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## **Academic Culture Between Inspiration and Self-Congratulation**

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First of all, a warm welcome to all of you.

What do you, yourself, expect from an MA study at the University of Amsterdam? What made you decide to join our MA programme? What can you expect from a study with us? Those of you who finished a BA program here might have quite a good idea what studying at the UvA means, but many of you are new to the UvA and even to a Dutch university.

In the next 30 minutes or so, I want to share some ideas regarding what we might expect from each other, or perhaps a little bit more ambitious: I want to reflect upon what good teaching should be about. When you were looking for an MA, you might have read many slogans used by universities to attract students in an increasingly competitive MA-‘market.’ But what, in fact, is good teaching? What is a good student, and what is a good professor?

To be clear from the beginning: I don’t claim at all to know the answers to these questions. But others seem to know it, since they label themselves in terms of excellence, claiming to be talented, inspiring and so on. I therefore propose to start with those self-declarations, those self-ambitions by universities, and to think through whether those claims, ambitions and pretensions make sense. One precaution: I may sometimes sound a little bit critical or skeptical about the Big Words we – in academia- use to describe ourselves. That is correct, I am somewhat critical and quite skeptical about recent tendencies. But I think for good reasons: let’s not take the PR language to advertise universities for granted but reflect on what good teaching should be about.

In its most recent and most important policy paper – Oog for Talent- (Eye for Talent) - the board of this university writes the following:

“An education from the University of Amsterdam challenges all students to perform to the best of their abilities and strives to provide an involved and ambitious culture of learning for students and professors. The UvA guarantees an inspiring program that is not only achievable but that also makes students feel committed to their study”. Moreover, we read that the UvA wants to attract “the most talented students worldwide”.

What are the buzz words here? What do they mean? And what do or should they imply for teaching? Let's start with '*Talent*': Eye for Talent is the main title of the policy document. Talent is probably one of the most (ab)used words among Dutch policy makers in the field of education and social policy at large these days. Putting 'talent' center stage is nonetheless perhaps a bit surprising since it seems rather obvious that in the field of education, talent development is, and has always been, the main goal. But let's try to better understand the recent surge in popularity of 'talent' and 'talent development' (talent-ontwikkeling). These are key terms in a discourse that wants to emphasize potentialities of people (instead of deficiencies), implying that until now we have had a rather negative view on pupils, particularly on those who are less gifted. The dominant idea among Dutch policy makers is that they have been focusing far too much on people's deficiencies instead of their capacities ('every child has a certain talent for something' is the new slogan).

Even though this might sound like a rather inclusive notion – everybody is recognized as having talents-, the emphasis on talent is at the same time a way to stress differences among people, since everyone is supposed to have specific talents: no one is the same. This tension between difference and equality in the notion of talent is important to understand. The UvA slogan 'Having an eye for talent' nicely fits in a *meritocratic* discourse. In a meritocracy, people's status is defined by their merits, by what they achieve, by how they use their talents. Meritocracy then, implies a certain idea of *equality*: everybody should have the same opportunities to develop their talents. This notion of equality is, however, a specific one: it is about providing equal opportunities, conditions, at the start (everybody should have the chance to develop one's potentialities to the fullest) without guaranteeing equal outcomes (since all our talents are so different). Equality in terms of outcomes is disqualified these days as an old-fashioned, left-wing political idea. So, in a meritocratic society, or at least in the meritocratic dream, differences in outcomes are totally acceptable, because they show real differences in merits, not differences based on class background, gender, ethnicity, or other forms of 'undeserved' difference and/or inequality.

In such a meritocratic society, a hierarchy in the education system is self-evident, since not everyone has the same talents. In that context, we don't have to be surprised that the UvA wants to attract the *most* talented students (at least as far as international students are concerned...) – the less talented seem to have their natural place in other, less privileged educational institutions.

It is a quite flattering idea that we are here because we are so talented and that the main reason others are not here is that they are less talented than we are. But is that true? Has the

meritocratic dream come true in the Netherlands? Is Dutch society indeed as meritocratic as the emphasis on talent seems to suggest? Are the conditions those of equal opportunity, implying that it all depends on one's willingness and ambition to achieve according to one's talents? Do we, here present, indeed collectively form the top of Dutch and even international talent? In other words, do children in the Netherlands have equal opportunities? Is there no influence anymore of class, gender, ethnicity, religion? But why then is the UvA so much more 'white' than, for instance, the VU, the Free University in Amsterdam? Instead of looking around and asking who is present, we could perhaps better ask who is NOT here, who is absent, and why that might be the case.

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This emphasis on talent and talent development does not only exist at the top, it is at least as popular in institutions working with youngsters that have difficulties at school, as I have learned from 3 of my PhD-students working in a research project on "Talentontwikkeling bij risicjongeren" ("Talent development for Youth at Risk") (Sebastian Abdallah, Maïke Kooijmans, Timon Raven). Particularly among social workers, youth workers dealing with drop outs and (potentially) criminal/deviant youth, the discourse is also all about talent. And exactly as in the rest of our-allegedly- meritocratic society, a heavy emphasis is put on competition to develop and show one's talents.

As such, it is a consoling idea to think or claim that everyone has talents – not to speak about more or less talents, but about people having different talents. But these youngsters-at-risk know perfectly well, however, that not all talents are equally valued by society – and that some talents pay off far more than others (in a service economy it is all about cultural and intellectual capital). As my PhD-students critically observe, many of these projects do not provide for other, alternative sources of self-respect (a strategy suggested by my colleague Evelien Tonkens and Tsjalling Swierstra); it is not a way to escape from the talent pyramid in which they end up at the bottom. On the contrary, those who are the losers in a meritocratic society are –once more- confronted with their deficiencies in many of these talent projects, that are based on meritocratic mechanisms of competition. New forms of hierarchy may result, confirming these youngsters idea that they deserve it to be at the bottom, like we seem to deserve it to be at the top.

As the famous sociologist of meritocratic societies, Michael Young, has shown, in a meritocracy it is particularly painful to be at the bottom because one can only blame oneself. No circumstances, no social conditions can be blamed, it is one's own failure. It is the mirror, the

reverse situation of the university where we can congratulate ourselves for being so talented, as is proven by the very fact that we are studying and teaching at the highest level.

Of course, all of you present here are talented, and I am immediately convinced that most of you worked hard for it. But that does not yet prove that Dutch society –or the societies from which you may come- are fully meritocratic. And even if our societies would really be meritocratic, all this emphasis on ‘talent’ wouldn’t help those who are less talented, who are kept busy with all kinds of talent development projects that might eventually even further erode their self-esteem.

But perhaps we should have a different reading of what is going on, of why talent and talent development is so popular: it might be proof that policy makers acknowledge that Dutch society is not yet meritocratic and that a lot of talent still has to be discovered and helped to flourish. The reason for the UvA’s emphasis on talent is perhaps less self-evident than I suggested: it might show that the UvA is aware that it has to play a role in making the meritocratic dream come more true. Of course, the university has “Oog voor talent”, a keen eye for talent, but we emphasize that because in the past other aspects might have also played a role in getting access to the university, whereas now only talent should count. In that case the UvA should reach out to those in Dutch society who are talented but haven’t had the same opportunities to develop their talents as their more privileged peers. Emphasizing ‘talent’ is then motivated by the acknowledgement that we are not a meritocratic society (yet) and that the UvA has an important role to help young people to discover their talents.

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But *how*, then, does the UvA suggest that it should nurture talent? It should “provide for an ambitious study culture” and an “inspiring curriculum”. The policy document also mentions “educational leadership” (“onderwijskundig leiderschap”). But what does that imply for the relation between faculty and students? In fact, the document remains rather vague about ways to realize the ambitious goals of offering an “inspiring program” and “an ambitious culture”, nurturing talent and producing committed students.

How can we reach those ambitious goals? In much of the literature on talent, ‘role models’ seem to play an important role. And indeed, like in the US, the popularity of talent development goes hand in hand with the rise in popularity of tutors, buddies, and other role models in the

Netherlands. Even though it is not made explicit in the UvA policy document, the notion of “inspiring staff” seem to refer to faculty performing as role models.

But what do we know about ‘role models’ and talent development? Heleen Terwijn, who is carrying out PhD-research on the idea(l)s and practices of role models, discovered that there is surprisingly little knowledge on how role models precisely work. Should the model, for example, be more or less the same in many ways as the person who needs a role model (in terms of gender, ethnicity, class)? Concretely: do boys need male teachers in order to best develop their talents (a heated discussion in the Netherlands regarding primary schools)?

Moreover, she discovered that there is quite a big difference between Dutch and American students in terms of having role models. Whereas American students enthusiastically spoke about very important people in their lives who had functioned as role models (often including their parents), Dutch students were rather embarrassed by the question about having role models. Most of them denied having ever had a role model. The Dutch presented themselves as masters of their own lives: the very fact that they were studying at a university was their own accomplishment, not due to the (special) help of a mentor or role model. In their very meritocratic conception, climbing the societal ladder is something one does completely on one’s own – *and since you did it all by yourself, you deserve to be where you are*. Many American students, on the other hand, were grateful to their role models who had played an important, if not decisive role in helping them to develop their talents. By doing so, they seem to at least somewhat acknowledge that society might be less fair and equal in terms of opportunities than the Dutch seem to think about their society. The Dutch seem convinced that everyone has the opportunity to achieve according to their own talents/merits, and the very fact that one is at the top of the pyramid shows that one has talent and that one did it oneself. (As a side note: in that sense the Dutch students seem to believe more in the American ideal of ‘self-made (wo)men’ than average American students, who acknowledge that they owed so much to role models and other significant others....)

However, when Heleen Terwijn asked the students about their ambitions and why they had chosen to study e.g. sociology or political science, American students had –overall- far more articulate ideas than the Dutch students. The latter were –on the one hand- self-congratulatory and happy with what they themselves had reached, but on the other hand rather clueless as to why they were studying and particularly why they were studying in a specific field. That seems at first sight to be quite a paradox: I have reached this totally on my own but I have no clue what I am doing here. Many Dutch students seemed to lack a direction, a focus... But perhaps that is not in opposition to the lack of role models but the result of it: Dutch students were not very

inspired, because they were not open to others who might know better. As it turns out, for fully developing one's talents and to get a 'drive' and 'direction', significant others do matter a lot. Heleen discovered that in the end, the most important thing was that pupils during their school time – elementary, high school or higher education- should get inspired, and thus should be open to being inspired. After having been inspired, inspiration remains a permanent, durable emotion that doesn't need the input or maintenance of role models over and over again: it suffices that students have become inspired at a certain moment, they have a clue what they want in life and do their utmost best to reach exactly that.

It is hard to be inspired by oneself – one needs the right, inspiring contexts. However, for many Dutch students 'getting inspired' was not exactly the way they were talking about their educational careers. They didn't look for role models or inspiration at the university and, in line with that, they didn't consider the university a very special place to be. Being at a university didn't feel like a privilege for them, nor was there an ethos regarding responsibilities of being part of the (future) elite of the country, or becoming a possible role model or inspiring person for others.

Perhaps this situation has slightly changed for Dutch students in the past years – selection has become tougher and motivation is more expected. These changes might help to realize the goal of the UvA to have committed students. But the question then becomes: what role has faculty to play, in terms of role models and inspiration?

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So, to be somewhat more self-reflexive (and self-critical...): what does that ask from the staff? Are we sufficiently committed and inspiring for our students? Are we aware of the specific responsibilities we have to you, our students? Can we and do we act as role models and inspirators? I guess that we –at least the Dutch members of the staff- will be somewhat shy to say that we want to and can be role models. For a long time, we would've blushed if we would have claimed to be inspiring – it was just not done to seriously ask oneself what societal and scientific responsibilities and duties one had by being in a (in fact very) privileged position as a tenured staff member of an institute that trains the next generation of leaders in all spheres of society, politics, industry. It sounded pretentious and elitist. Based on a quasi-equalitarian ideology – the university is just another institute, right?- the enormous impact of differences in educational capital was neglected, and the resulting inequalities painfully overlooked. In that

way, the Dutch faculty members mirrored the attitudes of the Dutch students: they were nothing too special, and kept their distance from the 'American' language of role models, inspiration, and leadership.

Well, that has recently dramatically changed (perhaps even too much): universities advertise themselves without any hesitation or modesty as centers of excellence. Every other email that I receive from colleagues mentions that they are working at this or that excellent institute, or that they themselves are indeed the absolute top in their field. And I have to admit that I hear more and more of my colleagues seriously speaking about themselves in terms of being excellent. Is such a hubris-style of bragging and swallow PR and marketing inspiring for our students? Is it inspiring for ourselves as staff?

It might be clear that I am highly ambivalent about the self-congratulatory discourse that has taken over academia. Here is not the place to analyze exactly why and how this has happened. Many factors play a role, such as new forms of 'accountability' as these have developed over the past decade. The regime of 'visitation' and 'accreditation' in its actual form has certainly not helped in creating interesting forms of self-reflexivity but has resulted in rather pompous texts about who we are and why we are so good. Additionally, the changing ways in which Dutch universities and research are funded require increased self-promotion and marketing of the university and oneself. The growing dependence on 'external' money, in the academic jargon: second and third stream money, makes an impeccable, 'excellent' name even more important; and we – I am very much including myself here- all embellish our CV's in order to impress selection committees, visitation committees, job talk committees, and so on.

I think that we are in urgent need of discussing what 'good social sciences' is and how to qualitatively measure this in a way that stimulates critical self-reflexivity instead of relying far too much on quantitative indicators – how many publications, how often cited- that has led to opportunistic strategies of publishing and a strong tendency to prioritize research output over education (and that is particularly relevant for you as students). As chair of the Dutch Sociological Association, I am therefore happy to announce that we are working on a report defining useful and inspiring criteria to judge 'good sociology' (in line with work done in the Dutch Royal Academia of Science that will shortly publish a white paper on output criteria of good social sciences as well).

You might object and say: well instead of the overly modest and shy faculty of the past, and compared to the rather bleak and unfocused Dutch students, we have now created a highly self-conscious faculty that is very well aware of its strengths. Point taken. But I am nonetheless worried because we risk becoming a caricature of who we are, or better: we seriously talk about

ourselves in terms of excellence, of being excellent, instead of pushing ourselves to do (even) better. Can self-absorbed faculty members be inspiring role models for students?

Perhaps I am too much of a Calvinist and just do not fit in these neo-liberal days full of self-praise, individual career management and 'talent talk'. But I would rather argue that it is not about Calvinism but about sociology. We need a sociological perspective on why and how talents can be developed, when and why students and faculty are pushed to do the best they can (instead of assuming that they/we are already excellent). And in that context I am happy to admit that my research school, the AISSR, is not just talking about 'excellence'. It also mentions that it wants "to provide talented social scientists with an inspiring intellectual environment" (okay, the 'talented' is a bit out of place here since it suggests that the non-talented don't deserve an inspiring intellectual environment..., but more importantly, here we find the word 'inspiring' again). It acknowledges the important role that others play in how we develop ourselves.

Indeed, the UvA should be inspiring for my colleagues, but most of all we should be inspiring for you, our students (and we should look for potential students who have had less opportunities), and be inspiring for them

You should judge whether we are competent in inspiring you. I promise that we will do our utmost best, on the condition that you are open to being inspired.