



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

# **THE UNCONVENTIONAL FUTURE**

**by**

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of the University of Amsterdam  
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## The unconventional future

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, the University of Amsterdam is 385 years old. We do have a noteworthy past; we do play a prominent role in today's society. Yet I would like to take you on a journey into the future. Because if we are to maintain this prominent role, it is imperative that we think about our position in tomorrow's world.

A couple of months ago, I attended the Science and Technology in Society Forum in Kyoto – an annual conference bringing together representatives from the political, economic and academic world. The opening session was titled *Science and Technology for the Future of Humankind*. Quite concretely, it discussed the impact of science and technology on the future of society. A future characterised by robotics and artificial intelligence? It remains to be seen.

Our society is undergoing profound and rapid change. Geopolitically, we might be entering a new era of post-liberalism, isolationism, conflicts and the end of the traditional political paradigm of previous decades. Brexit, Daesh, migration, trade barriers: our system is clearly being tested, conventional economic views are being challenged. What is the position of the nation state? How do we combat communicable diseases? What impact do megacities have on our social and economic life? How do new financial systems change our economic behaviour? And what will higher education look like in future? [1]

Besides societal changes, the current international academic system is running up against its own limitations. It has reached its limits in terms of flexibility, adaptability and disruptiveness precisely at a time when flexibility, adaptability and disruptiveness are most needed.

As I've said, we play a prominent role today, but are we ready to maintain this role tomorrow? Allow me to answer straight away: I don't think so.

First, we want to educate the next generation for their future. Yet the improved accessibility of education has led to an enormous increase in student numbers and the question is how we can assure the academic nature for each and everyone?

Second, we need time to reflect and to conduct research freely, yet we feel the pressure to produce more and more.

Third, we want to think about the university's future, yet we feel trapped in a conservative international academic system.

I realise this is a somewhat depressing start [...] So in the ten minutes I have left, I would like to address elements of the future strategy for our education and research and to highlight why we need trust and autonomy as a university. These fit seamlessly in current processes of change within the University of Amsterdam.

### **Implications for the relationship between education and research**

Ladies and gentlemen, like me, some of you here today were born in the fifties or sixties of the previous century. (\*) Let's keep in mind that our students will be working at least until the fifties and sixties of this century. They need the intellectual capacity, the actual knowledge, the skills and the personality to deal with the societal changes I outlined earlier. How do we provide for this? Allow me to

discuss four possible ways which we will in the coming years further debate within our community, fine-tune and make concrete.

First, education needs to be founded on the latest knowledge provided by research. The curriculum should be constantly evaluated and periodically adjusted to ensure our students participate in research-based learning. We can only achieve this if researchers embrace education. This allows students to experience the development of research as well as to participate in the discovery and contextualising of 'new' knowledge. The role of the 'Board of Studies' (OC's) will be key in this regard. Together with students and lecturers, the organisation of the Boards of Studies will be one of my priorities in the coming months.

Second, education should be appreciated and rewarded just as much as research. In human resource policy, education and research need to be recognised and weighted equally. The popular belief that one cannot be good in both research and education is simply untrue. Experience and literature show that learning improves when students are taught by a research expert [2](\*). I realise the international rankings' narrow focus *on research* doesn't help us, but we have our own responsibility to take.

Third, we should consider reversing the order sometimes. Normally, education follows research; an existing research field results in the creation of a parallel course. However, consider the fact that many students today choose an interdisciplinary field like Future Planet Studies and Politics, Psychology, Law and Economics. I am convinced their choices project a future need. Students of successful courses can therefore inspire us to initiate and to foster interdisciplinary research [3]. Imagine being a student in such a course and being able to initiate research, for instance in a PhD track with a group of

peers.... I don't know about you, but if I were a student such a prospect would excite me.

And finally, quality assurance should be less control and more inspiration. Obviously, quality assurance is mandatory for ensuring the accreditation of the university as a whole. Nevertheless, I am a strong believer in universities being responsible for the quality assurance of their own curricula with, let's be clear, more involvement of students and academics. All of us together can improve and innovate more by learning from each other than by complying to outside control.

### **Implications for research policy**

Ladies and gentlemen, I would now like to turn to research. The question here is: are we flexible and quick enough in changing our policies and priorities? What do you think, yes or no?

I didn't think so.

In our society, knowledge is ubiquitous and instantaneous. We are experiencing the fundamental changes being unleashed on every aspect of our lives and our communities. We are witnessing how powerful ICT devices are transforming the way we collaborate and conduct our research as well as their impact on society and politics. Information can't be contained by borders; knowledge is both distributed and accessible. This means that if we are to stay ahead, if we want to be leading in research, then we will need to be adaptable and disruptive. Here I would like to make a clear statement: this requires curiosity-driven research and plenty of imagination in all disciplines

I see four ways to build on our existing strengths whilst facilitating new research.

First, the humanities and the social sciences. Our society needs more and not less graduates in the humanities. In a recent lecture, UCLA chancellor Gene Block said, and I quote: 'I believe that every major problem that we face today, whether technological or not, requires contextual decision-making informed by humanistic study.' [4] In other words we will maintain, foster and strengthen a greater degree of methodological pluralism and together we should make this the motto of our comprehensive university. That implies we get to know and respect each other's research paradigms. And actually, I do believe in the imaginative character of fine arts in this context [5]. Our aim is to create a public space for philosophical, ethical, epistemological and cultural research and discussion for a world in continuous evolution as opposed to a static one.

Second, open science. This offers new possibilities for science and scholarly research. Open online collaborative research can, for instance, widen the scope of social research by expanding what I would call extensive qualitative data collection and by online collaborative and collective interpretation. This has the potential to widen participation in research but also to transcend perspectives of individual interpretations.

Third, complexity research. This research concentrates on the exploration of mutual interactions and on the emerging unpredictable behaviour of complex systems. A need exists for novel scientific instruments and narratives for complexity research. The recently launched UvA Institute for Advanced Study aims to answer this need.

Fourth, data-based science. Data science has become a research discipline in its own right, including the fields of healthcare, economics, the social sciences and the humanities. We need to

provide for this, and for the centres and facilities to make this work. At the same time, we have to understand the risks. These not only concern privacy and transparency, but also the very real threat of inserting inaccuracies through existing prejudices and social biases into the corresponding algorithm. Here again, I would like to stress the importance of the humanistic views.

### **Implications for the academic system**

Ladies and gentlemen, I have put forward suggestions for strengthening the relationship between education and research and for bolstering research policy. Allow me to discuss two issues related to the international academic system.

First, we should be honest in acknowledging that the system is slow to adapt. Its rankings endorse conservatism. This is also reflected in the review processes of funding agencies, where innovative research areas still have to struggle for recognition against 'safer' traditional domains. Interdisciplinary work requires open-mindedness, commitment and significant levels of investment. The University of Amsterdam will embrace this even more in the coming years.

The second point relates to our responsibility and our autonomy.

We are asked on the one hand to serve the public good and to justify our existence in the public realm [6], while at the same time being expected to drive economic growth for the private sector.

To me this is a question of responsibility, trust and autonomy, and it is essential that we protect all three fiercely. If we continue on the same path, we will neither be public enough nor private enough. As a university – and allow me minister Bussemaker to, through you, address our government in The Hague – we need trust and likewise freedom to establish the right framework for our university, and to

reach out to private partners to collaborate and so doing strengthen our academic research. In the same way, we need trust and likewise the freedom to engage with society and to create a public space for the future. In these times of change, participation of the academic community is essential – of students, researchers and lecturers in mutual interaction – to ensure we realise private and public partnerships not as an end in itself, but primarily and foremost because it leads to better academic research and education.

## **Conclusions**

Ladies and gentlemen, to conclude.

First of all, if we are to take our promise to the current and next generation of students seriously, then it is our public duty to ensure the right balance between education and research. Second, we should use our imagination in defining the research priorities of the future and build the foundations on which such research can take place. And finally, we need to protect our autonomy whilst addressing the current international academic system in which we operate.

This is no easy task. It will require resourcefulness and creativity. We are prepared to step into the unknown, to question current methods and to have the courage to think broadly about the society of tomorrow.

With all this, the University of Amsterdam, as an academic community, will be ready for the future: an unconventional future. The theme of this years' lustrum will therefore be "Inspiring Generations". In various activities, we will look forward and aim not to convince but 'to inspire and to get inspired'. One of the initiatives

is 'The next big thing', a course discussing the future of science and scholarly research from ethical, societal and historical perspectives.

It is my belief that the University of Amsterdam is well placed to take up the challenge I outlined today. We do have the disciplinary strengths, we do have the framework for interdisciplinarity, and we will continue to build our education and research on both. But most of all, we can build on a vibrant community. We are not just a set of curious individuals. We are a community of idealists, an engaged academic community. Together we will be a permeable university in constant discussion across disciplines and in constant discussion with society.

We don't shy away from this debate, we welcome it.

I thank you.

[1] 'An avalanche is coming: higher education and the revolution ahead' Michael Barber, Katelyn Donnelly, Saad Rizvi. Institute for Public Policy Research, March 2013

[2] 'Teachers Make a Difference. What is the research evidence?' J. Hattie in *Professional Learning and Leadership Development* 2003

[3] 'Excellent Education in Research-rich Universities' D. Fung et al, to be published

[4] 'Priceless: the value proposition for the humanities' G.D. Block. Koninklijke Hollandse Maatschappij de Wetenschappen, Winterlezing, Haarlem 2016

[5]  
[https://artreview.com/features/november\\_2015\\_feature\\_timothy\\_morton\\_charisma\\_causality/](https://artreview.com/features/november_2015_feature_timothy_morton_charisma_causality/)

[6] 'The Changing Nature of Public Science' Helga Nowotny in *The Public Nature of Science under Assault* Ed. H. Nowotny, D. Pestre, E. Schmidt-Assman, H. Schulze-Fielitz, H-H. Trute. Springer Berlin 2010