Statement by Feike Sijbesma on the occasion of his appointment of Alumnus of the Year of Utrecht University at 27 March 2017

Charles Darwin teaches us that it is not the largest, nor the strongest, nor the fastest that survives. Rather, it is the ‘fittest’ – the participant best able to adapt to changing circumstances – that is most successful.

I first came across these words of wisdom during my time in the Medical Molecular Biology degree programme at Utrecht University.

I went on to apply its principles to DSM and to my own leadership skills.

Originally Dutch State Mines, then a bulk chemicals giant, DSM has managed to transform, adapt and become the Life Sciences and Materials Sciences company it is today. ‘Creating brighter lives for people today and generations to come’. Or simply: Bright Science. Brighter Living. DSM is the largest producer of nutritional products in the world and a major manufacturer of materials that make our world more sustainable, including bioenergy and solar power.

We use our skills to make food healthier, to banish hunger, to turn the tide on climate change – in short, to make the world a better place. We have taken on the responsibility to care for all parties involved. Not just for our shareholders, but for our customers, our employees and society as a whole.

Companies have far more impact than they used to. As such, they have a responsibility that goes beyond making financial gains. That impact must correspond to a greater sense of responsibility.

It’s not all about making money. Our economy is a distribution model for skills and prosperity that grew out of the barter system. Within that model, money is a means, not an end. Perhaps we have lost sight of that fact somewhat.

That is something I would like to pass on to the current and subsequent generations of students and lecturers alike. Receiving your degree certificate is not an end in itself. Rather, it is the beginning of a journey of change and learning that will last the rest of your life. Keep innovating yourself and the organisation you work for. Don’t wait around for that Kodak moment: keep future-proofing yourself.

Be aware of the impact you might have and take responsibility for your actions. After all, everyone in this hall is privileged.

If it is still true that every 6 seconds, somewhere in the world, a child dies of hunger in its mother’s arms – for let’s not forget that nearly a billion people go hungry each day – can we really call our system successful?

If we fail to transition to renewable energy in time or fail to resolve the carbon dioxide crisis and millions of people are forced to leave their homes in places affected by climate change they did not cause, can we really call our system successful?
When I was appointed CEO of DSM, I wondered how I would deal with the responsibilities I was taking on. And I told myself that I would never hide behind the phrase: ‘Well, I had no choice. I’m just as trapped in the system as everyone else…’

It’s about being responsible with your obligations. After all, we all would like our economy and our society to be successful. And surely no one can be successful, or even call themselves successful, in a world marked by failure?

So let us ensure that this generation, that the students, lecturers and researchers present in this hall today, grow to become not the largest, nor the fastest, nor the strongest, but the fittest. That they become able to effect change in themselves and their organisations, ever striving to create brighter lives for people today and generations to come.