

Farewell speech by Peter-Paul Verbeek

Farewell speech by rector magnificus Peter-Paul Verbeek, delivered (in Dutch) during the Opening of the Academic Year 2026-2027 on Monday, 31 August 2026.

Dear all,

It's wonderful to see so many of you here today. This opening of the new academic year marks more than one new beginning. For the University of Amsterdam, but also for me. After four fantastic and intense years, I will soon hand over the chain of office to Anniek de Ruijter. And I would take a few moments to talk about that chain. For it symbolises what I wish to say to you in these final words as rector.

Our chain of office is less old than you might think. For although the UvA has existed for nearly 400 years, the chain was first used in 1918 by then-rector Kuiper at the opening of the academic year. Since then, it has been passed down from rector to rector, and the UvA tradition is that it may only be worn by the rector themselves – anyone substituting for the rector wears an alternative. It has therefore been worn by only a few dozen people, all of whom cared for the UvA in their own ways and in their own eras. That thought moves me, as does seeing the long list of names of previous rectors, many of whom we no longer know anything about. We have all played our modest roles in the history of this beautiful university, which has existed for many centuries and which is so large and idiosyncratic that it can only be governed by gathering a great deal of support, having a keen sense of what is going on among staff and students, and working together extensively.

A chain stands for connection: each link an individual part of the whole. And even though that word may sound a bit worn, 'connection' has really a key issue for us in recent years. The years during which I bore the chain were turbulent ones, in which a lot happened at the UvA, as well as with science and



society in general. In addition, for one year, I was not only rector but president as well. The connection between science and society and between each of us at the university was the central theme during these years. In society, the value and significance of universities became less self-evident than it had been for a long time. And within the university, our connections with partners outside the university were always up for discussion: who do or don't we want to collaborate with, and under what conditions?

The intense protests of recent years have left deep scars at the UvA, as well as at other universities all over the world. They have challenged us to continue to connect with each other, especially when our views differ the most. And they have also shown, in all candour, the polarised and intimidating conditions under which university administrators now have to work. That was not always easy and is not something we should consider normal. I am proud that we have continued to steadfastly seek connections over the past four years. Our new strategic plan – about which

much more later today – is all about connection: with the city, with society, with each other. The same goes for our new educational vision: based on ‘academic citizenship’, we not only want to train people to conduct scientific research, but also to have a societal impact or to focus on entrepreneurship. And to take responsibility for their role in society. This allows us to show even more clearly the ways in which science can benefit society.

But real connections come from both sides: they require something not only from science but from society, too. Science is only reliable and valuable if it is free and independent. And academic freedom is coming under more and more pressure, as politicians increasingly interfere with the content of education and research and in the management of universities, both inside and outside the Netherlands. A well-functioning democracy cannot exist without free science. Because it is this that allows scientists not only to look at society independently and critically, but also to contribute concretely and reliably to the big questions of our time, for which scientific research is so desperately needed. At the KNAW I hope, from tomorrow – yes, really starting tomorrow! – to strengthen the connection between science and society, while safeguarding academic freedom and linking it to academic responsibility.

This brings me back to the chain of office, and the connections it symbolises. I would like to take a look at it with you, because hardly anyone knows what it actually looks like. Our chain has seven links that symbolise the seven faculties, as well as four links with more ‘spiritual’ symbols, all held together by intermediate links with the coat of arms of the city of Amsterdam. A watchdog on a red background symbolises legal scholarship. A swan, in blue, represents literature and philosophy. A snake in green symbolises medicine, and a rooster in purple symbolises mathematics and physics. These colours coincide with those of the faculty piping on our gowns. In the middle we see the Holy Spirit, because the UvA still had theology as a discipline at the time the chain was forged. In 1920, the UvA

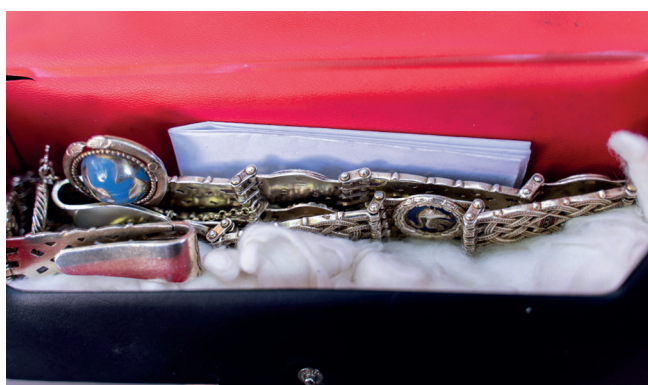
yearbook mentions a new addition to the chain, for the Commercial Sciences: a seabird on a gold background. And in 1988 – 68 years later! – a second addition followed for the Faculty of Social Sciences, which had been established in 1947: a globe.

After that, nothing changed about the chain for nearly 40 years – until last year. I must confess that for a long time I did not dare to keep the chain fully visible when I wore it, because of one of the other four spiritual symbols. Besides a torch, a yin-yang sign, and a pentagram, the chain contains a symbol that now evokes very different associations than it did in 1918: a swastika. Once a symbol for the four cardinal directions and for luck or prosperity, but later a symbol of the Nazis. When I was in Indonesia last year, I saw the symbol everywhere, but here I always kept it just tucked away a bit under my lapel. That had to change, we decided. We placed a compass rose over the swastika: another symbol for the four cardinal directions. The addition is on a fold-away shield, to keep the original chain intact and at the same time give it a place in the present. Perhaps some will say: how could you even think of leaving that swastika there? And others: how dare you change anything about the past of the UvA? And thus, this small flap actually also symbolises how I wanted to govern the UvA amidst all the polarisation: I wanted to give space to all perspectives, cherishing the unique character of the UvA while also connecting it with perspectives from outside the university.

Incidentally, the symbolism of the UvA chain is evident not only in the chain itself, but also in the box in which it is kept. When my fellow rectors take their chains out from the velvet lining of small ebony boxes during joint ceremonies, I place this box on the table: a Philips shaver case, probably from the 1960s, filled with half-decayed cotton and lined with torn imitation leather. I would always fantasise that it had survived the Maagdenhuis occupation of ’69. And I felt a little ashamed of it, even though I was simultaneously proud of that rebellious little box.



remaining connected to the UvA, through the KNAW and as a professor at the Faculty of Science. It was a privilege to wear the chain of office and to help shepherd our beautiful university. Thank you!



Dear all, this chain has accompanied me for four years, through many wonderful moments. Wonderful because they were shaped together with so many others: fellow Executive Board members, deans, the secretary general of the university, our director of Academic Affairs, the Works Council, the Student Council, our spokespeople, the secretaries who supported me, all employees of the Maagdenhuis, and many others. There is no room now to thank everyone personally, I will do that during the reception. But in particular I would like to mention my fellow rectors, in the Netherlands and abroad. How valuable it was to experience your mutual support, to pick each other's brains, and to 'zoom out' together from the issues of the day so that we could all take care of science together. I'm going to miss you so much.

My greatest thanks go to my family: Annette, Levi, Domien, Micha, Elias, and to my dear friends who been so supportive in recent years, who were there to talk and to sympathise during the difficult at times. I will soon transfer the chain, but I look forward to