

Connections. *On governing a university*

Speech delivered by UvA Executive Board President Edith Hooge during the opening ceremony of the 2024-2025 academic year on Monday, 2 September 2024.

Dear attendees, dear students and colleagues,

‘The aim is not the economic value of the products, but the development of social power and insight.’¹

In 1899, the American philosopher John Dewey gave his now famous lecture on the school as a community. The first principle of education, according to Dewey, is not economic value, but the development of social power and insight. In suggesting as much, he emphasises the strongly social character of education² and its intertwining with society.

I learned this during my studies in Educational Sciences in the 1980s at this university. Although Dewey was talking about an elementary school in the nineteenth century, his work also provides a clear perspective on the principles of a university. A university as a community. Scientific education and research as a thoroughly social affair. A university is at the service of and in the midst of society.

Because science serves society as a whole – our welfare and our prosperity. That is the power of a university. Given this, it is incomprehensible that we are on the verge of the largest and most reckless cuts to higher education in decades, amid a bleak anti-intellectual climate in the Netherlands and beyond.

I admit this is not an optimistic statement at the opening of the academic year. But let us not beat about the bush: the announced cuts will affect the very foundations of knowledge and the meaning of science, and undermine the stability of precisely

those institutions that bring us new knowledge and innovation.

Several universities have already indicated that, if this really goes ahead, they will have to cut back by more than ten percent. It goes without saying that we will oppose this, politically, legally and socially. By seeking publicity, by advocating in The Hague, by joining or supporting demonstrations, and by – if necessary – going to court.

The current political climate requires working together and forging connections between and within universities. This is a vital task and I want to discuss it in more detail today.

The past year has not been easy. There was great anger, frustration, helplessness, fear and sadness about the terrible violence in Israel and Gaza. There were calls for action and there were demonstrations on and around our campuses. But the demonstrations often resulted in intimidation, violence and destruction. There is much disgust and anger about this among our students and staff, about the social and physical insecurity, the damage, the deployment of the police. However great and justified the anger and frustration about the situation in the Middle East may be, we have the task of protecting our university community and taking everyone’s feelings, situation and perspective into account. Intimidation, destruction and violence can play no part in that.

These events, experiences and emotions leave their mark on our community. It is awful that there are students and staff who feel physically or socially threatened and unwelcome at the UvA. They must be able to count on our protection.

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It is worrying that meetings discussing open academic debate must be cancelled due to safety risks. And this while the free exchange of ideas and open debate are at the heart of what a university is about.

It is also disturbing that there are concerns about the right to demonstrate. Being critical, making your point and demonstrating should be available to everyone, and that includes at the UvA.

These events, experiences and emotions put us under pressure as a community. We understand each other less well, find it ever harder to connect with each other and no longer always recognise what unites us: our shared values, the goals and the purpose of this wonderful university.

What characterises a strong university community? From a social network perspective³, the answer is: numerous strong connections between all those people who form the UvA community.

And yet, I repeat, connection is precisely what is needed at this moment.

Connection is not always easy to achieve in our type of organisation, because we are not particularly built for it. A university has many academic, organisational and social layers, which often function at cross purposes to each other, have different values and purposes, and are only 'loosely coupled'⁴.

That is why universities are limitedly governable⁵.

They are not simple top-down systems, where you make a decision at the top and the result rolls out at the bottom. Powers and responsibilities are actually spread as broadly as possible, because professional autonomy produces the best scientific research, education and valorisation – and this also holds true for the UvA.

In addition, the UvA is also an organisation of, let's say, bureaucracy⁶ and business. We are the former because of our accountability for the expenditure of public funds; the latter because universities are also employment organisations, manage expensive buildings and launch innovations and start-ups.

And finally, as I mentioned, the UvA is also a social community, a mini-society,⁷ with various networks⁸ made up of members of our community, as well as action and interest groups, and those making representations or giving advice. With shared, though also sometimes divergent, values and principles.

Stakeholders in all these areas and layers compete for influence and a say, and exercise power and countervailing power. Governing a university is therefore polycentric and comes down to a balancing act: constantly weighing up, considering and deliberating within a complex interplay of forces. It is not without reason that, since the 1960s, apt characterisations have been given by the sciences of public administration and organisation and policy of the limited governability of universities, such as the 'Garbage Can' model⁹, 'Organised Anarchy'¹⁰ and 'Herding Cats'¹¹.

That is not necessarily a bad thing and perhaps it is even a good thing, because that limited governability guarantees the autonomy that is necessary for the varied practice of scientific education and research. But it does make university governance unclear, and decisions and policies are not always widely supported. And, as I have said, it is also unhelpful when it comes to making connections within the university. And, to reiterate, those are what we really need now.

How do we achieve clearer governance, broader support and more connections within the UvA? What do we do centrally, what decentrally, when is

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3. Cross & Parker (2004) 4. Weick (1976) 5. Hooge (2013) 6. Du Gay (2000) 7. Dewey, (1944) [1916], p. 360 8. Cross & Parker (2004) 9. Cohen, March & Olsen (1972)

10. Cohen and March (1986) 11. Hammond (2004)

consultation possible, when can one contribute one's ideas? As the Executive Board and deans, we must be clearer about this. No one would object to the implementation of new privacy rules being decided and managed centrally. And the same would apply to HR policy or building management.

But for some subjects, 'joint governance,' as I will call it here, is a better and more fruitful model than choosing between central or decentral. These are subjects where it is desirable that a great deal of responsibility and influence be placed with those who 'create' education and research together on a daily basis: students, lecturers, researchers, staff and managers. By connecting their assorted knowledge, skills, experience and motivation, decisions and policies can gain broader support and help bring the UvA community as a whole closer together.

Joint governance requires responsible behavior and involvement from the entire university community. It requires that the university is a place for polyphony, a place where all voices count. In this context, the levels of support for, and inclusivity of, the representative participatory bodies is a point of attention.

In addition to the participatory bodies, there are ample opportunities for involvement, influence and polyphony within the UvA, for example via deliberative¹² forums such as the University Forum and the Senate, or in student associations or the students' union. There are programme committees, the student assessorship, the Central PhD Council, various UvA-wide committees and there are numerous informal avenues for discussion, debate, influence and leadership.

We must maintain all these opportunities for joint governance and, where necessary, breathe new life into, sharpen or renew them.

Joint governance contributes to connections being forged in complex areas; for example, studying with a disability, drawing up codes of conduct, or setting up ethics committees.

And it helps to restore mutual connection and trust. After the (run-up to the) demonstrations and all that came with them, numerous initiatives have been taken in recent months relating to listening, dialogue and consultation. We will continue with these forms of joint governance, aimed at restoring connection and trust, in the coming academic year.

Finally, I would like to come to something else that also requires connections within and between universities – including internationally; something that we also have to face. In the report *Krachtig en kwetsbaar* (Powerful and Vulnerable)¹³, the Stolker Commission notes that academic freedom is not a given and cannot be taken for granted.

In order to safeguard academic freedom at the UvA, we need to reach firm connections on three points. Firstly, we must actively share opinions about academic freedom with each other. About what it is – for example, the responsibility to employ nuance and use different perspectives. And about what it is not – for example, fanaticism or taking unwavering positions¹⁴. By doing so we can ensure that academic freedom is recognised as a shared value within the UvA community and it is clear where we stand when putting it into practice.

Secondly, we can connect our students to academic freedom by educating and challenging them in it. After all, they are also the explicit bearers of it¹⁵. For example, teach them that at university systematic doubt and academic caution take precedence over certainty¹⁶. Or show them how you can choose a position yet remain curious about counterarguments and other points of view. This can be done by paying explicit attention to the subject throughout the year, for example through integration into study curricula, as a separate subject, during introduction days, at graduation.

Finally, academic leadership is a strong binding agent – leadership that encourages us to ask

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each other for explanations and accountability about the implementation of academic freedom and professional and moral responsibility¹⁷. And leadership with the courage to address issues and set standards – for example, when open academic debate is disturbed or positions are imposed unilaterally.

The freedom of academics is under pressure in an increasing number of countries, including in the Netherlands and across Europe. There is increasing polarisation and we are witnessing ‘the disappearance or at least quieting of the political middle ground and a hardening of debate styles’¹⁸. This can cause splits in university communities, including our own, with academic freedom coming under pressure. Returning to Dewey’s work¹⁹: seeking connection is also learning together. The power of learning comes not from questing for certainty, but in embracing inquiry and doubt.

As a university, we must remain well connected to society and continue to serve it – by educating young people well and shaping them for responsible roles in society, by practicing independent science and by actively continuing to share our knowledge and insights.

It is all hands on deck.

Thank you for your attention.

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