To: Executive Board

Tilburg University

Dear Executive Board,

We have read your response to our petition “Researchers First for a Better Tilburg University”.¹ We regret to have to say that we find it very disappointing. Your core message is that TiU’s employees should not worry because the university is on the right track and that, if we simply continue along the path that you have outlined in the Strategic Plan 2014-2017, everything will be fine. We could not disagree more. Indeed, it is exactly this argument, this assessment of the current state, which motivated us to start the petition. We simply cannot proceed this way.

Your response is so general and vaguely worded that there are clearly parts of it with which we cannot disagree. The letter talks about values, ambitions and goals, but never defines these. The letter does not detail where we stand, nor what the normative benchmark is. Without knowing these, words remain a dead letter and we cannot know what we should do. The response again shows the inability, or unwillingness to make choices. But choices must be made, even if they are “complex and profound”. For clarity and brevity, let us focus on the points where we disagree with your text and your assessment.

The response is disappointing since it neglects the fact that the petition has not only been initiated, but has also been signed by 161 persons. Your response also neglects that several persons did not sign because they feared negative repercussions if they would. The list of supporters includes some of the best researchers that TiU has, including several winners of NWO-VICI-grants, as well as support staff and students. They form an important part of the human capital of TiU. You cannot neglect these people, certainly not since the University especially needs its best researchers to realize its ambitions (whatever these may be).

The response is also disappointing because of the “welcome” it expresses at the end. As if we are new to the game and did not contribute suggestions before. We asked for a discussion on content, and you promised that you would invite us. You, however, did not and still do not follow up on that promise. Rather than engaging in face-to-face discussion, you seem to evade it.

Although we understand the importance of signaling unity, we were somewhat surprised to see that the message is also sent on behalf of the Deans. We know that some of the deans are very much willing to discuss, and we believe this will hold for all of them.

It is your conviction that TiU is strong and healthy. We hope the statement is true, but cannot verify it. Indeed without having specified goals and ambition levels, it is impossible to verify the statement. Others have a somewhat different assessment, and believe that, while “we strive for improvement”, we risk getting behind our benchmarks. Indeed, it is not difficult to

¹ The petition is at [Executive Board of Tilburg University: Put Researchers First, For a Better Tilburg University](#)
find peer institutions that have done comparatively better. Our aim is to stop this process of falling behind, and to do so in a sustainable way, a way that keeps the community going. Knowing where we stand requires explicating values, setting goals and making choice. Our petition asks you to do so. You write that the letter is a response to the substantive issues in the petition, but it addresses none of these fundamental points.

You write “the ambition hence is a shared one”, which simply ignores one of our main points of worry. If you do not make the ambitions explicit, we cannot know whether or not we share them. On this point, we refer to the letter that we read on 3 July, when we handed you the petition.² That letter also shows that we are very much aware that realizing our ambition requires a joint effort of all involved in the University.

In contrast to what you write, it is not true that the petition’s focus is “predominantly on excellence in research”. The petition puts researchers first, as these form the core of any university. It is research that distinguishes a university from other institutions of higher education. There is also some evidence that the best researchers tend to be the best, or most inspiring, teachers. In its Strategic Plan, TiU chooses for research based learning. As a result, researchers have to come first; they form the bulk of the human capital of the university. However, it is a fact of life that people differ and that research is a competitive game. It follows that TiU should especially cherish its best researchers.

Our point is not that the university is profit-driven, but rather that it is managed like a firm that operates for profit; in a top down matter. This does not fit a university. The management cannot direct, it can only enable. Hence, it should work in a bottom-up fashion. The university cannot enter into commitments without the consent of its researchers, certainly not in those areas where it needs the cooperation of the researchers to honor these commitments. You acknowledge that you need the insights of the researchers, but you need more: you need their full cooperation. Hence, the management should be such that it elicits that cooperation.

We hope that the “Building Excellent Support for TiU” program will succeed and that the criterion for success will be “the support infrastructure supports researchers optimally”; of course, both in their research and teaching activities. We appreciate that the vacancy in the Supervisory Board will be filled with a person with a strong academic profile, but this can only be the first step. Given the important duties of this Board -such as appointing the members of the Executive Board and determining the TiU policy for professors – one member from academia is way too little.

As said, we are disappointed by your response as it does not go to the heart of the matter. We believe that it also sends the wrong signal to the university community, and will be interpreted as such. When differences of opinion exist, there are two possible responses: pretend that they are not there and continue; or discuss them, in order to sharpen the view on the merits and weaknesses of the different points of view. In your response, you have chosen the first option. In our view, the latter is more rational and the only one fitting for a university.

² The letter is at Executive Board of Tilburg University: Put Researchers First, For a Better Tilburg University
We remain convinced that TiU can improve itself by mobilizing the intellectual capital that it has available and we remain at your disposal to discuss and advice on these matters.

We very much hope that you will make this response available to all university employees, just as you did with your own message. As we think people deserve to be well-informed, we believe it would only be fair to do so.

With kind regards,

Eric van Damme
Cyrille Fijnaut
Marc Groenhuijzen

Siegwart Lindenberg
Arjen van Witteloostuijn
Aart de Zeeuw