**Web version of the Dies Natalis 2026 speech**

**Rector Magnificus Prof. Dr. Ir. Jantine Schuit**

(spoken in Dutch – machine translated)

Dear guests here in the Aula, and everyone watching via the livestream,

It is wonderful to be here together, on the 113th anniversary of our university.

Throughout the day, I have come across the image behind me several times. You may also have seen it outside over the past few days. Towards the end of the afternoon, large flocks of starlings appear, often above fields and open water—especially at this time of year. Tens of thousands of birds move together, constantly changing shape. The cloud contracts and expands again, tilts, descends and shoots upwards. A turn that begins somewhere ripples through the entire flock in a fraction of a second. Hardly ever does one bird collide with another.

What sets such a flock in motion? And what keeps it together?

I'll come back to that at the end of the speech

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Over the past year, I have spoken to many people both within and outside our university. These conversations often concerned the changes heading our way and affecting us. Conversations about new opportunities and possibilities, but also about concerns. What do these changes mean for the way I do my work?

Researchers asked me whether curiosity-driven research still matters, or whether it is now mainly about engagement and impact. Students spoke about their wellbeing and study pressure. With my fellow rectors, I discussed academic freedom and how immensely important it is to safeguard it. Many conversations within our community also concerned the speed at which AI is developing, and how it is changing education, research and work. What does this mean for the quality of our education? And how do we prepare our students properly for a future in which AI is already influencing their studies and will soon influence their work as well?

Across these different conversations, one question kept returning:

How do we find our way in a world that seems to be becoming ever more complex? How do we remain relevant?

The issues and circumstances of today are indeed different from those of the time when Erasmus University began as a school of higher education. Higher education is now far more accessible and international than it was 100 years ago. At the same time,

unlike in the past, we are now expected not only to provide education, but also to deliver innovation and societal solutions.

Much is changing within the university too. We must preserve our quality and accessibility, while funding and student enrolment are becoming scarcer.

Then there are other developments that affect us. Geopolitical relations are shifting, and disinformation is increasing. We are concerned about climate, health and inequality of opportunity.

None of these developments stands alone. A technological development affects the way people live and work. Health issues affect the economy, society and us as human beings. Climate issues require not only technical solutions, but also behavioural change, social choices and legal frameworks.

Reality does not respect the boundaries of our disciplines.

In discussions about societal challenges, the conversation often quickly turns to solutions. That is understandable. The issues we face are urgent. We want Science That Matters: scholarship that contributes to a resilient future. But for me, science that matters begins one step earlier: with asking questions. How does this work? Why does this happen? What do we not yet know?

This curiosity-driven, or unconstrained, research develops knowledge without a predetermined application. Much of the knowledge we build on today once emerged from curiosity: from questions whose eventual consequences no one could foresee, but which later often formed the basis for major breakthroughs.

Asking critical questions is also valuable because it serves the interests of society and our democracy. Research must be able to study subjects whose outcomes may be unwelcome or uncomfortable. That is why, as a university, we deliberately create space for this. We are investing additional resources in unconstrained research. And we actively support researchers in obtaining personal grants, through guidance and mentoring. Such grants give researchers the freedom to decide for themselves what they want to investigate.

One of the most valuable characteristics of a university is that here you encounter people who see the world differently from you. People with different backgrounds, cultures and views of the world and of scholarship.

There is strength in not immediately agreeing with one another. Introducing a perspective that no one has considered before, or asking a question, can change the direction of your thinking. That is not always comfortable, but it is highly valuable.

At the same time, like many others, I see how easy it is to seek out people who think much the same way as we do: the echo of our own voice. That is very human. But one of the most important tasks of a university is precisely to enable encounters with different perspectives, and to learn from one another.

We urgently need that more complete picture, including when it comes to innovation. If we want solutions that hold up in practice, knowledge of behaviour, organisations, business models and law is essential. The major challenges of our time do not call for less specialisation. They call for a willingness to connect specialised knowledge.

Knowledge gains meaning when it is set in motion: between disciplines, between scholarship and practice, and between people with different experiences and backgrounds.

That is what our university is good at: a university of health, behaviour, economics, law and business. Precisely the areas needed to make technology work for people and society. We bring these perspectives together. We do so within our own community, but also with partners in the city of Rotterdam, the region and beyond.

We do this together with Leiden and Delft, with partners in Europe and in our open innovation networks. These are all examples of the same movement. Take the Port of Rotterdam, for instance. The energy transition and new digital possibilities demand a great deal from the people who work there. Together with public and private partners, we are developing new learning environments and educational programmes for these professionals, among others, over the next three years.

We will do the same in our degree education. We are investing more than ever in interfaculty and inter-university education. We are renewing existing programmes and developing new programmes, minors and tracks. There are now 15 initiatives in total. Students who begin their studies with us in the years ahead will learn through these programmes to collaborate across disciplinary boundaries and to view the problems of today and tomorrow with an open mind. I am truly proud of how we are shaping this together.

These developments offer opportunities, but they also ask something of all of us. For researchers, this means there is room for both unconstrained research and societal engagement. For lecturers, it means preparing students even more for a world that is constantly changing. For colleagues in professional services, it means actively contributing ideas and providing support for these new forms of collaboration in education and research. For students, it means better preparation for their future. But it also requires openness and curiosity: as critical thinkers, responsible citizens and bridge-builders in a society that can sometimes seem to be moving further apart.

At a time when debate sometimes becomes more polarised and opinions retreat into like-minded groups, this may well remain one of our most important responsibilities. New insights often arise when different ways of thinking meet. Because scholarship is ultimately a shared conversation.

That is why we remain committed to dialogue. Over the past year, we have held discussions about academic freedom. Three key building blocks emerged from these: make academic freedom tangible and open to discussion; engage employees and students in conversation in a safe environment; and ensure that more diverse voices are represented at the table.

The reports published by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences last month show how important the role of university leaders is in this regard. We must ensure that people have sufficient space to hold these conversations—including when they involve criticism of our own policies. Because a university does not grow stronger through uniformity of thought, but through a culture in which multiple voices can be heard safely.

Today, we celebrate the 113th anniversary of our university. Much has changed in those 113 years. And much will change in the years ahead. We must respond to that.

At the beginning of this speech, I asked how a flock of starlings is set in motion and stays together.

A turn always begins somewhere: with a few birds changing course. The others respond, adapt and keep the flock together. And those who initiate the turn continue to pay attention to what is happening around them.

It is the same here. The answer lies in interaction. Leadership is needed: people who set a course and take responsibility. And a community is needed that thinks along, challenges ideas and helps shape what comes next. Those who provide direction must keep listening, learning from others and adjusting course when circumstances require it. In this way, everyone contributes from their own role, with room to change direction without losing one another.

That is a university at its best: a place of connection, curiosity, questions, perspectives and movement.

And that makes me optimistic.

Congratulations on 113 years in motion.

Thank you.