



# A plea for tolerance

*Speech delivered by UvA Executive Board President Geert ten Dam during the opening ceremony of the 2023-2024 academic year on Monday, 4 September 2023.*

Dear colleagues and students, dear attendees,

Welcome to the opening of the new academic year. I am looking forward to this new year and I hope you are too.

The year we leave behind us has been one of vigorous debate at our university. This comes as no surprise. We are, after all, an engaged community and that is something I'm proud of. But our societal involvement also means that we should be all the more aware of how we conduct debates among ourselves, especially when it comes to controversial issues.

The key question is: how much space do we allow ourselves – or should we allow ourselves – for both the debates within the university and those within the broader social context? What do we tolerate, what don't we tolerate, and why or why not? Everyone understands that there are extremes. We do not condone hate speech, anti-Semitism or any other form of discrimination. But where do we set the boundaries when it comes to social topics, to personal sensitivities?

When involved in discussions and debates, we are guided by different values and rules. I will name five, which can sometimes clash.

The first is that, as a university, academic freedom is of paramount importance to us; without that freedom, 'excellent, innovative, critical science' is not possible.<sup>[1]</sup>

Secondly, we have a code of conduct that states that we must treat each other with respect, even when under pressure.

Thirdly, we have built what we refer to as our 'House of Social Safety', a coherent set of measures and guidelines. We do not bully or hurt, we refrain from intimidation,

discrimination and exclusion, and we speak out about undesirable behaviour.

Fourthly, we have house rules that cover events, communications and publications, et cetera.

And finally, there is the all-encompassing freedom of expression, a civil right that naturally also applies to our staff and students.

These values leave a lot of room for interpretation and that can lead to friction and conflict. For example, academic freedom quite rightly comes with a broad degree of latitude, but when should that freedom be curbed by rules of conduct, ethics, a sense of responsibility and the impact of one's actions? We label behaviour 'undesirable' as soon as one of the people involved reasonably perceives it as such. Is that purely subjective? Or does 'reasonably' imply that we are looking for intersubjectivity and thus for guidelines that indicate what we may hold each other accountable for?

Another example of a situation that can cause friction is this: our house rules state that there should be no political and/or religious demonstrations on our campuses. But how are we defining 'political demonstrations' if we, as public intellectuals, also want to engage in societal debate? And with regard to freedom of expression, is the University of Amsterdam open for every debate and for every opinion, or just for 'academic debate'? And how exactly do we define that?

As we open another academic year, I would like to make a plea for tolerance, aimed above all at our own community within the university. A plea to keep the space for mutual debate as large as possible while at the same time nurturing the responsibilities that come with being an academic: respecting, listening, debating – and not just tolerating dissent, but actively seeking it out.

Dear attendees,

Practically everyone who works or studies at UvA would say that a university should be a place for open debate,

and yet in practice we see more intolerance than we would like to. I will give you a few examples.

A number of years ago, the discussion platform Room for Discussion (affiliated with the study association of the Faculty of Economics and Business) invited the controversial Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson for an interview. This resulted in considerable commotion and criticism, in part because of his views on gender identity, feminism and climate change. Even though the organisers allotted extra time for a critical debate with the audience, this did little to temper the calls for Peterson to be denied access to the university. As the Executive Board, we believed then, as we do now, that every study association should have the freedom to choose its own guests, provided that the person in question respects the boundaries of the democratic, constitutional state.

A second example is an interview Room for Discussion had scheduled with Jeroen van der Veer, former CEO of Shell, in April of this year. A group of students felt that, as a 'climate wrecker', Van der Veer should be prevented from speaking. Posters appeared on which the former Shell CEO was depicted with a black bar over his eyes and 'Wanted' printed above his head. Van der Veer ultimately cancelled. As a university, we find this state of affairs unacceptable. Making it so that a person is unable to speak, threatening them and cheering when they cancel, this simply cannot be allowed to happen.

The third example also deals with the 'climate' issue. Before the summer, we organised extensive dialogue sessions with staff and students about cooperating with the fossil fuel industry. We heard shared concerns for the climate and the future of the generations to come. However, we also saw intolerance. Even before the start of the dialogue, we were accused by some staff members of giving in to activists. An argument of little substance. The subject of the climate has been put firmly on the agenda by activists and for this they deserve our appreciation. The activists rightly called for keeping an open mind when entering into the debate on cooperation. But then a student delegation declared – before the dialogue even got underway – that they were against any form of collaboration with the fossil fuel industry. The students had determined their position, and did not want to listen any further to researchers who could explain why they believed cooperation on specific projects is necessary.

And there are other examples too. I am thinking, for example, of the lecturer at Amsterdam University College who no longer feels free to discuss various documentaries in his lectures for fear of being accused of creating an unsafe learning environment. Or the political science study association that organised a debate on Israel's foreign policy, to which they invited a representative from the Israeli embassy. The organisers were confronted with a protest group who found it outrageous 'that an educational institution like the UvA is offering a platform to a representative of the Israeli apartheid state'. Such protests are quite intimidating, especially for a study association, which, by its very nature, should be entitled to organise debates.

Shortly before the summer, the Stolker committee, set up in response to a whistleblower report about alleged institutional malpractice at one of our faculties, also called for the continuous monitoring, promoting and protecting of academic freedom.<sup>[2]</sup> To quote from the recommendations of the report: 'It must be emphasised, therefore, that researchers, teachers and students who do not wish to listen to each other, do not grant each other space or prefer to avoid or even exclude each other, undermine both their own message and development as well as that of others.'<sup>[3]</sup>

Dear attendees,

Intolerance goes hand in hand with polarisation and gnaws at the roots of our democratic society. It is at odds with our academic mores, in particular with the principles of academic freedom and respect for each other.<sup>[3]</sup>

How do you define academic freedom? Excellent publications have appeared on this topic, such as the one from the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences [referred to further by its Dutch acronym KNAW] in 2021.<sup>[4]</sup> The KNAW makes a distinction between academic freedom and freedom of expression. The latter, freedom of expression, is the right to express your opinions as long as what you say is not considered an offence punishable by law. This freedom is not linked to academia and therefore does not include the obligation to substantiate your views with arguments and proof. This is different with academic freedom where statements must be grounded in scientific research and be open to academic discussion. I'll come back to this shortly. The KNAW also states that academic

freedom is not absolute. Every academic and researcher must adhere to the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, which covers principles such as honesty, scrupulousness [due care], transparency, independence and responsibility.

The principle of responsibility – for people, society and the environment – in particular, places limits on academic freedom. In his Academy Lecture for the KNAW in May, our rector Peter-Paul Verbeek emphatically linked academic freedom to societal engagement. As academics, we are free to choose our subjects and our partners for collaboration, but we are also responsible for the social impact of our work. Academic freedom therefore means that we have to make trade-offs. And that demands the ‘courage to doubt’.<sup>[5]</sup>

Academic freedom is also an important value in education, one that deserves protection. There should never be one predominant perspective on the world. As an academic institution, we owe it to our students to bring them into contact with varying sources of knowledge, traditions and approaches, even when this makes them feel ill at ease. Every single lecturer and every programme committee must strive for this plurality. And this is certainly not a given: it is an ongoing mission for all of us.

Academic freedom in education is also a task for students. They must be willing and able to debate along the razor’s edge, on the basis of equality and the quality of arguments – and this extends to giving everyone the right to speak their minds. And that includes emotions, which need to be heard and discussed, too.

The passion many of our students have for issues such as sustainability, health and justice should not mean that they should no longer be confronted with opinions or perspectives they do not like or agree with. When they cease to come into contact with those perspectives, that’s when we will have lost the soul of our university. I have voiced this previously during the opening of another academic year. The university is the environment par excellence for being confronted with facts and opinions that may provoke or go against the grain. We must learn to tolerate such opinions and be open to discussing them. Nobody is unequivocally right; we must be willing to listen to each other. Only in this way can our students, as educated citizens, develop a

moral compass and intellectual resilience.

The question is, do the KNAW guidelines on academic freedom and responsibility provide sufficient guidance? Is it clear to staff and students what can and cannot be argued, who may and may not take the stage, and who you should and should not listen to? I think not.

The sharp distinction the KNAW makes between freedom of expression and academic freedom no longer suffices for us. It goes without saying that the university is a place where you have to take a well-reasoned position (and learn how to do so). However, the idea that you can only invoke academic freedom in the context of your own field – as the KNAW argues – is not tenable in a time of increasing interdisciplinarity and of academics emerging from the seclusion of their disciplinary silos. And who determines what ‘the field’ is? Where do we set the boundaries when we study a subject from the perspective of different disciplines simultaneously? Where are they when we collaborate, incorporate insights, when we integrate academic and practical insights to arrive at solutions to complex societal issues? I certainly do not know. As far as I am concerned, academics and researchers should enjoy the protection of academic freedom as long as they adhere to the academic principles of honesty, scrupulousness, transparency, independence and responsibility. And as long as they – and I cannot emphasise this enough – treat each other and their environment with respect, because that is part and parcel of responsibility.

The academic principles provide guidance, and we need that, to help protect the space for responsible debate at the university. When the controversial Peterson came to the UvA, the call went out to ‘always invite a second speaker when discussing a controversial topic’.<sup>[6]</sup> I would rather apply our academic principles as a guide here than this practical solution. After all, who determines what constitutes a controversial topic, or that a topic is too controversial? That is, by definition, prescriptive. A university must be able to handle controversies. We must, as a matter of principle, be receptive to hearing other opinions and allow ourselves to be nourished by this as well. It deepens our understanding of societal phenomena and helps us refine our academic agenda. So, the boundaries are wide: people with seemingly unpopular opinions are also welcome here. Not everyone needs to be represented in every debate or discussion, and being an academic is not a requirement

for taking part. It is precisely because we attach great importance to societal engagement and involvement in society that those opinions, too, must be heard within the walls of the university.

This year we included a leaflet on academic freedom and responsibility in the totes for the Intreeweek [introduction week for bachelor students at the UvA], describing our academic mores. By focusing attention on this area, we hope to contribute to an open intellectual climate both inside and outside our walls. Since the previous academic year, our Social Safety Roadmap has also been included in these totes. We do this to make it clear that academic freedom is never a licence or an excuse for misconduct, verbal aggression, intimidation, discrimination or exclusion. With freedom comes responsibility – for yourself, for others and for the community as a whole. Allowing others the same degree of freedom is an integral part of this.

Dear attendees,

I will conclude my speech on this note. Our academic community is not homogeneous, and that's a good thing. We have different opinions and we have different backgrounds, beliefs and feelings.

How we deal with this is of paramount importance. Do we fall prey to polarisation, do we stick to our own perceptions, do we mainly listen to ourselves, do we exclude others? Or do we celebrate academic debate, do we try to be open to different views, do we allow others space, do we search together?

The latter, I hope.

Because that would make the University of Amsterdam a university where vigorous, astute, open discussions take place, a place where we learn from each other by listening and where we do not condemn each other or get dragged down in point-scoring contests.

That is a culture that is both challenging and safe – two concepts that are wrongly, and all too easily, depicted as mutually exclusive these days. They belong together. Do not make the debate personal, accept diversity, and create a culture in which we can disagree with each other on content.

We are all responsible for seeing that this happens.

*\* My thanks go to Yasha Lange for his astute insights and his constructive criticism of earlier versions of this speech.*

[1] Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (KNAW) [Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences] (2021). *Academische vrijheid in Nederland. Een begripsanalyse en richtsnoer* [Academic freedom in the Netherlands. A conceptual analysis and guidance]. KNAW, Amsterdam. See also: Suissa, J., & Sullivan, A. (2022). 'How can universities promote academic freedom? Insights from the front line of the gender wars'. *Impact: Philosophical Perspectives on Education Policy*, no 27.

[2] Stoker, J., Stolker, C., & Waaldijk, B. (2023). *Powerful and vulnerable: Academic freedom in practice. Investigation report, recommendations and reflection following a whistleblower report to the University of Amsterdam*.

[3] Stoker et al. (2023), p. 11.

[4] KNAW (2021); see also Stoker et al. (2023).

[5] Verbeek, P.P. (2023). *Akademielezing 2023: Academische vrijheid als opgave. Over wetenschappelijke verantwoordelijkheid en de moed om te twijfelen* [Academy Lecture 2023: Academic freedom as a duty: On academic responsibility and the courage to doubt]. Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (KNAW) [Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences].

[6] See also Bracke, S. (2023). 'Een spook zonder vaste vorm: Academische vrijheid in tijden van 'woke'' [An evasive ghost: academic freedom in times of 'woke']. *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 2 March 2023, pp. 38-43.

*This text version is a translation and may differ slightly from the speech which was delivered in Dutch.*