

Steering a knowledge-based course in Amsterdam

Opening of the Academic Year 2018-2019

Welcome to the start of this new academic year. Welcome staff members and students, local Amsterdammers and everyone else here today.

This afternoon we'll be looking at the relationship between the university and the city. Let me start by showing you some great examples of partnerships between the two.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a while since I came to this beautiful city as a new student. Back then, 'gentrification' was not yet a buzzword. It was a time when talk of 'the new metro line' referred to the fierce debate and riots in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood. To me, Amsterdam was an exciting new world I wanted to be a part of. And that's still the case. I've stuck around ever since.

But don't worry, this speech isn't about me and my story.

So what *is* it about? I am going to sketch the relationship between the University of Amsterdam and Amsterdam the city. First I will give you a brief overview of that relationship, the way it used to be and the way it is today. Secondly – and this will take a little longer – I will talk about what I think that relationship *should* be. I will finish with one theme that illustrates the way I see this.

So, first of all: how *was* our relationship and how is it now?

Amsterdam is close to the hearts of our staff and students. They're not just drawn here by the quality of our education and research, but also by the lively and inspiring city around us. As a brand name, Amsterdam is unrivalled. Students and staff don't just want to live, work and study here, they also want to contribute to the arts and culture, and help solve metropolitan issues.

The university and the city belong together. Our history dates back to 1632, when the University's forerunner, the *Athenaeum Illustre* school, was opened with addresses by Gerardus Vossius and Caspar Barlaeus. This was followed by a 300-year period in which the UvA was largely funded by the

city of Amsterdam. The city council also appointed professors, and the mayor was chairman of the university's board. This situation remained unchanged until 1961, when a new Higher Education Act was introduced.

In the past decades the relationship between the UvA and the city has become a little more distant—although great examples can still be found of the two working together, as we've seen in the opening video. There are a number of reasons for this widening distance. One is the growing emphasis on performance indicators for the funding of education and research. That means these kinds of partnerships and societal activities don't count as much as publications in high-impact journals. And then there's the pressure on study progress and success rates as a goal in itself, which means students have less time to spend on activities outside their degree. And, finally, due to the growing internationalisation of the academic world, the UvA's focus has become more international too. That's why the UvA and the city aren't such obvious partners as they used to be.

And that is a pity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have given a brief sketch of how that relationship was and is now. I'd now like to move on to my second point, which is how I think the relationship between the university and the city *should be*. I want to make the case for a renewed social contract between our two organisations. For a close working relationship that revolves around research and education and engages with society. And which also focuses on innovation and takes account of everyone's responsibilities. That way we can stimulate economic growth, increase social cohesion in the city, offer all inhabitants equal opportunities and establish a broad and inclusive form of prosperity. Let me explain how in greater detail.

It is crucial for us, as a university, that we conduct partnerships with companies, public sector organisations, museums, citizens and the Amsterdam city council. Developing and transferring knowledge is what a university is for. Psychiatrist Nora Volkow put it very nicely during the acceptance speech for her honorary doctorate at our university: apart from finding its way into society, knowledge must also be embraced by that society. Moreover, we also share a common drive with the Amsterdam City Council, which is "think global, act local".

Amsterdam is more than a regional or national centre. The city always was an open, international community, which allowed it to develop as vigorously as it did. In his history of Amsterdam, Russell Shorto call it the world's most liberal city.¹ It was a haven for intellectuals, artists and tradesmen from all corners of the world. Today the city council positions itself as a city with international responsibilities and a strong competitive position.² The institutions of higher education play an important role in this, as they guarantee the continuous inflow and outflow of graduates of various kinds. That is the prime reason large companies choose this location, and the same goes for start-ups. These institutions also help create an attractive urban environment. And this, and here we come full circle, helps to attract and retain talented people.³ All this is very important in the battle for scarce, highly qualified staff, particularly in the field of ICT and data science. And we need to realise that these highly qualified people also value a green and healthy region in which to work and live. Just like us they want to be able to cycle and go for a walk, see an exhibition or kick a ball around in the park. And helping create such a region is something we can and want to contribute to.

Like the city, we also have this international orientation. We need it to educate students in a way that prepares them to live and work in an increasingly globalised environment. More than ever before, participating in the international arena of top-level research forms the basis of our legitimacy. But we are also connected to the region and city. And the problems Amsterdam struggles with are problems all world cities struggle with. They are global issues that are reflected in our education and research programmes. How can we encourage a flourishing creative economy, while keeping middle class and low-skilled people in the city? How can we develop the city while paying attention to spatial segregation and income inequality between population groups? And do this in a sustainable way? What are smart and responsible ways to utilise the opportunities artificial intelligence has to offer? Maarten de Rijke, University Professor of Artificial Intelligence and Information Retrieval at the UvA, will tell you more about this last topic later.

I'm sure you understand there is much to be gained from a partnership between the university and city. The proximity of metropolitan issues that students can delve into gives real substance to educated citizenship and professional orientation. It also provides opportunities for community service within study programmes, and hopefully outside it as well. In research, the proximity of the city is most visible in the 'living labs' where innovations are tested and improved. Partnerships between academia, the private sector, government and citizens – a concept known as the 'quadruple

¹ Shorto, R. (2013). *Amsterdam. A history of the world's most liberal city*. New York: Vintage Books.

² <https://www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/volg-beleid/internationale/internationaal/>

³ SER Agenda Stad

helix' – are proving to be important vehicles for new research. We have only just started exploring what 'citizen science' can yield, an approach that involves the city's inhabitants in research.

We want to engage in partnerships that are useful and necessary to society, but also provide room for fundamental research. That's research that society doesn't benefit from in the short term, but will in the long term. And let me be clear: this is not about simply converting research into products and services for companies – the valorisation strategy of many a cabinet. In her book 'The Entrepreneurial State' Mariana Mazzucato shows how this often leads to the public sector seeing others run away with the fruits of their investment. One example is that of Apple profiting from the results of research carried out in the fields of aerospace and the internet, without having invested in these programmes itself or paid back society in some way. Even though the reverse is possible. Thanks to investment by companies, an innovation centre for fundamental research into artificial intelligence could recently open at the Amsterdam Science Park.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have just outlined what I think the relationship between the university and city should be. And that is a partnership that both serves the public interest and stimulates innovative research. The thinking power of all our academic disciplines helps Amsterdam to formulate an answer to big questions regarding housing, mobility, sustainability, radicalisation and labour participation for all its inhabitants. Or, to put it in stronger terms: cooperation between academia and local government is essential for a well thought out course of action. Let me close by taking one theme as an illustration.

It is a topic about which there is widespread concern: social segregation, here in the Netherlands but also beyond. And it's no coincidence that it is a common thread running through the coalition agreement of the Amsterdam city council. Who does the city belong to, and whom does it serve? And no, this is not about Airbnb and tourist shops taking over (which might be your first thought). It is about the nearly autonomous process of self-segregation that is associated with Amsterdam's ongoing internationalisation. How do we deal with this? How can we curb rising inequality of opportunity?

Education plays a crucial role in this. Once upon a time it was the most important motor for the emancipation of disadvantaged groups in society. These days, however, the gap between children of highly educated parents and parents with low qualifications has widened, also in Amsterdam. Teachers struggle with the social complexity of the city, which they see reflected in the classroom.

Tutoring and homework support services are springing up everywhere⁴, and you can guess who are the ones who can afford them for their sons or daughters. This growing segregation in education is an international phenomenon. Recent research conducted in the US⁵ has shown that today's ambitious elites invest in education for their children instead of jewels.

What can the city council do? Make good choices using evidence-based policy. In other words: carry out interventions based on scientific research. Multi-annual research that draws upon cooperation with partners in the field. This is the only way to find out what intended as well as unintended effects policy interventions can have. And see whether different measures counteract each other, for example. We can learn from cities like Toronto, Vancouver, London and New York. We don't need to make the same mistakes they did. Aided by our research, the city council can combat inequality, facilitate accessibility and counter the socio-economic divide threatening the city.

A sustainable knowledge coalition that furthers the effectiveness of local government policy is not something that emerges by itself. The university and council each have their own dynamic. The council goes through more short-term cycles, in which questions sometimes require quick answers. The UvA typically goes through longer cycles that don't necessarily match with the political agenda of the city. In addition, both our organisations can be characterised by weak, loose connections.⁶ At the UvA individuals and groups of staff members have a great deal of professional autonomy. That can make us hard to approach from the perspective of external stakeholders. Whom do they contact, what door do they knock on? It's virtually impossible to decide top-down what should happen in each and every situation. This loose organisational structure is also our strength, however. Academics are flexible and can engage in a creative and constructive debate with policy makers, enabling them to help develop innovative and sustainable solutions. The only thing we need to do as a university is to showcase this more effectively. Sounds like a piece of cake really, doesn't it?

Of course it isn't, not quite. We want to stimulate cooperation with third parties among staff members at all levels within the organisation: departments, research groups, and individuals. And in the process, we will not evade the tensions that come along with being an engaged university. How can we combine academic excellence with societal engagement? How can we pay justice to

⁴ Het CBS becijfert dat de uitgaven hieraan tussen 1995 en 2015 zijn gestegen van 26 miljoen naar 186 miljoen per jaar.

⁵ Currid-Halkett, E. (2017). *The sum of small things. A theory of the aspirational class*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press.

⁶ Weick, K.E. (1976). Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21, 1-19.

individual enthusiasm and institutional commitment at the same time? These are questions we need to answer as we establish partnerships regarding specific issues. And we already have a number of engaging examples, as you have seen in de videos. They are also featured in the booklet you will be given when you leave the auditorium.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have told you what the relationship between the university and city was, is and what it should be. I have illustrated my view of what it should be using the theme of social segregation. In connection with this theme, I would like to draw your attention to an initiative for establishing a 'Knowledge Centre for Inequality in the City'. This has been included in the coalition agreement of the Amsterdam city council. Various disciplines will join forces in this centre to map smart policy interventions and study them.⁷ The participation of all knowledge institutes is required to unlock the maximum potential of academic expertise regarding metropolitan issues.

So, in short, we have made a good start.

Thank you for your attention. I wish you a great start to this academic year as well.

⁷ Coalitieakkoord GroenLinks/D66/PvdA/SP (2018). *Een nieuwe lente en een nieuw geluid* (p.10). Amsterdam.