

# Whatever happens: we're going to start again!

Speech delivered by UvA Executive Board President Geert ten Dam during the opening ceremony of the 2020-2021 academic year on Monday, 31 August 2020.

Dear UvA-community,

Whatever happens: we're going to start again! I'm glad about that, even if the way we're beginning this year is rather unusual. Six months ago, I couldn't have imagined that only a small group of people would be here today, or that the majority of my audience would be watching me on their screens.

Dear colleagues, it is what it is. Under these extraordinary circumstances, we are going to pour our heart and soul into the pursuit of academic knowledge. I'd like to welcome you all to the opening of the academic year. And I'd like to extend a special welcome to our new first-year students; I hope you manage to find your place within the UvA and our beautiful city.

I'd like to take a moment this afternoon to talk about the impact the coronavirus has had on our university. After that, I'd like to look ahead at what will be an especially challenging year.

Let me begin with the coronavirus and the health problems that the virus can cause. I very much hope that most of you have been spared these problems. My heart goes out to anyone who has personally suffered, or whose loved ones have suffered physical consequences from the virus. We are currently seeing a major appeal for young people – for students – to follow the coronavirus rules and prevent the virus from spreading further. I've noticed that our study and student associations are taking responsibility around this issue, which is great to see. Let us know what we can do to help you.

The coronavirus has had many consequences besides health problems – good and bad, and combinations of the two. For me, one of the good consequences is the enormous boost that online learning has received. In one giant leap, we crossed the digital threshold that the education sector has been tiptoeing towards for some time. Many of you have literally worked day and night to provide online teaching to your students. In no time, a 'Keep on Teaching' page appeared on Canvas, with practical information and tips. The good people at ICT Services made it possible to learn and work safely online.

I take my hat off to everyone concerned!

Another thing that was good to see was many staff members helping each other. I sincerely hope we can continue this teamwork, which would give a major boost to one of the priorities in our HR policy. That priority is giving equal recognition and value to teaching and research, and also to both individual and team performance.

Unfortunately, the coronavirus crisis has also brought us some things that aren't so good, or has exacerbated existing issues. Workloads were already substantial, and they haven't grown any smaller. UvA staff who worked from home beyond their full capacity might look askance at others who were out and about with yoga mats and tins of paint. Today, to mark the start of the academic year, WO in Actie has issued a pamphlet with no fewer than forty assertions about academia. The pamphlet identifies a number of problematic areas, including the causes of high workloads. It deserves to be read and discussed widely.

Another negative effect of the coronavirus is that many research projects came to a complete standstill – because, for example, laboratories were closed, test

subjects were not available or staff were giving priority to online teaching and students. These stoppages have increased uncertainty for researchers on temporary contracts. As a board, we will not shy away from engaging in a robust discussion about solutions with the relevant ministries and the NWO. But we will also make sure that young scientists on temporary contracts do not become victims of this crisis. Contracts can be extended if necessary, to allow them to complete their research.

So far, I've spoken a lot about the consequences of the coronavirus that we are currently dealing with as a university. What we can learn from the crisis and how we can turn negative consequences into desirable reforms will be topics for future discussion. I'd like to share with you some thoughts about our academic education in the near future.

The first thought is that we will only come through this crisis with a solid foundation for the future if we continue to meet each other face to face. Working and learning online are necessary and good if they provide more – not less – scope for genuine face-to-face interactions. I don't know about you, but after a day of Zoom meetings I'm exhausted. I have to focus harder than usual on what is being said. I miss the eye contact and the body language, and the silences feel uncomfortable. Even worse, I'm getting tired of always seeing my own face on the screen. Genuine interactions take place in physical meetings. That's where students receive feedback, we debate and brainstorm, and we engage in social activities. True academic education can only occur through face-to-face encounters.

Consequently, my second thought is that hybrid forms of education can help us continue to improve our quality. We are looking for clever combinations of online and on-campus learning. For instance, we could include courses offered by universities all over the world. Conversely, students in other places could also benefit from what the UvA has to offer. This also offers new opportunities to increase the accessibility of university education. In our search for clever combinations, we will draw on our experiences from

the past few months, as well as on academic literature about the effectiveness of hybrid programmes. Our Strategic Plan for the next six years, which is currently being prepared, will address this issue.

My final thought about the new year is unrelated to what I've spoken about so far, but it is no less important. A year ago, I emphasised the importance of personal safety for students and staff. Things are not yet good enough in this area. Every complaint must be taken seriously and thoroughly investigated. An external committee is looking at how we currently tackle issues around personal safety and how we could do better. Out of an abundance of caution, we have temporarily set up an additional, external contact point for complaints. But the most important thing is that we must work harder to change our culture. We must not turn a blind eye, and we can do a better job of holding each other to account for unacceptable behaviour. An open, transparent culture is the best protection against such behaviour.

So, back to the extraordinary circumstances of the past six months. How have students been coping? Reinout Wiers, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology and initiator and driver of UvA Care, is in an excellent position to tell us. He conducted a study into student wellbeing during the coronavirus pandemic.

*[Start of dialogue Geert ten Dam and Reinout Wiers:]  
Reinout, could you perhaps initially tell us the background to your study into student mental health issues and the coronavirus?*

*... and then came Covid-19*

*... What are some of the things you might do in these new interventions?*

*[after the discussion:]*

*Many thanks Reinout, what a good way to kick off the new year.*

*Let's conclude with a musical ode to Amsterdam, followed by a toast to the new academic year. I'm*

*delighted to present to you the students from our  
Sweelinck Orchestra; they're going to play Aan de  
Amsterdamse grachten.*

DRAFT