

# The Good of the University

Critical Contributions  
from the *Tilburg Young Academy*

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**Editor's note**

Throughout this volume, we refer to the strategic plan of Tilburg University, entitled “Weaving Minds and Characters: Strategy Towards 2027”. Therefore, it is not included as a reference in each individual contribution. We comment on the four C’s from the strategy, but we have inverted the order since young academics like to turn things around. This also puts a virtue, courage, in first place.

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# On the Good of the University

*Esther Keymolen*

In 2022, Tilburg University entered its new strategic period which is marked by the publication of the university's vision, entitled: "Weaving Minds & Characters: Strategy towards 2027". The document provides direction for the steps Tilburg University wants to take in the coming years. It is centered around four key values that (should) guide the university community's behavior and choices: curious, caring, connected, and courageous. Explicitly preferring a rolling strategy, without committing itself "to action plans and programs for the next six years", Tilburg University invites its community to "contribute in an engaged way to the further development and realization of the Strategy".

With the book *The Good of the University* that you – as a curious reader have, rightfully so, picked up – the Tilburg Young Academy (TYA) has wholeheartedly accepted this invitation. TYA brings together early career academics from Tilburg University's various Schools with the goal of actively fostering a flourishing environment at the University. Bluntly put: they care and they are not afraid to show it!

Focusing on Tilburg University's key values – or the "four C's" as they are commonly referred to – the essays in this book flesh out what it takes to actually be(come) a good university. Backed up by scientific insights, the authors formulate both sharply and thoughtfully, as you can expect from engaged academics. This resulted in a book full of bold and thought-provoking ideas with a clear aim to shake up the status quo.

Several essays lay bare where the current university strategy deserves more depth or maybe too easily skims over intrinsic friction. For instance, what does it mean to strive for a safe university while there is also the call for innovation and interdisciplinarity, eminently uncertain endeavors? An entrepreneurial spirit is regarded as crucial at Tilburg University; but what does entrepreneurship come down to in the academic context? And if we know that university rankings and quantitative student evaluations are severely flawed and far from evidence-based, should not we oppose their use and develop our own instruments?

Taking the university's motto "understanding society" to heart, the authors do not shy away to reflect on how the university itself, as an inherent part of that society, should deal with societal challenges such as sustainability, gender equity, and the role of technology. To become a truly sustainable university might demand making well-considered choices concerning business relationships and investments. To become a truly gender-inclusive university might ask for substantial investments in setting up (or reviving) diversity recruitment programs. To become a university where technology not merely connects students and employees to increase efficiency, but actually caters to the needs of the community, it is of utmost importance to nurture a culture where the well-being of people always comes first. Several essays directly aim their attention at the core business of the university: research and education. By tackling topics such as open science and the task of educating responsible citizens, new pathways are sketched to ensure that the University does not merely talk the talk but walks the walk of a good university.

Reading this book, I am hopeful and inspired. But first and foremost, I also feel like I am getting a kick in the ass: to work harder, to listen better, and to use the bright and courageous ideas of young academics. I am sure that by reading this book, you will feel this kick too. Of course, change does not come over night and there are many things that we cannot control. But this does not relieve us of the obligation to ask ourselves every day: How am I contributing to a good university?

*Prof. Esther Keymolen is vice-dean for research of Tilburg Law School. She was a founding member of the Tilburg Young Academy and its first president.*



Courageous

# “When Even the Changes are Changing”: Safety, Interdisciplinarity, and the Challenge of Uncertainty

*Catherine M. Robb*

That the only constant is change is now taken to be something of a cliché. That universities should embrace change and be a force for change, is also taken as a given – the nature of science and education means that, by definition, a good university is at the forefront of knowledge and disseminates that knowledge to its students. Even the nature of our own university has changed, from a small Roman Catholic Business School founded in 1927, to an institution oriented towards the humanities and social sciences with over 20,000 students. In the latest strategy document, the Executive Board and Deans paint a picture of the nature of the change we now face as being different from the changes we have traditionally embraced and encouraged. This new type of change poses a challenge to our university, and “poses fundamental questions to us in all areas of thought and learning within our academic community”. What makes this change so demanding, as the university’s strategy says, is that “we live in a time when even the changes are changing”.

It is not at all clear what it means for “changes to change”. Two main “culprits” of this new kind of change are stated in the strategy document as (i) the development of the *Anthropocene*, in which human activity is having causative effects on the ecology and climate of the planet, and (ii) *digitalization*, in which information and processes are converted into digital technologies. These social and technological advancements, it is suggested, pose a challenge to the way in which a university functions, how it embraces change, and how it acts as a force for scientific innovation and educational development. But how these two developments cause “changes to change” is still ambiguous. In order to make sense of this phrase, it will be worth considering how the nature of change has the potential to challenge the institution of the university. If I may provide a brief suggestion, for change to cause fundamental disruption to science and academic practice it will probably have to involve at least one of three characteristics: (i) the rate of change will be so fast-paced that it becomes difficult to track and respond to, (ii) the way or process by which we create change becomes difficult to understand or something over which we have less control, or (iii) the outcome of change alters objects, people, institutions

and relationships in such a way that makes them difficult to understand, difficult to control, or unrecognizable altogether. It is highly likely that the changes posed by developments in digitalization and the Anthropocene have the potential to create – and arguably are already creating – all three of these challenging “changes” to the nature of change.

If this is the case, then we really are living in a time of radical uncertainty, where the rate, process, and outcome of change result in unpredictability, unreliability and precarious conditions for science and education. The good university, therefore, becomes an institution that not only needs to respond to and be a force for change but one that must respond to the uncertainty that comes from this change. The strategy document makes it clear that it is in this challenge of uncertainty that the future vision of Tilburg University rests: “We are being challenged to set the course in a context in which much remains uncertain. We want to learn from the actions we take, respond to developments, and anticipate changes”.

In the light of this “changing change”, *Weaving Minds & Characters* offers an overarching general vision for Tilburg University picking out particular “threads” that will provide a focus for policy commitments over the next five to six years. Two of these threads are a commitment to ensuring “social safety”, and a commitment to “interdisciplinary” research and education. On the face of it, these two commitments for safety and interdisciplinarity seem uncontroversial. However, in what follows, I suggest that given the challenge of uncertainty, the good university should not be a “safe space”, nor should it settle for the limitations and ambiguity of interdisciplinarity. Given the nature of decision-making in light of unprecedented change, along with the university’s commitment to its four “C” values (curious, caring, connected, courageous), we need a university that is *courageous* enough to question the nature of safety and the value of interdisciplinarity, *curious* enough to explore the need for risk, and *caring* enough to create radical and ethical *connections* between its students, staff, and partners.

### **The “Safe” University**

In several places in the strategic plan, it is mentioned that Tilburg University is, and strives to be, a “safe environment”. This need for safety seems specifically woven into the core values of Care and Connectedness: we *care* about each other, so we offer and contribute to a safe working and study environment; a safe campus gives rise to a community feeling that fosters *connections* with each other. There is no doubt that we want the university to be an institution free from unjust discrimination,

exclusion, and harassment. The emphasis on “human dignity” requires that we treat each other with respect, and as such, Tilburg University is striving to become a fair and attractive employer, and a fair and caring advocate for its students. This is a timely and necessary commitment, but the exact details of how this will be further implemented are still yet to be seen – as admitted, these ideals are “not self-evident yet”. As a result of the uncertainty that comes with the fast-paced changes in social and digital developments, the strategy claims to be “rolling” and so will not commit itself to implementing any particular policy over the course of the next six years. However, there is no need to avoid committing to exacting procedures and policies to ensure the respect and fair treatment of all those connected to our university. These should have been made central to any strategic plan. Yes, we are living in a time of uncertainty that requires, in part, openness and flexibility. But our need to respond to injustice is not something about which we can merely be reactive.

If safety is to be defined and understood as “freedom from danger” and “the state of being protected from or guarded against hurt or injury” (OED, n. *safety*), then in some respects the university must strive for this without question. There are some unjust “dangers” or “harms”, or “injuries” that the university can and should aim to protect against, such as the harms of unjust discrimination, and physical injuries that may arise in the working or studying environment. However, the essential requirement to address systemic and localized issues of injustice is not the same as a general requirement for “safety” or guaranteed protection from harm. The general covering term “safety” is blind to a more careful and critical analysis of what counts as the kind of harms, dangers and risks we (as students and staff) need or want protection from. Are we courageous enough to ask whether some harms and injuries might be justified or necessary if we are to commit to our values, if we are to provide inspirational teaching based on innovative high-quality research? Are we courageous enough to ask whether the university’s commitment to courage and curiosity might sit at odds with its requirement for safety?

### **Inclusion and Sustainability are Not “Safe”**

The Executive Board and the Deans have pointed at the different “threads” that will contribute to our safety, for example, sustainability, diversity, and inclusion. These are all neutral and descriptive nouns, and by themselves do not point to any necessary normative valence. Take for instance the word “inclusion”. In a more general sense, the word just means “the action or an act of including something or someone [...]; the fact or condition of being included” (OED, n. *inclusion*). It is the

opposite of “exclusion”, the act of excluding someone or something, the condition of being excluded. But by itself, this says nothing about *why* someone or something has been included or excluded, *who* we are including or excluding, and the extent to which this inclusion or exclusion is harmful.

By themselves, exclusion and discrimination are not necessarily harmful. We exclude and discriminate regularly and often for good reason. For example, we might need to discriminate (which just means to *distinguish* or *differentiate*) between those with disabilities and those without, so that we can provide extra resources to those who need the campus to be accessible in a certain way. When, for example, the School of Humanities and Digital Sciences (TSHD) hosts its summer barbecue for staff each year, only TSHD staff are invited – not our partners, not our children, not the students, not our colleagues from other Schools. This exclusivity enables TSHD to provide an important social event that provides a sense of community and connection-building amongst its staff that would not be possible at an event that was open to more people. When, for example, a student might violate academic integrity by knowingly and repeatedly plagiarizing, we might decide to exclude them from their study program. We need this exclusion; it allows us to uphold academic integrity in our institution. The inclusion of the student, and the failure to discriminate between good and bad academic practice, would be harmful to the values of the university. Inclusion is not necessarily just – it is our task to critically reflect on what or who we ought to include and exclude, to have the courage to include those who have a right to be included, and exclude those who should be excluded. Doing so might not be *safe*: the policy and relational changes involved will often require us to offend those who are still unaware of their biases, take financial risks, and commit us to breaking down (metaphorical) statues that represent and express injustice.

Take “sustainability” as another example. By itself, that something is sustainable just describes that it is capable of being “upheld” or “maintained” or “continued” (OED, adj. *sustainable*). But by itself, that something can be maintained or continued does not mean that it would be a good thing to do so. We might maintain the status quo and so preserve the unjust systemic discrimination of those who are under-represented or preserve outdated technologies that hinder educational progress. Sustainability is not necessarily just, and it is our task to critically reflect on what we ought to sustain, or from what we ought to break free. Doing so might not be *safe*: the policy and behavior changes involved will often require us to break from

tradition, to be a lone voice in a hostile crowd, and to make difficult choices that may end up offending or harming some yet benefitting others.

### **Daring to Take “Principled” Risks**

It is not “safe” to ask questions and make decisions in the face of uncertainty. It is inevitable that the way to achieve success in eradicating entrenched expressions of injustice – both towards others and our environment – is by taking risks, daring to break with tradition, and making bold changes that have no precedence. Reducing work pressure for staff, providing accessible and quality education, exploring the developments of digitalization, ensuring that women academics are fairly represented and free from discrimination, reducing our carbon footprint, all require bold policy change that comes with risk. Safety is freedom from harm and following this to the letter would mean, for example, that we refuse to challenge our students, prevent them the emotional harm of receiving a low grade or critical feedback on their work, and spare them the necessary risks involved in thinking critically and creatively. But the strategy document is explicit that we don’t want this – we want a university in which we “dare to go against established views [...] to make mistakes”.

As a result, the university need not promise us social or epistemic *safety*, but something more radical than that – it should outline and promote a set of basic and detailed *principles* that determine an unwavering commitment to the ethical, respectful, and just treatment of its staff and students. Some Schools have already recognized the need for a “principled” rather than a “safe” university. For instance, in its own strategy document, TSHD has outlined its commitment to using the concept of a “principled space” which “assumes a set of shared values that all members of the community observe” (*Shaping our Future Society Together*, 26). In some instances these principles will require us to keep each other safe, when we have determined that the harms, offenses, and risks at play are *unjust*. But sometimes our principles will require us to be unsafe, courageous, to make unpopular decisions, to cause offense, and take risks. Our task as a university should be to determine what principles we commit ourselves to, and what these principles require of us. It is only by taking a stand on what counts as *unjust* harm that we can begin to analyze how a call for “social safety” fits with the four “C” values that are emphasized as central to the strategic plan.

The good university will make a priority of developing in its staff and students the skills that are necessary to recognize and analyze what counts as *unjust* harm that