously involving those academics that are most affected by the changes resulting from the implementation of the decisions. Moreover, we are not too optimistic about the outcome. We think that the project has made a wrong start and has been set-off in the wrong direction.

First, we wonder why 13 groups were needed, and we fear that this will lead to a cacophony of different views, from which the steering group will only be able to make a weak compromise. Second, we note that, in the steering group as well as in each of the 13 action teams, academics are in the minority, with the majority of the members coming from support staff. This does not guarantee that the interests of the primary processes will prevail. Third, and perhaps fatal, the guiding principles that have been formulated for the entire project (June 12, 2014) are sometimes conflicting with available evidence or scientific insights, which implies that the “first-best” is likely to be missed. In particular, although the principles talk about effectiveness

²⁸ For details on BEST, see <http://www.tilburguniversity.edu/intranet/organization/current-developments/building-excellent-support/>

²⁹ For an introduction to the literature, see Chapter 4 (“Geluk, werktevredenheid en productiviteit” (Happiness, job satisfaction and productivity)) in Ruut Veenhoven et al. (2014) *Het rendement van geluk (returns to happiness)*, <http://www.smo.nl/item/202/het-rendement-van-geluk/>. A lot is known about what makes academics happy and much can be learned from survey research at US colleges; for example, see the annual surveys at <http://chroniclegreatcolleges.com/>

³⁰ The importance of this operational goal, and the BEST program, should not be underestimated. Table 2 in the publication “Dutch Science and Technology Indicators, 2012” (<http://www.dialogic.nl/documents/2010.056-1235.pdf> see also www.wti2.nl) shows that, at TiU in 2011, 58.8% of all personnel (measured in fte) is academic personnel; at the TU/e in Eindhoven, it is 64.5%. The difference is remarkable, especially since one would expect a technical university to have more equipment, and hence to need more support staff. We have not seen international comparisons.

and efficiency, they do not clearly specify the goals to be reached, so that these terms are meaningless. Rather than focusing on the internal organization of support staff, the starting point could have been the interface (researchers and teachers) with the primary processes. Fourth, and this may be the most crucial point of all, the guidelines dictate that a separate hierarchy within support staff will be maintained, which conflicts with integral management and stands in the way of a support staff that is really oriented towards the primary processes. Unless support staff is oriented towards the primary processes, most problems will continue to be dealt with by administrative measures (such as documentation and publication requirements), rather than from the perspective of an integrated scientific mission. Finally, the guidelines mandate quick job rotation of support staff, even though it is known from evidence and practice that this may severely reduce the quality of support.

We regret that these restrictions were imposed *ex ante*, as they will prevent the overall goal (the first-best outcome: support staff that optimally facilitates primary processes) to be reached. There really should have been a critical impact assessment before embarking on such an important project. More generally, University management could benefit from making better use of scientific insights, as readily and widely available on campus. Again, an important endeavor is likely to generate counter-productive outcomes as a result of making the basic mistake of not giving the lead to the ones that form the core asset of any university with academic ambition: its own top researchers.

The real issues

It will be clear that we are (still) very critical about the Strategic Plan. However, we are more critical about what is not in the Plan than about what is included. The really important issues are not addressed; in some cases, there are a few sentences referring to these issues, but they are not discussed. The real issues are evaded. We now discuss some issues that should be addressed.

Strategy

The strategic issues relate to what we do, at what level (what is our ambition? where do we want to be?) and, most importantly: why? For example, the Strategic Plan states: “It is now up to us to achieve the clearly defined goals we have set for ourselves”, but it is simply not true

that clear goals have been set. Sentences like these can only indicate that we do not take seriously what we write. A second example illustrating this is when the Plan states that “Tilburg University needs to build a sharper profile”. This is correct, and indeed it is quite urgent. However, after having noted this, the Plan simply moves on to other things; it does not make clear how a sharper profile should be built; it even does not mention preliminary steps to be taken in this direction.³¹

Currently, TiU is advertised as a specialized university, and the University is quite proud that it is the best specialized Dutch university in the *Elsevier* education ranking. But what does it mean to be a specialized university?³² Specialized in what? TiU does not cover all of the Humanities, and it does not even cover all of the Social Sciences: important fields like Political Science and International Relations are missing. Do we want to restrict ourselves further to Business, Economics and Law, or perhaps even further? Or do we instead want to expand and cover the entire Social Sciences? Do we, perhaps, even want to cover those parts of the Humanities that are most closely linked to the Social Sciences? If we do, then what will be our ambition level? In our view, it is questions like these that are urgent to discuss, with choices being made quickly thereafter.

As illustration for the urgency and for how TiU may be hurt because of lack of a clear profile, consider the world-wide rankings of universities. On the TiU website, we can read something about such rankings (with TiU scoring especially well in Business and Economics, a field in which rankings are quite developed), but some of the statements that are posted there are very defensive. Statements that read as “don’t take the low ranking too seriously because we do not fit very well into the existing boxes” do not make a good impression. They do not reveal our strength and they will not induce students to come here. Although, of course, such rankings are only rough indicators, their existence, strategic importance and (potential) effects cannot be ignored. TiU competes on international markets, also for students; hence, it does have to show its colors. Indeed, students from abroad are using such indicators in their search for where to

³¹ We understand that meanwhile a committee has been established that might be investigating these issues. Before the summer, one of us (Arjen van Witteloostuijn) was asked by the Executive Board to head a committee charged to investigate “issues” related to the University strategy at large. However, other committee members argued that initiating the Petition was incompatible with membership of the committee, hence Arjen van Witteloostuijn was ousted. As far as we know, after the summer, the broad focus on the University’s overall strategy was restricted to research only.

³² With respect to the *Elsevier* ranking it is clear: Maastricht, Rotterdam and Tilburg are the three specialized universities in the Netherlands.

study. A lack of profile limits the possibilities for international positioning and unnecessarily hurts us.

Some university rankings are indeed less suited for TiU as they focus on broad universities. However, others, such as the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings, also provide rankings for certain fields. If we need to put ourselves in a box that is internationally recognized, it will be the one labeled “Social Sciences”. Within this field, we do not score badly.³³ In 2014-2015, we are number 63 in the world, which is about as good as Leiden, Utrecht and Maastricht (65, 64, 62). However, it is well below Cambridge (10), LSE (11), UCL (13), King’s College London (27), UvA Amsterdam (36), Erasmus (40) and KU Leuven (49). Is being #63 something to be proud of? Should our ambition not be to belong to the top 25 in the world, and to the top 5 in Europe, just as our ambition is in Business and Economics?³⁴ Is such a score not a minimum requirement to survive as a research university in the future? Should not all our efforts be devoted to establish this?

We repeat that, although overall rankings are important, it should be realized that they do not measure intrinsic scientific quality. The rankings can be used as signals of overall quality or attractiveness, but should not be used as criteria for research quality (see footnote 24). To judge the value of science itself, we have to rely much more on actually reading what people publish.³⁵ With a view to the future, this needs a scientific mission relating to an internationally recognized label of “Social Sciences”, rather than purely administrative measures, such as ever more pumped up requirements for the number of publications.

³³ <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2014-15/subject-ranking/subject/social-sciences>. The methodology that is used to establish the ranking is also clearly described there.

³⁴ Our score in Business and Economics is much better: we are in the top (5, 25), or close to it. The TIU website mentions: “July 2014: #7 in Europe and #31 worldwide”. In its own ranking (<https://econtop.uvt.nl/rankinglist.php>), Economics is #19 worldwide and #3 in Europe, while the UTD Top 100 Business School Research Rankings, ranks TISEM as #32 in the world and #3 in Europe. Unfortunately, “our” Business School, TIAS, does not score so well in these rankings. It is #74 in the FT MBA-ranking, <http://rankings.ft.com/exportranking/global-mba-ranking-2014/pdf>, and only #97 in the FT EMBA-Ranking <http://rankings.ft.com/businessschoolrankings/executive-mba-ranking-2014>. The (still) loose links between TiSEM and TIAS and the fact that TIAS does not have a meaningful output in academic research could contribute to such a low score. There are also choices to be made here, especially if one wants to be internationally competitive. There are no leading business schools without a serious academic reputation or with the majority of the staff having only a part time affiliation.

³⁵ See also KNAW (2005) “Judging research on its merits”, <https://www.knaw.nl/nl/actueel/publicaties/judging-research-on-its-merits>

Another strategic issue requiring urgent attention is our low student numbers and our declining market shares for some fields. If students view market share as a signal of quality, this does not bode well for the future.³⁶ Fortunately, important first steps have recently been made in this domain with the report of the University-level action team on an education profile and the Abbring/Bronnenberg report on declining student numbers at TiSEM. We view the first in particular, with its strong plea to re-establish a learning community, to be very much in line with our ideas. Nevertheless, much more should be done. For example, why is TiU the only Dutch university without a University College? What happened to the feasibility study that was announced in the Strategic Plan? Why do we fail to establish a University College that could so naturally connect the various schools at TiU?

Values

Underlying the strategic choices are norms and values. What are the academic values of TiU? We do not think they have been made explicit. Probably, they can be best read from the Honorary Doctorate Degrees that we award, but, when we look at the relevant part of the TiU website (<https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/about/profile/doctorates-1/>), we only see names and not the motivation for why these persons received the highest honor that our University can award. As such, important opportunities to signal our academic values are not exploited. The motivations are read during the ceremonies at which the doctorates are awarded; hence, it would be easy to put them online. As words written are more durable, and easier to remember and to transmit to others, than words that are just spoken, it would be desirable if such would indeed be done. The website states: “Exceptional scientific accomplishments can be rewarded with an honorary degree. This title can also be bestowed upon a person who rendered exceptional community services.” For many of the Honorary Doctorates, it will be obvious to academics working in the same field for why the laureate was selected, but it is worthwhile (and maybe necessary) to share the excitement with all others in the university community, as it can contribute to creating such a community. Making the reason explicit is especially important for cases, as in 2008, where it will not be clear to many workers at TiU, or to outsiders, what were the “exceptional community services” that gave rise to the award.³⁷

³⁶ Of course, the excellent scores of some of our programs in the “Keuzegids Universiteiten 2015” are most welcome to counteract this.

³⁷ Let us not be misunderstood. We think that, in general, TiU has made good choices. We can also be proud of our students. In 2010, the TiSEM students awarded Jean Tirole, this year’s winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics,

At the broader level, there is the issue of whether our managers and administrators share the values of the academics. We believe that all people, in the first instance, are intrinsically motivated and want to develop themselves. However, we believe that an important distinction between academics, on the one hand, and managers and administrators, on the other hand, tends to be forgotten. Where the latter view themselves as working for TiU, academics primarily see themselves as working for science. Their loyalty, in the first instance, is to science and to their academic colleagues. They are willing to be loyal to a university, and to commit themselves to their institution, but only if the values of that university do not conflict with the higher values of science. This imposes constraints on management of a university, which, currently, do not always seem to be recognized at TiU.

Leadership and governance

We mentioned that some issues discussed in this paper are specific for TiU, while others have a broader, national scope. To a certain extent, this also holds for the academic values discussed above; see the above remarks on valorization and those in the footnotes 26 and 27 in particular.³⁸ Clearly, governance and leadership of universities are also national issues.

Like De Beus et al. (2009), we think that the Rector, and not the President, should be the leader of a university. There is an important distinction between authority (earned and inspiring) and power. We are strongly convinced that the leader should lead by academic authority and example. We have not made up our mind on whether or not the Rector should be elected or appointed. In any case, the procedure should be more transparent. Furthermore, since the Rector represents the academics, non-academics should have no influence on who will be the Rector.

The Rector should be an inspiring leader. He or she should have real authority. She should defend the academic values and inspire the university community. She should defend the university, and what it does, against the outside world. She should protect the interests of the

the Tjalling C. Koopmans award. The TiU Press Release about the Honorary Doctorate in 2008 can be found at http://uvtapp.uvt.nl/fsw/spits.nb_lib.frmToonPersbericht?v_id=14646

³⁸ KNAW (2013) (see footnote 26) notes that the value that a country attaches to science is somewhat signaled by the percentage of government expenditure that is devoted to R&D. In the Netherlands (in 2011), this is 1.5%, which is about the EU-15 average. Some other countries have a much higher percentage, such as Germany (2%), US (2.5%), and South-Korea (3.5%).

academics and students, and she should try to convince the outside world of the beauty of science. She should continue to stress that science is a value in itself, and not just of instrumental value for the economy or for society. To put this in perspective, one might think of the opposite case where there is no real authority, but power. What does power without authority do? It bows to higher power. Hence, the chance of bowing to power at the next higher level goes up when real authority is lacking. One might also look at the top-down direction. The chance of appointing someone without real authority on the next lower level goes up when power is the main leverage. We see here the makings of a possibly vicious circle.

Aspects of governance should be changed as well. A community of professionals cannot have a Supervisory Board consisting exclusively of ex-politicians and captains of industry, as this will give rise to a conflict of values. There should be a balanced representation from academia and society, with (at least) the representatives from academia having real authority. Decision-making processes should be transparent at all levels; management at all levels should be held accountable for their actions. If management does underperform, transparent and effective rules should be in place to have them replaced. As the MUB structure does not automatically guarantee that the best brains available at the university are involved, the Rector, the Deans and the Heads of Department have an important responsibility to make sure that they inform them, which is a first and necessary condition to get academics involved. Academics, of course, should contribute to the public good, and the norm should be that those that do not are reminded of this by their direct colleagues.

Conclusion

We have written that our worries resonate with broader sentiments of discontent in academia in the Netherlands, and we pointed out that there are also specific aspects at TiU. What is needed is a mission for the entire university that is fully integrated into the whole organization, making governance and support staff facilitators of the primary process of science. In some respects, TiU is better placed to address the current problems than other universities in the Netherlands: TiU is smaller, hence, it is easier to look each other in the eyes and to form a community. Nobody has (as yet) called our idea of re-establishing the academic community a romantic

one.³⁹ Indeed, we do not think it is. It is feasible to realize it, and especially so at TiU. Here, TiU could show real leadership.

³⁹ Romantic, defined as in the inaugural lecture of Jan Sprenger “Beyond the romantic age of philosophy”, Tilburg University, 17 October 2014.