



Generation Alpha

Speech delivered by UvA Executive Board President Geert ten Dam during the opening ceremony of the 2021-2022 academic year on Monday, 6 September 2021.

Dear listeners,

I don't know how *you* feel, but I'm very impressed by what I've heard. Many thanks to the speakers for sketching the challenges we face, for the special visions of the future and for their ideas about the role the university can play. For me, it's self-evident that we as a university should shape our work together with young people. After all, with our teaching and research, we influence long-term areas that will prove crucial for subsequent generations. We've already heard some examples: climate and sustainability, knowledge and data as a common good, equality and accessibility of secondary and higher education. Working together with young people on these issues is essential for what Roman Krznaric calls 'intergenerational justice'.^[1] Together, we must become aware of the legacy we are leaving for Generation Alpha – the generation born after 2010, the children of today, in other words. How can we make a difference for this generation?

I'll give you the answer right away: by fostering and strengthening our resilience. As a university and also as individuals.

A university that aims to contribute to a vital society cannot do without resilience. The future is uncertain. If we've learned anything from the coronavirus, it's that. The latest climate report by the IPCC points to an uncertain future too. Which is why our Strategic Plan – our policy plan for the coming six years – applies the umbrella term 'agility'. Our teaching, our research and the organisation as a whole must be able to respond to rapid changes. If a new global pandemic

occurs, we won't immediately have the resources to combat it. But what we can do, with the right research infrastructure, is develop effective vaccines at amazing speed. By organising our talents, knowledge and resources properly, we can face an uncertain future with more confidence and, to some degree, help to actively steer it.

That is why our Strategic Plan contains various goals for a resilient, agile university that is in step with its times. We want more interdisciplinary collaboration in our research. We want more partnerships with public and private organisations, more responsible use of data technologies aimed at innovation, and more interactive and accessible academic education. And finally, in all our activities, we strive for sustainability, inclusivity and independence. You can read the Strategic Plan on our website.

Dear colleagues and students,

Is it enough for a university to be resilient? No. Individuals are important as well. Something that receives less attention in the Strategic Plan, but which has been pushed high up on the agenda by the coronavirus, is the welfare of students. Their resilience is important, too. Allow me to explain what I mean.

I talk to many inspired, passionate students. They are committed to topics like our planet, climate issues, mindful use of raw materials and a more just society. They carry this passion into the classrooms, and that's wonderful to see.

There's another thing about this generation of students. I asked Emma Fuchs, former chair of ASVA: What struck you most during your committee year? She answered: 'The vulnerability of students'. Among other things, she cited difficulty with

studying, with money issues, with the coronavirus measures – and mental problems in general. We are also seeing other indications of psychosocial problems, insecurity and depression. In recent years our students have made much greater use of the services of student counsellors and student psychologists. The demand for psychosocial support comes partly from international students who haven't yet built a social network, but also from young adults who have grown up here.

I think young people really are under great pressure.^[2] They need to achieve a lot simultaneously: choosing the right course of studies, achieving top results without any 'delays' – and also building a well-filled CV. Excellence in higher education is associated more with students who excel and less with particularly good education. At the same time, young people worry about student debts, about hard-to-find work placements or jobs, and about the affordability of accommodation. For many of them, the combined burden is simply too much. The meritocracy has proven to be an illusion, that places the fruits of success and failure unilaterally on individuals.^[3] For this reason alone, I would wish for a more robust public sector, including educational institutions that better ensure accessibility, equality, diversity and inclusivity.

So the welfare of students and their individual resilience are specific concerns. What can the university do, apart from offering psychosocial help? The reflex is to provide students with more safety and protection, but we need to be careful of creating a vicious circle: the more problems students experience, the stronger the reflex to protect them, which makes them even more vulnerable. In 'The coddling of the American mind' Lukianoff and Haidt meticulously analyse this mechanism.^[4] They show how fear and depression among adolescents have increased strongly since 2010. Besides the pressure to achieve, patterns of upbringing and social media play a role here, too. In addition, more than ever before, students are expressing their vulnerability in terms of feelings of unsafety. And they are asking the university to safeguard them from these feelings at all times.

We need to do this up to a certain point. A sense of safety is a very positive thing, and we do not tolerate disrespect or transgressive behaviour. But when feelings of unsafety are linked to the content of our teaching, we move onto a slippery slope. The passion of students that I mentioned before leads to high alertness regarding themes such as sustainability, health and justice. That's a benefit. But if this alertness also leads to situations where students no longer want to be confronted with divergent opinions and unwelcome perspectives, then we lose the soul of academia. Fear of 'having the wrong opinion' – that is, being politically incorrect – inhibits critical thinking. I have noticed this in my own lectures as well.

We can't allow a situation in which certain themes or perspectives become increasingly hard to discuss. It's like trying to combat a pandemic with your hands tied behind your back. If our students wish to tackle urgent global problems in the future, they need to approach them from various directions. They need to encounter people who think differently and hold divergent viewpoints. They need to tolerate and discuss these viewpoints, even when they are hurtful. Only in this way can students develop a moral compass. I'm not advocating a lack of safety here. I'm advocating free speech and a university that teaches students intellectual resilience.

The curriculum in particular – this is the educational scientist in me speaking – should foster intellectual resilience. A new definition of a safe learning culture can help us here, a culture in which students are affirmed in a positive way and their independence is promoted. There is no room for intimidating, transgressive behaviour. But there *is* room for uncomfortable opinions and perspectives. The discussion is open, and everyone can say what he, she or they think. That way, we can seek a scientific foundation, counterarguments and evidence together.

In order to realise a learning culture like this, I'd like to see pedagogics become a more important component in our curriculum, as a supplement to the focus on course content and didactics. A good relationship between lecturers and students supports a sense of involvement in the teaching material as well

as learning achievement. Moreover, a good relationship like this benefits the well-being, autonomy and intellectual resilience of students. ‘No achievement without relationship,’ says UvA Professor Helma Koomen, who together with her research group has carried out extensive meta-analyses on this topic.^[5]

I hear you thinking: yet another thing added to the already heavy workload of lecturers; but Koomen and her colleagues show that a qualitatively good relationship also increases the well-being of lecturers. A poor relationship is bad for your sense of competence as a lecturer.^[6]

In short, a safe, strong learning culture allows us to foster the intellectual resilience of students. In addition to this, we will of course continue to provide psychosocial support for mental problems and support students who are having difficulties with the shift from protective secondary education to university. We do this with student psychologists, student counsellors and study advisers.

Dear all,

To sum up, can we make a difference for Generation Alpha? I think we can.

I have shown that we need a resilient university for the uncertain future that this generation is heading for.

Moreover, I’ve said that every young person also needs individual resilience. Here, I’ve drawn a distinction between, on the one hand, the mounting problems facing young people and, on the other, the mores of academia. These mounting problems urgently require solutions and a robust public sector. A free academic community requires a university that fosters the intellectual resilience of students and doesn’t coddle them too much. We do this by taking a firm stand, together with the students, for free speech and by putting a stronger focus on their well-being within the curriculum.

We are working hard on further development of the University Teaching Qualification, the Advanced University Teaching Qualification and the Educational Leadership Training programme. The Teaching Learning Centres have a key role to play in those efforts. I’d like to highlight two points of focus: the importance of good relations between lecturers and students, and intellectual resilience. If we keep those in mind, not only will today’s students benefit from a strong and safe learning culture, but their successors in Generation Alpha will too.

I thank you for your attention.

[1] Krznaric, R. (2020). *The good ancestor. How to Think Long Term in a Short-Term World*. London: W.H. Allen.

[2] See also SER Jongerenplatform (2019) *Hoge verwachtingen: Kansen and belemmeringen voor jongeren in 2019* Den Haag: SER.

[3] Young, M. (1958). *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033: An essay on education and society* London: Thames and Hudson; Sandel, M. J. (2020). *The Tyranny of Merit. What’s Become of the Common Good?* Penguin Books Ltd.

[4] Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2018) *The coddling of the American mind. How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure* Penguin Press.

[5] Roorda, D.L., Koomen, H.M. Y., Spilt, J.L., & Oort, F.J. (2011). The influence of affective teacher-student relationships on students’ school engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic approach. *Review of Educational Research*, 81, 493-529. Roorda, D.L., Jak. S., Zee, M., Oort, F.J., & Koomen, H.M.Y. (2017). Affective teacher-student relationships and students’ engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic update and test of the mediating role of engagement. *School Psychology Review*, 46 1-23.

[6] Ruiters, J. A. de, Poorthuis, A.M.G., Aldrup, K., & Koomen, H.M.Y. (2020). Teachers’ emotional experiences in response to daily events with individual students varying in perceived past disruptive behavior. *Journal of School Psychology*, 82 85-102.