



# Science and democracy

Speech delivered by UvA Executive Board President Geert ten Dam during the opening ceremony of the 2022-2023 academic year on Monday, 5 September 2022.

Dear colleagues and students, dear guests,

Welcome all!

And a special welcome to Peter-Paul Verbeek, who will become our new Rector Magnificus on 1 October. It's great that you have already joined us for this opening, and we look forward to you joining the UvA.

It is wonderful to see you all here; hopefully, everyone is well rested after the summer break.

This year, we are opening our academic year under the theme of 'Science and democracy'. How can we, as a university, contribute to a resilient democratic society?

Democracy is not something to be taken for granted. The international rule of law and our democratic values are under threat. At the international level, from events such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. And in the Netherlands, from growing inequality, disinformation and mistrust. For decades, Dutch citizens had a high degree of confidence in democracy. In 2021, however, the childcare benefits scandal and the lengthy formation period of the new government dealt a severe blow to that trust.<sup>[1]</sup> Since then, the 'gap' between politicians and citizens has been a topic of discussion everywhere you look. The second corona wave, and other recent crises – inflation, nitrogen, housing – have only exacerbated the degree of mistrust. Kim Putters, former director of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), puts it sharply – to summarise: Citizens' trust

in the government is declining because the government has too little faith in its citizens and fails to take into account the differences between those citizens in terms of perceptions, motives and capabilities.<sup>[2]</sup> This undermines democracy.

Yet there is more to democracy than the relationship between citizens and government. A resilient democracy is also about the relationships between its citizens, and about having the ability and freedom to participate in the social sphere as you see fit, being involved in decisions about it and allowing others the space for this as well. Without social and political citizenship, there can be no strong democracy. International comparative research – the ICCS study coordinated by the Educational Sciences of the UvA<sup>[3]</sup> – shows that young people in the Netherlands achieve lower scores in these areas than their peers in other countries<sup>[4]</sup>. This is important because citizenship and attitudes toward democracy are formed during adolescence. After that, a person's views tend to remain relatively stable.<sup>[5]</sup>

You might be wondering: If our young people are scoring poorly on aspects of citizenship, why have I seen no evidence of this myself, here at the university? That could well be because there is a marked difference between educational levels in this regard. Students from pre-university education support democratic values more strongly than students from pre-vocational education. Compared to those with fewer years of schooling, the students from pre-university education are also generally more confident in their own citizenship skills and tend to place a higher value on social and political participation. In addition, this difference is more pronounced in the Netherlands than in other countries.<sup>[6]</sup>

All in all, there is a very real danger that values such

as freedom, equality, mutual trust, participation and reliability (for instance, the reliability of information) will be eroded. And this poses a threat to our democracy.

Can the UvA do anything about this? Should the UvA do something about this?

If you ask me, the answer to both questions is a resounding 'yes'. There are four ways in which our university can contribute to a resilient democratic society. First, we can contribute – and are already doing so extensively – by conducting research into the mechanisms that serve to foster or undermine democracy. Second, we can devote greater attention to academic citizenship within our degree programmes. Third, we should ensure our voice is heard in societal discourse, especially as it pertains to areas in which democracy is being undermined. Fourth, I believe we are supporting democracy when we offer an academic home to students and academics from conflict areas.

Let us take a closer look at these four points.

The first is conducting research into democracy. Political science has a particularly rich tradition in this area. Take, for instance, Sarah de Lange's work on populism or Tom van der Meer's research into citizens' trust in the political system and dealing with political representation. Who has a seat at the table, and to whom do people listen?

Other studies explore topics like the relationship between artificial intelligence and the democratic function of the media, for example, with the aim of enhancing the reliability of information. One place this research is being conducted is in the ELSA lab launched last year as a collaborative partnership between the UvA, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and Centrum Wiskunde & Informatica. Claes de Vreese, our university professor and one of the driving forces behind the ELSA lab, will tell you more about that in a moment.

Other studies deal with the liveability of

neighbourhoods and the social cohesion within them. They explore how citizens experience democracy in their everyday lives – and how we can strengthen their engagement. People must feel confident that they belong and that they matter, regardless of their sociodemographic background.

I could give a great many more examples of UvA research that contributes to a resilient democracy: from research into AI models that do not discriminate to studies aimed at effectively developing citizenship competences in secondary education. I think we are doing well in this particular regard.

This brings me to the second way we, as a university, can contribute to a resilient democracy. We can give academic citizenship a prominent place in every degree programme. While this is objective is explicitly stated for the Honours Programme, it has not been incorporated into other programmes in the same way. I feel we must do better in this area.

Academic citizenship is important for all our students – not as an extra option, but as an intrinsic element of every programme. I consider it our core task to train students who will be willing and able to use their academic assets for the betterment of the community. Who will be well-prepared to support and propagate democratic values. Who will have a strong awareness of context, complexity and social justice, and be familiar with the values and habits of their discipline. A well-developed moral compass is needed to break new ground, making use of one's own expertise, and that of others as well. They must also remain open to challenges from those with dissenting opinions – including people outside their own circle. Our students must be able to cooperate with others from higher professional and senior secondary vocational backgrounds, as doing so drives innovation and strengthens the social glue holding our society together.

Further to that, it is vital that students have more opportunities for community service learning. This means gaining knowledge and skills by taking part in projects that benefit the community. Community

service learning brings together people from diverse backgrounds so that they can learn from one another. A great example of this is the community project Zeeburgia AUC School Coaches in Amsterdam-Oost, which is the neighbourhood I live in. Students from Amsterdam University College provide free homework tutoring to members of Zeeburgia's youth football club. This non-commercial homework help is a way to combat the growing education gap driven by private tutoring services. At the same time, it brings the university students into contact with worlds they are often unfamiliar with: those of football players and their parents, in which many households have a low income and no financial assets. The sense of purpose this gives the students is made clear by the fact that many of them continue to provide homework help as volunteers after they have obtained the necessary credits. Another fine example is the community service learning project on Curaçao. This was established by Pepijn van Neerijnen and Koert van Buiren from the Faculty of Economics and Business and involves students completing tasks assigned by local businesses in a cross-cultural setting. The result is a win-win scenario for all parties.

Community service learning is one of the ambitions set out in our most recent Strategic Plan. And we already have a fine report, including recommendations for putting it into practice.<sup>[7]</sup> A working group has begun the implementation process. The most vital task is to embed community services within the degree programmes, creating space for substantive discussion and reflection on past experiences. Only then – as various studies have taught us – will the desired learning effect on students be achieved.<sup>[8]</sup>

As it happens, community service learning is known to have another effect as well: it increases students' level of engagement with their degree programme. One of the questions that Mark Deuze, professor of Media Studies at our university, will address in his keynote speech is how we can get students more involved in shaping our curricula. Contributing to the community and demonstrating engagement with your

degree programme are important elements of academic citizenship.

Dear guests,

In short, the UvA can contribute to a resilient democracy by conducting research and by permanently embedding academic citizenship in its degree programmes. The third way we can strengthen democracy is to advocate for a number of fundamental values and to speak up about their importance.

In this regard, Putin's attack on Ukraine has created an additional obligation for us – a strongly-felt sentiment within the UvA. We cannot remain silent when democracy is threatened, in whatever fashion. As a university, academic engagement is our weapon. Our Strategic Plan states that we are both engaged and independent. We can and must speak out in defence of freedom, equality and reliable information. This also means seeking out the debate on equal opportunities, social injustices and exclusion. A good example of this is urban geographer and UvA staff member Cody Hochstenbach, who – based on years of research – continues to draw attention to the causes of the housing crisis in the Netherlands, and especially in Amsterdam.

Academics must be given the time and appreciation they need to express themselves openly. Unfortunately, those efforts are regularly met with malicious reactions, verbal attacks, intimidation or threats. Luckily, however, there is growing attention for this issue, including at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Our academics deserve our full support when facing such disgusting displays of hostility. UvA employees in the Press Office, Legal Affairs and Integral Safety Management departments are standing by to help them with steps such as filing a police report, monitoring social media or pursuing legal action, if desired. The UvA brochure *Researchers + (Social) Media* was also recently published, containing more than 100 practical tips.<sup>[9]</sup>

Speaking out is therefore our third means of contributing to a resilient democracy. The fourth and final way we can contribute is by offering an academic home to students and academics who have been forced to flee conflict zones. We intend to expand the support we have organised for Ukrainian students, making it a long-term effort. That way, other refugees can benefit from the experiences we have had in the past year. This could include guest accounts, potentially in combination with physical study spaces for refugee students, so that they can continue their personal development - that could offer them hope. It might also mean job mediation for academics with refugee status. We must be able to match their capacities to knowledge institutions in the region where they are now living. For a small number of them, we can offer a place and support within the UvA, thanks in part to the efforts of the University Local Consultative Committee (UCLO), the consultative body of the trade unions and the Executive Board.

Dear colleagues and students, dear guests,

At the beginning of this speech, I asked whether the UvA can and should take action to protect and strengthen our democracy. I've made it clear that we can do something. In conclusion, I'd also like to emphasise once again that we should do something.

When freedom and justice are under threat, when mutual mistrust and inequality are on the rise, and when participation and active citizenship are dwindling, we cannot stand idly by. We are more than mere observers of a societal phenomenon. We cannot pretend to be a socially engaged organisation while, at the same time, doing nothing when our fundamental values are in jeopardy. We must willingly shoulder our responsibility for helping to ensure the proper function and resilience of the democratic system.

This is our social mandate; it is in keeping with who we are and what the UvA does. We pride ourselves on our social engagement. I am asking you now to accept your very real responsibility for a resilient democratic

system. Through your research – where possible and appropriate – but in any case, by devoting attention to academic citizenship in your programme's curriculum; by speaking out in societal discourses that touch on your area of expertise; and by supporting refugees. And let us know if we, Executive Board and deans, can help in any way.

I wish you all an inspiring academic year!

[1] Den Ridder, J., Vermeij, L., Maslowski, R., & Van 't Hul, J. (2022). *Burgerperspectieven 2021* [Citizens' perspectives 2021] | 4. The Hague: SCP.

[2] Putters, K. (2022). *Het einde van de BV Nederland. Over de noodzaak van een verhaal voor onze samenleving*. Amsterdam: Prometheus.

[3] International Civic and Citizenship Education Study

[4] Munniksma, A., Dijkstra, A.B., Van der Veen, I., Ledoux, G., Van de Werfhorst, H., & Ten Dam, G. (2017). *Burgerschap in het voortgezet onderwijs. Nederland in vergelijkend perspectief*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

[5] Shehata, A., & Amnå, E. (2017). The development of political interest among adolescents: A communication mediation approach using five waves of panel data. *Communication Research*, 1, 1–23; Russo, S., & Stattin, H. (2017). Stability and Change in Youths' Political Interest. *Social Indicators Research*, 132, 643–658.

[6] Munniksma et al. (2017).

[7] *Maak werk van maatschappelijke betrokkenheid van studenten: een wederzijds belang* [Promote the social engagement of students: a mutual interest]. Recommendation from the working group on Student Social Engagement.

[8] Tijsma, G. et al (2020). Becoming productive 21st century citizens: A systematic review uncovering design principles for integrating community service learning into higher education courses, *Educational Research*, 62, 390-413; Van Goethem, A., Van Hoof, A., Oróbio de Castro, B., Van Aken, M., & Hart, D. (2014). The role of reflection in the effects of community service on adolescent development: A meta-analysis. *Child Development*, 85, 2114-2130.

[9] University of Amsterdam (2022). *Wetenschappers in de (sociale) media. Meer dan 100 praktische tips* [Over 100 practical tips for academics in social and other media]. Amsterdam: UvA.