

University of Amsterdam
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**‘The Democratic Shortfall’: Speech delivered by Executive Board President
Geert ten Dam on the occasion of the opening of the 2016/17 Academic Year
at the University of Amsterdam**

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to wish you all a very warm welcome to this festive opening of the 2016-2017 academic year: a year which, as you have just seen, has actually already begun. I still find it easy to imagine the sense of expectation that many of our new students will be feeling. I was once a beginning student here myself, at this university and in this very city. I am extremely honoured to be able to open the academic year at the institution where I both studied and worked for many years. Let me begin with a question that has been exercising the minds of many lately at the University of Amsterdam.

To whom does the university belong? To put your mind at ease straight away: it does not belong to the Executive Board. But nor does it belong solely to its lecturers, researchers or students. We belong to society. We are funded from public sources, and should therefore be expected to serve the public interest. This interest, however, is far from unequivocal. It covers general academic education, but also concerns training for the workforce, no unlimited right to study, unfettered fundamental research and research on pressing social issues, as well as innovative strength. Serving these various (often conflicting) interests produces tensions – tensions that are inherent to the practice of science and for which there are no simple solutions, but which nevertheless deserve to be, and remain, open to discussion.

It should be no news to you that these tensions have surfaced in higher education with regard to prominent policy issues such as increasing student volumes, high costs, excessive study delays/dropout rates, and current industry requirements. The university no longer enjoys an unquestioned position as an intellectual sanctuary and driver for emancipation. It is in this climate that people such as Anthony Kronman, Martha Nussbaum and Derek Bok have avidly defended academic values. Each in their own way, they have argued that a university that is accessible and free, that can offer a broad education and that encourages cross-disciplinary, creative and critical thought is precisely the kind of university that can offer value to society.

In the discussions surrounding the level of democracy at the University of Amsterdam, I have also heard these feelings voiced by staff and students. The discussion did not revolve solely around representative bodies – the core of the discussion centred around the role of the university. The lack of democracy was actually the sum total of three separate shortcomings, which I believe we need to discuss. I will cover all three separately. The first of these democratic shortfalls is caused by increasing selectiveness in education; the second by a quality assurance policy that affords lecturers and researchers too little in the way of participation, and the third by the channels open to staff and students to voice their opinions.

I will start with the first of these democratic shortfalls, which concerns the question of how we address the desire to increase excellence in education.

Since 2011, the year in which performance agreements were made in higher education,¹ the universities have been working hard on an ‘ambitious study culture and improvements to study success’. Success rates were clearly calling for a boost in quality, while the ‘War for Talent’ also fuelled competition among universities worldwide. Selection was a good thing; education should emanate excellence. However, striving for excellence also harbours an inherent risk – especially in a society where social success depends more and more on a person's academic career. This applies to the Netherlands particularly, with its characteristic early selection point at the end of primary school. There is a burgeoning social inequality looming if we do not also keep higher education accessible to late bloomers or to young people who, despite their abilities, do not receive the right opportunities. This accessibility, one of the cornerstones of the meritocratic ideal, has been left by the wayside in the pursuit of excellence. Restricted access to higher education not only robs some young people of opportunities, but it also affects people's confidence in politics and society, and the extent to which they support democratic values. Research continues to show that a person's level of education is one of the key determinants in this respect.² It is precisely today's society that demands inclusive education: abandoning the meritocratic ideal leads to frustration, anger and disenfranchisement.

In the current age, education is not only about a piece of paper. The school attended, one's specific educational pathway, and the ‘additional achievements’ document accompanying a secondary-school diploma are gaining in importance. The so-called pathway-dependent aspects are increasing. In the Netherlands, and the large cities especially, there are already clear differences at primary-school level. There are ‘popular’ schools where highly-educated parents send their children, and less popular ones with children of less well-educated parents. This segregation is comparable to that in American inner-city schools.³ The pupils of popular, well-equipped primary schools are then over-represented at grammar and pre-university secondary schools where they can effectively prepare for a university career, while pupils from disadvantaged primary schools generally move on to preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO). Intelligence, as we know, does not adequately account for the sociocultural differences in schooling.

In this setting, academic pre/post-intake selection is a delicate matter. We must learn to ignore the white noise, and concentrate on students’ chosen pathways. Final exam results, for example, only have a predictive value for selective intake if the average score is 8 or higher, meaning that the late bloomers miss out. By way of illustration: our own senior lecturer and Spinoza Award recipient Patti Valkenburg first attended a senior general secondary school; only started her higher vocational education after several years in the workforce, and did not start her academic university career until the age of 30. A

¹ General Agreement (*Hoofdlijnenakkoord*) between the Association of Universities in the Netherlands and the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW-VSNU, 2011), consulted on 19 August 2011 via <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/convenanten/2011/12/12/hoofdlijnenakkoord-ocw-vsnu>.

² Eidhof, B., Dam, G. ten, Dijkstra, A.B., & Werfhorst, H. van de (2016). Consensus versus contested citizenship education goals in Western Europe. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 11(2), 114-129.

³ Ladd, H.F., Fiske, E.B., & Ruijs, N. (2009). Parental choice in the Netherlands: growing concerns about segregation. Consulted on 20 August 2016 via http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/papers/Ladd_COMPLETE.pdf.

conscientious attitude, perseverance and intrinsic motivation are more important for study success, as studies have shown.⁴ But is it possible to select according to these qualities? And how do we develop them if there are no role models in the environment to serve as examples for study, for more senior professions or for the formation of a CV that contains activities relevant to the study programme?

Selection without consideration for the social mechanisms at play will lead to a skewed student population, benefiting neither the university or the employment market. Greater diversity, after all, ensures that we gather multiple perspectives on the world and on social issues. By doing so we also teach our students to feel at home in an international and multicultural society, with due attention to the associated opportunities and challenges.

Before we start putting all of our faith in selection, let us as a university first commit to creating a high-quality and inclusive curriculum, one that will allow our students to shine. Academic success is the result of a programme that engages and retains students, with a commitment to social and academic integration.⁵ The culture of a study programme ultimately determines the accessibility of academia, which is just as important as encouraging talent, excellence and success rates.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have outlined the first of the democratic shortfalls, which is the result of rash selection procedures. I will now proceed to the second, which concerns quality policy. The quality of university education and research is realised at the programme and research-group level, with a leading role for staff, lecturers and researchers. There are literally mounds of research reports demonstrating that giving staff a certain level of freedom in performing their duties is an absolute must for achieving top quality.⁶ However, we remain stubborn when it comes to professional freedom. Centralised regulations have led to increased regulatory pressure within institutions. When such regulations fail to work, they tend not to be abolished but instead replaced with new ones, creating a tangled web of regulations requiring more and more monitoring. Management expert Roel in 't Veld put a name to this phenomenon long ago, calling it 'policy accumulation'.⁷ He noticed that people and organisations become suffocated by it, and are no longer motivated to take responsibility themselves. While regulatory pressure increases, problem-solving and learning capacity remains stagnant, and probably even drops. The resulting dynamic across all of higher education does nothing to improve quality.

⁴ Niessen, A.S.M., Meijer, R.R., & Tendeiro, J.N. (2016). Predicting performance in higher education using proximal predictors. *PLoS ONE*, 11(4): e0153663. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0153663.

⁵ Pascarella, E.T., & Terenzini, P.T. (2005). *How College Affects Students* (Vol. 2): A Third Decade of Research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁶ See, for example: Organisation for Economic Co-ordination and Development (2011). *Education at a glance: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD.

⁷ In 't Veld, R. (2006). *Regeldruk en regelzucht* [Regulations: pressure and mania]. Government Gazette, October.

Nonetheless, quality policy by both the government and institutions is mostly set out as regulations, sanctions and financial incentives. The cultural facet of quality policy – what individuals themselves contribute in order to improve education and research – is hidden from view. An authoritative university with a distinct quality culture, on the other hand, gives researchers some control over the content of their work, the conditions under which they can perform effectively, and the partnerships they wish to enter into that transcend the boundaries of their own discipline or institution. This produces institutions able to react to developments in society in a flexible, responsible and pro-active manner.

Professional freedom does not mean individual free reign, however. Individual staff members or professors, for example, should not have the freedom to demand that their research topics be included as modules in any Bachelor or Master's programme. That is not the image I have of the research-intensive university that the UvA aims to be. Producing an appealing and challenging curriculum requires teamwork; it is not merely the sum of individual parts. Various experts may – or even must – be involved: programme directors, College/Graduate School directors, department chairs, and even central departments such as Academic Affairs. Checks and balances are necessary in order to guarantee quality. We need a culture in which we work together towards a shared vision of education, student involvement, community building within the institution, academic leadership and a robust and fair HR policy – as well as one where we organise critical reflection and feedback.

Creating a robust quality culture requires trust, which in turn thrives on a delicate balance between regulation and freedom. I have noticed that instead, the government and universities have ended up with their backs to one another. The New Public Management discourse is at odds with the Humboldtian higher education ideal, and central territorialism conflicts with a desire for decentralised administration and professional autonomy. Increasing accountability requirements and the need to exclude all possible risks at the outset have dominated higher education policy – and all without establishing a relationship between the quality culture *within* the institution and individual study programmes. For a democratic university wishing to include social representation, I see the restoration of joint responsibility as a matter of major importance. We as the Executive Board wish to be the catalyst in this process, and devote focused attention to our procedures and conduct: or in other words, the normative component of good governance.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This brings me to the third and last democratic shortfall. Who governs the university? Or, more to the point: what defines a democratic method of governance?

To me, consultative bodies and organising critical dialogue with the academic community are essential components of 'good governance'. There has never been an institution that suffered from criticism – quite the opposite. Our university has various consultative bodies, Boards of Studies, and committees for this purpose, such as the University Committee on Research (UOC) and the University Committee on Education (UCO). We need to foster these bodies. At the same time, consultation should not be limited to official bodies. Our challenge

is to give all committed and enthusiastic students and staff a voice in governing the university.

In short, what we need is more democracy. As early as the mid-1980s, Benjamin Barber⁸ drew a distinction between weak and strong democracies. Strong democracies focus on participation by everyone in all manifestations of social and political life, not only by a parliamentary elite. The recent protestations within the UvA relate to this distinction: many people feel like they go unheard, despite being represented via official bodies. A strong democratic university respects official representative and advisory bodies, but does not stop there. Just as a resilient democracy is born of individualistic citizens and must be able to rely on the democratic process itself⁹, so too is the university born of the intellectual capital of all of its students and staff, and must provide them with instruments to contribute their ideas. And not as the last step in the decision-making process, but from the very outset.

On the one hand, a democratic university must provide for specific values, for the things that drive people and bring them together. On the other – and here's the rub – we must be able to peacefully maintain a variety of perspectives on any emergent issues. This is the 'golden rule': do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and agree to disagree. We must learn to deal with conflicting principles, with majority decisions and minority rights, and with the power of arguments and of numbers. The proponents of a direct democracy keenly address the crisis of legitimacy among our existing democratic bodies: people have a vote, but not a voice; people can be heard, but there is a lack of dialogue. At the same time, they are less concerned with the decisive power that a university also needs – for example, when addressing problems such as insufficient research funding, the undervaluing of education, or the obstacles to interdisciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration both within the Netherlands and outside its borders. In the words of Flemish writer and cultural historian David van Reybrouck: it is about striking a balance between the two fundamental criteria of efficiency and legitimacy.¹⁰

The discussion surrounding the level of university democracy is not limited to Amsterdam – it also rages elsewhere, albeit without media coverage. The UvA is precisely the institution that can take the lead in resolving democratic shortfalls; its 'close relationship' with the media will help to reach and involve the public, as well as our own students and staff.¹¹ In conjunction with consultative bodies, we as a board are aiming to strengthen our representative democracy. We will make more extended use of deliberative forums and consultative meetings where we can exchange ideas. More deliberation leads to greater involvement, more innovation and more effective problem-solving strategies.¹² Examples of

⁸ Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy. Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

⁹ Gunsteren, H. van (2008). *Bouwen op burgers* [Citizens as the foundation]. Amsterdam: Van Genneep.

¹⁰ Reybrouck, D. (2015). *Tegen verkiezingen* [Against elections]. Amsterdam/Antwerp: *De Bezige Bij*. Fung (2015) also gives the criteria of social justice.

¹¹ Hajer, M. (2011). *Gezaghebbend besturen: waarom is het zo moeilijk?* [Authoritative governance: why is it so difficult?] In H. Dijkstra & R. Hagendijk (ed.), *Onzekerheid troef: het betwiste gezag van de wetenschap* [Uncertainty trumps: the contested authority of academia] (pp.53-74). Amsterdam: Van Genneep.

¹² Fung, A. (2015). Putting the Public Back into Governance: The Challenges of Citizen Participation and Its Future. *Public Administration Review*, 75(4), 513–522.

consultative meetings include sessions by Boards of Studies and staff networks or study associations, but also consultations such as those to be undertaken soon by the Democratisation & Decentralisation committee. Under the motto of 'Amsterdam can always go one step further', we can stretch the legislation governing the organisation of university administration to the limit if necessary. Otherwise there is always the experimental clause in the Higher Education and Research Act.

We also see no problem with making room in university committees, bodies and networks for young people: for students, PhD students and post-docs. They are the beating heart of the future, and it is the university's responsibility to prepare them for it. We can only fulfil this responsibility with the involvement and verve of the new generation themselves.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have spoken about democratic shortfalls that are an issue not only at the UvA, but also at other higher education institutions; I have divided the shortfalls into three components: those caused by increased selection, by quality policy and by a lack of dialogue within the institution.

The Executive Board will endeavour to address each of these shortcomings. In doing so, we will not forget that the UvA is a part of society. We will serve the interests of the institution within the limitations of the public interest, while remaining in consultation with the entire academic community. Together we must have a meaningful message to convey regarding the social value of ambitious education and research, and the role of intellectuals in society. This is a task that we are only too happy to shoulder.

In conclusion, I would like to give you an example of a contemporary way for universities to fulfil their role in society. We are proud to announce that the Institute for Advanced Study will soon officially be opening its doors. This is no institute in the traditional sense, but a networking organisation that gives researchers a safe haven – free of financial and other limitations between disciplines – to devote themselves to fundamental research and social issues. Modern universities cannot function without external collaboration, both nationally and internationally. Only in this way can we respond effectively to the major challenges of our day, such as the monumental technological and social consequences of the digital revolution. This is no autonomous, self-actuating process, but one whose management requires cross-disciplinary collaboration. Our success in this regard with the Institute for Advanced Study gives hope for the future.