



Keeping our academic spirit alive and kicking

Speech delivered by UvA Executive Board President Geert ten Dam during the opening ceremony of the 2019-2020 academic year on Monday, 2 September 2019.

Ladies and gentlemen,
a warm welcome to you all, here at the start of the academic year.

Let's get straight to it. As far as I'm concerned, we're in a fighting spirit at the start of this academic year. The Dutch title of this opening address is '*Wat bezielt de academie?*' That means 'What is it that inspires or drives academia?', but you can also read it as 'What's got into academia?'. I'd like to start by asking another question: what's got into the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science?

As I speak, colleagues from institutions such as the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and students from the Dutch Student Union are protesting in Leiden against the transfer of government funding from arts, humanities and social and medical sciences programmes to natural sciences and technology programmes. This is a reckless redistribution exercise; the exact figures, and therefore the consequences, are insufficiently clear. The House of Representatives has been forced to make a decision blindfolded, without all the facts at its disposal. Moreover, there's no rationale behind it. As many of my colleagues have argued, this move neither benefits the labor market and society nor leads to better science. And finally, the vaunted 'additional funds' are actually coming out of student pockets: basic student grant money from the student loan system that is now being used to cover up spending cuts elsewhere. My colleague Jan Lintsen put it best: this is a retrograde policy.

It would therefore be remiss of me to carry on like none of this matters and gloss over the events in Leiden. In fact, if this opening hadn't already been scheduled, I would have loved to attend the alternative opening of the academic year organised by WOinActie to show my support. Instead, Agneta Fischer and Fred Weerman, deans of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences and the Faculty of Humanities, are there on our behalf. Let's go over to them live now.

Ladies and gentlemen,
I will now turn to the central question I'd like to talk about today, which is related to the issues I've just mentioned. That question is: what is it that guides and inspires us as a university, and how can we keep that academic spirit alive?

Politicians and policymakers are treating universities in a manner that would have been unimaginable even a few years ago. Spending cuts and the separation-by-stealth of teaching and research funding have hit us in the core of our being, as has the neglect of the arts and the entire social sciences and humanities domain. And as if that wasn't enough, some political parties are now openly doubting our academic integrity. They equate a socially engaged university with a *biased* university. Such sentiments may play well on Twitter, but are proof of a lack of insight into what drives us as academics.

The task we face is to keep our spirit, the essence of our being, alive. Universities must be resilient in the face of spending cuts and attacks on Twitter. We can build this resilience ourselves. I'll return to this point in a moment. First, let me give you a brief outline of what I see as the essence and spirit of a university to be and how it informs our reason for being.

Since I was appointed President of the Executive Board, I have read many a book about the value that universities hold for society. Universities exist to serve the public interest. They inspire new generations, promote emancipation and give students a broad education. I've read and heard various permutations of the notion that universities strive to make an impact by contributing intellectually to efforts to tackle societal challenges. They do so by carrying out research and training students.

Our research is inspired by a deep-rooted curiosity with regard to these societal challenges. Curiosity is timeless – it's the nature of the challenges that changes. More than ever before, complex challenges such as climate change, sustainable mobility, global food supplies, functional illiteracy, social segregation and migration flows require intellectuals to help solve these issues. The key to tackling the major societal challenges effectively is the ability and willingness to work across disciplines. It is exactly this insight that renders the proposed reallocation of funds between disciplines so short-sighted. Consider the field of Artificial Intelligence, for example. Our university professors are at the forefront of technological developments regarding information gathering and machine learning. We also pay explicit attention to AI's social and ethical aspects. Nobody wants crime detection algorithms to discriminate against minorities, yet this still happens regularly. Academics from various disciplines are working with third parties and with each other to promote responsible data processing within suitable legal frameworks. This year will see us embark on a new Strategic Plan, in which we'll aim to highlight the multidisciplinary themes where the University of Amsterdam will be able to make a difference over the coming years.

This combination of broad and in-depth knowledge characterises our teaching as well. We bear responsibility for both study success and the efficient spending of public funds. But in itself, getting students to graduate as quickly as possible is not the mainspring of our teaching philosophy. After all, obtaining a university degree in the shortest possible amount of time is not the only way for students to

demonstrate their ambition, qualities or the value they can add to society. They can also choose to broaden their horizons by taking multiple study paths or additional courses, completing an optional work placement or volunteering. We're looking for new indicators of study success that are in sync with the spirit of our institution. This will be another element of the Strategic Plan.

We have much to offer to society through our teaching and research. And the most valuable instrument that we deploy for this is the freedom of academic debate. We use it to search for objectivity, intersubjectivity, evidence for assumed connections and consequences, or evidence that the opposite is true. When our independence is attacked or – even worse – individual academics are intimidated, confidence in science and the integrity of our lecturers and researchers are undermined. Within the limits of the democratic rule of law everybody must be allowed to engage in vigorous, unrestricted debate. The freedom of speech applies to all of us, whether within the UvA or outside it. We are free to debate each other on the basis of equality, and the quality of our arguments. A university forms an ideal environment in which to be confronted with facts and opinions that conflict or even clash with your own. If we as a university stop celebrating debate, we violate our duty to society and undermine the public service of educated citizenship. As the Executive Board we will continue to defend this vigorously.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I've outlined the spirit that motivates us and our reason for being. There continues to be more than enough reason for us to continue to do our work in an inspired way, aided by the jewel in our crown, free academic debate.

And yet, more often than we would wish we seem to be losing this vital spark. At the UvA, both students and staff have experienced frustration, anger, burnout and polarisation. Part of the blame for this must go to the dynamic of the outside world. However, it's too easy to blame our discontent exclusively on government policy or on a climate of growing

intolerance and distrust in society. We also need to look at ourselves.

At the UvA, we're usually quite good at formulating ambitions and ideals, but we're not as good at putting them into practice. And it's times like these that call for adaptable forms of management to try out various different solutions together with multiple parties, for experimentation and learning together¹. In an organisation such as a university, we rarely 'roll out' policies, but rather take joint steps and making adjustments where needed. All with the aim of achieving ambitious objectives. I'll limit myself today to three issues that we need to tackle ourselves in order to keep our academic spirit alive and kicking.

First, we need to reduce workloads. We're faced with both an increase in government regulations and a decrease in funding, and we'll continue to oppose both publicly. However, high workloads are not merely a technocratic issue and can't be reduced by more money and fewer government rules alone. The issue is more complex. For instance, the latest Employee Monitor showed once again that high workloads don't affect all members of staff equally. It's mainly assistant professors, associate professors and lecturers – members of staff with many teaching tasks – who struggle with this. The 'Managing your workload' ('Grip op Werkdruk') programme, led by director of operational management at the Faculty of Economics and Business Wilma de Munck, was set up to help ease the burden. Some of its findings have been counter-intuitive, however. Particularly puzzling is the fact that faculties with higher budgets per student report higher workloads. Another seemingly illogical development is the launch of new educational activities, courses and degree programmes without reducing the existing offer first. Between 2013 and 2017, the student population rose by 8 per cent. The number of courses increased more rapidly, by 15 per cent. But that's nothing compared to the increase in the number of degree programmes, by 33 per cent. The number of minors even leapt by 70 per cent. This goes to show that our efforts to guarantee a high-quality and rewarding education have rebounded on us in the form of increased

workloads, burnouts and less time for meaningful interactions with students.

We've set aside additional funds for the coming year to tackle the issue of high workloads. We're going to devote more time to introducing educational innovations and tackling excessive bureaucracy and meetings. Furthermore, we'll invest in better leadership and teaching logistics that reduce the burden instead of adding to it. In addition, Colleges and Graduate Schools should initiate a conversation about the minimum annual hours of instruction and the allocation of tasks. Finally, we'd like the Colleges and Graduate Schools to think carefully about the sort of education they want to offer. More isn't always better, and quality trumps quantity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The second issue we need to deal with is how we evaluate and value our work. Breakthrough research and prestigious publications are rightly valued highly. This will remain the case, as these are part of our core activities. On the other hand, educating a new generation and contributing solutions for societal challenges should be valued equally. We've asked around and many of you agree. However, this isn't reflected in our current valuation system. Members of staff with a passion for teaching spend considerable time on curriculum reform, only to see colleagues who focus on research and obtaining NWO grants be promoted ahead of them. The resulting frustration and despondency are reflected in almost every round of the weekly conversations we have with members of staff as the Executive Board. This undermines collegiality and team spirit.

Like high workloads, valuation is not a technocratic issue. Since early 2018, we've pursued a strong HR agenda based on the equality of research and teaching. The implementation of this agenda is a matter for faculties, departments and supervisors. This leaves room for the peculiarities of specific contexts. In order to do justice to the importance of teaching, we've spent the last year developing a toolbox (excuse the jargon) to provide more insight into teaching expertise. The toolbox takes the academic hierarchy

into account. Associate professors, for example, are expected to be not only inspirational teachers, but also to take responsibility for curriculum reform. The toolbox enables us to experiment and learn together with the ultimate aim of improving our staffing policy. As the Executive Board we will be following these developments closely.

The third and last issue that we need to tackle in order to keep our academic spirit alive, after high workloads and valuation, is social safety. Universities in general can and should do more in this regard. The UvA is no different. Last year's case at the Amsterdam Law School has left a deep impression. It has taught us that there's a link between hierarchical structures and transgressive behaviour. Let me quote a few extracts from the letter written by the Central Works Council, which hit the nail on the head. The Council wrote: 'The academic career prospects of younger academic staff, particularly PhD candidates, researchers and lecturers, are determined to a large extent by their dependence on the judgement of powerful professors. [...] These career prospects are formed in a highly competitive environment [...] in which gaining the approval of more senior academics is paramount. [...] The powers of supervision, subject matter expertise and assessment wielded by these senior academics occasionally veer into abuses of power at the expense of junior members of staff, who often fail to report these for fear of causing lasting harm to their career prospects [...]. If we want to change the systemic factors that allow abuses of power, exploitation and exclusion to exist, recognising that there is a problem [...] is essential.'² So far the comments by the Central Works Council.

To avoid misunderstanding: 'abuse of power' does not only cover sexual harassment or bullying. Scientific harassment is equally prevalent. By this I mean instances of a professor or senior academic putting their name to a publication that they have made no significant contribution to, demanding first authorship or submitting a research proposal elaborated by a more junior member of staff. Before the summer, we established a Strengthening Social Safety Task Force to work on a healthier academic

environment university-wide. This is chaired by Liza Mügge, associate professor of Political Science at the UvA.

Ladies and gentlemen,
This concludes my address on the spirit that guides universities and their reason for being. I've specified three issues that we must tackle to keep our academic spirit alive and kicking: high workloads, valuation and social safety.

I can assure you that these issues will be reflected in the Strategic Plan to be drawn up this year. As to the mission and strategic objectives that are to be included, we'll be happy to exchange ideas with you during breakfast sessions and round-table discussions.

Are you still paying attention? Good. I hope you'll leave this room with the intent to help the Executive Board and the deans make our wonderful university more resilient for the 2020s, so that we may continue to strive for ambitious goals and contribute intellectually to efforts to tackle societal challenges.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Notes

1. Faber, A., & Idenburg, A. (2017). *Sturen op transitie: van utopie naar stapsgewijze voortgang*. In: *Sturen in een verweven dynamiek. Perspectieven op complexiteit en oriëntaties voor beleid* (pp.24-32). The Hague: Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy.
2. COR. *Ongevraagd advies inzake systeemfactoren, sociale onveiligheid en de functie vertrouwenspersoon*. 21 May 2019.