

Leiden University

SPEECH Rector Magnificus Hester Bijl, OAJ 2022

What if studying in peace and freedom cannot be taken for granted...?

If the terrible situation in Ukraine has taught us one thing, it is that peace and justice can never be taken for granted. But warfare is nothing new: there is always war somewhere in the world. The number of people fleeing war, violence, persecution and human rights violations increased once again this year.

The university community has an important role to play in society when it comes to encouraging the debate and dialogue on peace and justice. On our behalf and that of our fellow universities, the Universities of the Netherlands emphasised, 'It is our responsibility as universities to contribute with our research and teaching to a better world and to work for peace, respect and (academic) freedom.'

It is no coincidence that freedom is one of the four core values of our Strategic Plan 'Innovating and connecting'. For us, freedom is about independent questioning and providing space for different perspectives and ideas, open dialogue and for free research. It's no surprise that we have chosen these particular values. Our motto is *praesidium libertatis*. We are a bastion of freedom. Since our foundation on 8 February 1575, we have been known as a place for 'free thought'. This is why, for example, Nelson Mandela was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1999.

Our motto is now more relevant than ever. But alongside a motto it is something we should work on every day: we must stand up for freedom and actively protect it. When academic freedom is at stake, as with the increasing intimidation and threats against researchers who share their insights in the public debate, we take a strong stand and take action. Protecting our academic freedom is at the heart of what we do, but this entails keeping a watchful eye on and trying to understand all that is going on around us. It also entails a focus on open debate that allows for different perspectives.

Now in particular it is important to take responsibility. War has a huge impact on our students, staff and guests with ties to that country and region as well as on anyone else who is affected by the events, be it directly or indirectly. The war in Ukraine has prompted many people within our academic community to offer help. For example, students from Ukraine and Russia could receive aid from an emergency fund established by the Leiden University Fund. But there are many more wonderful initiatives ranging from an international mentor network for affected students and researchers to guest work placements for Ukrainian researchers and aid collections at various places within the university.

We also feel an urgent need to have this conflict explained in academic terms and to seek possible solutions. Some of our researchers are therefore working together in an interdisciplinary hub to produce research and teaching on the war in Ukraine.

Does that mean we're there? Certainly not. Other students are vulnerable and need our attention.

I'm thinking of our international students who are affected by this or another conflict. Studying while knowing that your family and friends are in a war zone causes a lot of uncertainty and pain. Besides their intense concern about the fate of their family and friends, these students are unable to return to their country. And they often face financial problems because many of their parents have fled their home country. Students refugees who have come here to study have problems with finances, obtaining a visa and accessing a degree programme here. They are already at a disadvantage. And when they can finally begin their studies, whom can they turn to for help and psychological support?

The impact of studying if you face such obstacles or have a visual impairment, mental health condition or physical disability is significant during your entire student career. In recent years it has become clear that more and more students need help and assistance. Recent research by the ISO, ESN and LSV has concluded that as a group, international students are having a particularly hard time of it: 59 per cent of international students suffer from mental health problems, and 28 per cent do not feel at home in the Netherlands. Shocking conclusions. The realisation that this group needs more attention is nothing new but the coronavirus pandemic and the situation in Ukraine have made this all the more clear. We need to look at what more we can do for this vulnerable group in terms of well-being, support and guidance.

The basis is that as a university we provide a safe environment. Inextricably linked to well-being is a sense of belonging, being able to be yourself and feeling safe and at home in your interaction with others. This is one of the main conditions for being able to study, regardless of whether in an in-person, online, blended or hybrid learning environment. It is important that students with a disability experience the fewest possible barriers to their studies and that we help them deal with or overcome the obstacles they face.

Much is being done within our academic community to improve student well-being. Since recently each faculty has had its own student well-being officer and they are doing a tremendous job. As they are close to the students, they can introduce low-key initiatives for their faculty or even a particular degree programme. They want to increase the attention and support given to the well-being of all the students at our university.

One good example of this is the Act of Kindness project in The Hague. You can hang up a note on a kind of classified ads board offering a small gesture, such as an invitation for a cup of coffee or a walk. But there is much more going on too. There is online information about well-being, there are well-being weeks and additional student psychologists and the assistance for students has also increased to include support groups, group training and buddies. I am proud of the efforts of everyone at the University to make all of this possible, but the well-being team at Student and Educational Affairs deserve a particular mention here.

For some students the coronavirus crisis also had its advantages. Students with a disability or student carers benefitted greatly from the remote teaching that we were forced to switch to. They are not always able to attend in-person classes, for instance because of frail health or because set times are difficult to combine with limited energy or caring duties. Now in-person teaching is possible once again, it is important to look at what the coronavirus crisis has brought us. I can see opportunities for more flexibility and personalised learning, for example teaching and learning methods that are not reliant on time and place. Online teaching also has something to offer, for instance lectures and knowledge clips that can be watched again online. This is not to detract from the importance of social interaction and, of course, in-person teaching.

This ties in well with our digitalisation strategy from 2021, which focuses on the blended university. Meeting in person is at the heart of our teaching but we also offer online components if these contribute to the student's learning experience and the quality of our education.

I'm convinced we can achieve most if we keep on talking to the target group. That is why I'm so pleased that two international students are here on the stage who are willing to share their experiences of barriers to studying. I'm impressed by their personal stories and their perseverance and would like to introduce them to you. I will do so in English.

[Disucssion with LeonorAlbuquerque Amaral and Hawra Nissi]

And finally, I'd like to turn to all our students here in the church and outside. I wish you a fantastic academic year with plenty of positive experiences and inspiring moments. Good marks are important of course, but I hope above all that you will feel at home at our university. Get to know and seek out one another; help and support one another. Then we will ensure that university is an unforgettable time for everyone.
