

Time to get to work: the shutters must be opened

Speech by Executive Board President Vinod Subramaniam delivered (in Dutch) during the Opening of the Academic Year 2026-2027 on Monday, 31 August 2026.

Isn't this wonderful?

Last week I had the privilege of experiencing my first Intreeweek. Of feeling the excitement of a new cohort of students, cautiously taking their first steps on their own personal odysseys.

*"As you set out for Ithaca,
Wish for the road to be a long one,
Full of adventure, full of discovery."*

Thus spoke the Greek poet Konstantinos Kavafis.

My message to them, the students, was: enjoy the journey. Enjoy the journey itself, enjoy the people you meet, and enjoy the ports where you dock along the way. They may well be more important than the destination.

At this opening of the academic year, we celebrate our students first and foremost. They are the beating heart of our university and the reason why we are here in the first place.

Students naturally take charge of their own journeys. They determine their direction, ask their own questions, and find their own havens. But they do not make the journey alone. As a university, we have the responsibility of providing them with the best possible education and research, as well as an inspiring community along the way.

As the newly formed Executive Board, we have the privilege of rolling up our sleeves in the coming years. To continue shaping that community and the journey we are taking together. And, speaking also on behalf of my colleagues, we are very much looking forward to it.



Because together, we can go so much further. Not by all looking in the same direction or thinking exactly the same way. But by being involved with one another and with the world around us.

Engaged. Curious. Independent-minded.

Those are the core values of the UvA and our new strategy.

For me, that strategy is not a document to be kept in a desk drawer. It is our compass for the coming years.

But a compass only has value if you use it. You need to keep checking it along the way: Are we still on course? What are we missing? And from whom can we learn?

Let us realise that we can always do better.

I have been able to observe the UvA from the afar over the past few years, and from very close up for the past four months.

Academic institutions are proud of their excellence, but this

is rarely achieved in isolation.

Yes, at the UvA we have a great deal to be proud of. But to continue excelling, we must dare to step out of our own bubble.

We must allow ourselves to be challenged and inspired by questions and dilemmas that we gather from the world outside our university.

There is work to be done: the shutters must be opened. I hear you thinking: but aren't our shutters already open? Certainly. But it can really be better. The shutters must open further. Wide open. For those outside, but also for those within.

Not because the university only becomes valuable when the outside world confirms it. But because we can only properly fulfil our public mission if we remain connected to society. So that we continue to nourish our individuality, and to tell its story, while also testing it against the stories of others.

This is how we make our education and research stronger – and, together with others, also how we can contribute more to the big questions of our time.

To the outside world, this means: listening better. In the run-up to our publishing our strategy, we consulted many people and organisations. What we heard was clear: the UvA is somewhat inward-looking, a bit complacent and not always easy to work with.

The call was: don't be an island; find us, work together. We want to do that. With colleagues in the region - from the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, the Vrije Universiteit and the ROC of Amsterdam, with municipalities, social organisations and companies. Together we can achieve a lot. And we can learn a lot from each other.

All this will be necessary if we want to make progress with the energy transition, the climate transition, the healthcare transition, and so on. Unprecedented opportunities also lie closer to home regarding major urban problems; for instance, our scientists are using AI to help clear Amsterdam's city centre of litter more quickly.

And this applies internally as well – since a university where people truly know how to find each other is not just a more pleasant place to work and study. Together, you see more, understand what is going on better, and get further than anyone working individually could; in short, it makes for a better university – sharper, more creative, and stronger in what it can represent.

In doing so, we must pay attention not only to our scientific colleagues but also to our professional staff, without whom the university simply cannot function. I want their experience, expertise and ideas to be a full part of our shared journey.

Opening the shutters also means showing more of yourself.

There is a great deal of attention paid to technology in the Netherlands. Over the past four months, I have been repeatedly surprised by the wealth of technology I have encountered at the UvA. Technology is not an end in itself, but a means to advance society, and that is only possible if the technology is also properly embedded in society. We need all disciplines for this, and we have them all in-house at the UvA. Here, you can learn not only how to use artificial intelligence to help heal people, but also what social, ethical and legal questions this raises – and how to ensure that technology is deployed for the right purposes. To me, that is technology in context.

Technology in context. From medical technology and molecular design to AI and quantum: not merely from the perspective of technology or technical development, but always in a much broader perspective. Technology that is connected from day one to law, history, economics, and culture. That embraces technological, economic AND societal added value.

Technology in context. That is something we should showcase and promote much more.

Our primary mission is clear: to throw the shutters wide open. To step outside, to allow other perspectives, and to engage in dialogue – both inside and outside the university. And at the same time, to dare to remain independent-minded.

By doing so, we can determine the future course of our university together. A final observation: what has also touched me over the past few months, has been seeing the deep involvement and dedication of you, of all of us, to our mission. I am proud to be part of this community.

Opening the shutters: this is not a sprint, but a long haul. That is what we would like to focus on in the coming years.

Let's throw open the shutters together!