



Inspiring Generations

Official Opening of the 2017-2018 Academic Year

Dear guests, dear students and staff members,

First of all, I would like to offer a warm welcome to you all, here at the start of the new academic year. And a special welcome to Jan Lintsen, who joined us last Friday as a new member of the Executive Board. I hope you will fully enjoy everything the UvA has to offer.

Passion, in-depth knowledge, a sense of humour. The ability to get students to look beyond the textbooks. These are the things our students say when asked to describe a really good teacher. And one of them added, 'There is one lecturer who will always be special to me, because the things she teaches me are crucial to the professional I want to become.'

Dear guests,

That's the quality we're aiming for, to inspire. This year, we're celebrating our 385th anniversary at the University of Amsterdam. And it's no coincidence that the motto we've chosen for our celebrations is 'Inspiring Generations'. To mark the occasion, we have issued special anniversary grants to young researchers, and made the annual University Day extra festive. This month, our researchers will be giving 'pop-up' lectures on the ferry across the IJ and in the transfer lounge at Schiphol airport. And yesterday, at Tuschinski cinema, Robbert Dijkgraaf kicked off the Challenging Society Sessions for students, staff and Amsterdam residents.

The 'Inspiring Generations' anniversary theme speaks to the kind of university we aim to be: both for our students and for society. Nowadays, however, what universities stand for is not self-evident. Students, governments and researchers all place a range of different demands on universities. Students want inspiration, and to be stimulated in their personal development – as well as effective preparation for a complex job market. The government does recognise universities' intrinsic value (especially given the student protests from two years ago), but they also call for higher success rates and greater yields for society. Researchers are deeply enconced in their own specialisations to allow for individual excellence, but also seek out collaboration with others to attain inspiring results.

Here at the opening of the 2017-2018 academic year, I would like to turn the spotlight on academic education: how do we resolve the tension between what our teaching means for individuals and for society? And how do we give substance to 'Inspiring Generations'? Robbert will be talking about research later.

Dear guests,

Is there too much of a gap between society and the world of academia?

This is a question that often arises during discussions about the university. Opinions vary greatly, from ‘we are too politically correct’ to ‘we are not involved enough in public debate’. The government is giving signs that we as a university are not generating enough value from knowledge gained through research – our ‘valorisation strength’ is too low. Astronomer Vincent Icke once nominated ‘valorisation’ as the most horrible word of the year, and a concept that should be immediately banished as it represents the ongoing pressure on universities to be financially profitable.¹ I also fail to see the attractiveness of the word. But what surprises me most is how easily some people argue for increased societal yields from universities (i.e. greater valorisation) while ignoring education. When educating the next generation, in particular, is of such great value. It is a creative force that contributes to innovation, and to a resilient society that is inclusive, not exclusive.

Simply pointing out this fact is not enough, however, as it provides no adequate argument for the societal legitimacy of our institution. The public debate about output is too insistent for that, as are discussions about initiatives such as ‘venture labs’, the on-campus breeding grounds for entrepreneurship, or about the relevance of our programmes to the labour market. And the complaint from some students that their personal motives do not match the programme’s learning objectives – that’s another important reason.

In short, we as a university must clearly demonstrate the value of our education. Of course our aim is to fulfil our core purpose: to educate students who are willing and able to use their academic training to contribute to society. To my mind, this means that we must do three things. Firstly, we must foster students’ academic formation, both within and across disciplines; secondly, we must aid them in their personal development; and thirdly, we must prepare them for the labour market.

Regarding the first aspect, students’ academic formation, the University of Amsterdam seems to be doing well – going by the results of the National Student Survey, at least. This may come as a surprise, given the oft-cited criticism that modern-day universities only care about success rates, and not about students’ academic formation. In virtually all of our programmes, students are positive about how they learn to collaborate with others, and about the resources dedicated to their problem-solving and communication skills, analytical thinking and argumentative techniques. They are also positive about developing a critical attitude, which is a key aspect of

¹ *De Wereld Draait Door*, 21 November 2013, <https://dewerelddraaitdoor.vara.nl/media/304621>.

the German tradition of self-cultivation called *Bildung*. However, students' academic formation only covers one part of their overall development.

Opportunities for the second aspect – personal development – are not explicitly included in the National Student Survey. However, students do regularly raise this point in discussions that I hold with them together with rector Karen Maex. There is a great need for personal meaning and fulfilment: who am I, who do I want to become, where do I want my abilities to lie? Students want to be given room for doubt and reflection. They want teaching that calls on their powers of imagination, to help them see beyond the limits of 'now'. And they want more attention for the moral and cultural dilemmas that they face.

The current score, you might think, is 1:1 – academic formation, good; personal development, could do better. But the third aspect of education – preparation for the job market – that is where students believe we are falling behind. In their view, professional training is 'below par' in almost every programme. Truth be told, medicine and dentistry are the only two programmes that perform well in this regard. The vast majority of students feel the connection between what they learn and professional practice is minimal or insufficient. This problem cannot be solved simply by a professional orientation programme, a job interview training course or a committee with professionals from the field. We do not sufficiently explicate the connections between academic knowledge and skills on the one hand and societal challenges on the other, and how students can contribute to these as future professionals.

The very fact that academic knowledge and skills are necessary 'tools' for achieving meaningful goals is nothing new. On the contrary: it is a fundamental principle of cultural-historical approaches to teaching and learning.² This principle is now more important than ever, and demands a contemporary approach. Society is placing increasingly greater and as well as different demands on professionals. The VSNU, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands, emphasises the far-reaching effects of digitisation and the universities work together on a project called The Digital Society.³ Virtually every publication on the role of universities in the 21st century depicts society as complex, chaotic, diffuse, non-linear, context-dependent and unpredictable.⁴ Simple solutions no longer suffice, if they ever existed to begin with. Looking and working beyond the limits of individual disciplines is now a must, and the new generation of professionals must possess a well-developed moral compass for charting a new

² For example, see Daniels, H. (2001). *Vygotsky and pedagogy*. London: Routledge Falmer.

³ VSNU (2016). 'De Digitale Samenleving. Nederland en zijn universiteiten: internationale pioniers in mensgerichte informatietechnologie.' VSNU: The Hague.

⁴ E.g. Elkana, Y., & Klöpffer, H. (2016). *The university in the twenty-first century. Teaching the new enlightenment in the digital age*. Budapest/New York: CEU Press.

course. Professionals must be open to being challenged by those with different opinions, and be able to engage with societal issues.

Students themselves have also changed. To the new generation, developing their identity has become a 'task', at least to a greater extent. Strong individualisation and increasing diversity in society has turned the 'standard biography' into a 'biography of choice'. Young people construct their identities in ephemeral, flexible communities in which new technologies play a major role. Their personal worlds form the benchmark in all aspects of their lives, as was demonstrated by German philosopher and pedagogue Thomas Ziehe in 2004.⁵ The way they communicate with each other and with lecturers has become more informal and casual, and learning pathways are more flexible and make greater use of digital methods. At the same time, students are asking more from universities than ever before as sources of personal fulfilment and identity formation. As such, an à-la-carte model made up of separate MOOCs is of no help.

Dear guests,

I mentioned earlier that a university's valorisation strength comes not only from research, but to a significant extent also from its teaching activities. I also claimed that we could stand to make the 'value' of education more explicit. While our academic teaching record is good, personal development and vocational preparation can be improved. These improvements are also necessary, as the outside world demands professionals with more than just academic subject knowledge and skills. Students themselves are also asking for a greater focus on 'sense making'. I see the personal and societal objectives of education as two sides of the same coin. Though sometimes they are at odds, the trick is to align the programme's objectives with the motives of students, and vice versa – only then will education have genuine meaning for both students and society.

So, how can we bring these closer together?

Meaningful education emerges when students are given the opportunity to participate in social practices during their studies; when they learn to take responsibility, and generate value in a critical and creative way. We help students to develop a professional identity by exposing them to the activities of professionals who have themselves enjoyed an academic education. After all, a professional identity is not something people either have or don't. It is developed over the course of one's career, and is shaped in part by the field and its established practices. This is why it is so important for senior university lecturers and professors to have a visible presence in our Bachelor's and Master's programmes, as they possess high-quality academic knowledge, and can

⁵ Ziehe, T. (2004). *Pädagogische Professionalität und zeittypische Mentalitätsrisiken*. Keynote address at the CSP Conference, OSLO, June 2004.

also serve as role models to students. A recent review study⁶ stressed the importance of exploratory learning experiences for identity formation, along with the availability of concrete tools to aid the process.

These are the elements that are reflected in the teaching innovations here at our university, of which I will now give two examples. Starting this academic year, relevance to professional practice will be the common theme running through the new Bachelor's degree in Law. Week 1 will start with a course titled 'Insight into law practice', with lawyers and legal specialists as guest speakers. The virtual 'Amsterdam Law Firm' then gives students realistic cases to cut their teeth on, under the guidance of professional lawyers. A special moot courtroom has also been set up, giving students a realistic courtroom setting in which they learn to make a case and structure legal arguments. A second example comes from the Educational Sciences programme, which offers the third-year theory subject 'Education innovation' on school change processes. Students work in groups of twos and threes on real innovation projects in schools, aimed at producing recommendations that are supported both theoretically and empirically, and answer questions such as: what is the best way to structure the first three years of secondary school for students taking the advanced pre-university programme (or VWO+, as it's called)? In my days as a lecturer in this course, I was struck by the level of students' motivation and the quality of the results they attained. Nobody wanted to disappoint their school, and students gradually took ownership of the project themselves, internalising the associated theory. And more importantly, students began to see themselves as education specialists.

The University of Amsterdam's renewed vision on education increases the focus on exchanging good practices of this type. Learning both **from** and **with** one another must become second nature, to enable high-quality, meaningful education. We also want students to share knowledge and information, and to discuss their ideas, perspectives and their implications. All of these aspects are also related to the importance of diversity in the international classroom, as new ideas and insights are often born in diverse environments.

In these aims, we are explicitly targeting students with a drive to study and the will to excel. But this must not be simply interpreted as: 'students with high grades'. The University of Amsterdam wants to support all students capable of completing a university programme: early and late bloomers alike, first/second/third-generation students, Dutch and international, and both temporary and permanent residents of the Netherlands. But we will be keeping standards high for both the nature and quantity of subject matter, and the quality of student work. Students must be willing to make a genuine investment in their studies, and in our community of learners.

⁶ Verhoeven, M., Poorthuis, A. M.G., & Volman, M. (2017). *Exploreren kun je leren. De rol van onderwijs in de identiteitsontwikkeling van leerlingen*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, Child Development and Education Research Institute.



Within these limits it is our aim to offer maximum support, be it via an extra-challenging honours programme, or supplementary courses in language and writing.

Innovation in education takes time – time to experiment, and in so doing, to create a higher-quality and contemporary education system. University workloads are already high, a matter of concern to us as the board. Initially, innovations such as blended learning and flipping the classroom cost more time than they free up. The same applies to the teamwork required, and the effort needed to put academic leadership into practice. Even the greatest inspiration is of no use to strung-out workers. We have no ready-made solution to this problem, but will prioritise it over the next few months. We will give thought to the necessary staff-hours, to creating more professional freedom, and to reducing administration and red tape.

Dear guests,

I hope that my speech until now has provided a more sophisticated response to the issue of valorisation facing universities. We create value primarily through our students, by inspiring the new generation. By showing them the kind of academically trained professional they can be. A good starting point in this regard is to invite students to take part in real-world practice – whether the situations are real or imagined. It makes learning meaningful and gives students the kind of challenge they need. It produces well-educated citizens with attention for context, complexity and social justice who can help solve societal problems, thus helping to create a better society. Our civic duty demands that we nurture the power of imagination that this requires.

Ensuring that the whole of society benefits from universities' knowledge and expertise means concentrating on educating students in the here and now (as well as later on in their lives). In this light, the cutbacks to higher education in recent years can be seen as foolish and counter-productive. I sincerely hope that the new cabinet will bring the squabbling about the student finance system' to an end and invest in the quality of higher education. We will do our job to carefully monitor that quality, develop it and account for it.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the accessibility of our university. I mentioned before that we are here to support all smart and ambitious students. However, we are aware that our university is less accessible to young people who do not have the social capital that makes an academic education 'a matter of course'. To address this issue, we are calling on the experiences and knowledge of our own students. We call on you as beginning professionals: who among you can think of a way to make the University of Amsterdam more accessible? Each of the three best ideas submitted will be rewarded with a €750 prize and a starting budget of €5000 to develop their idea with the support of our staff. More information will be published on our website tomorrow.



This is where I sign off.

I hope you all enjoy the celebrations this afternoon, as well as the other anniversary events being held until January. Thank you all very much for your attention.