Speech by Minister of Education Ingrid van Engelshoven
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Welcome everyone.

[Holding up an e-reader]

I’ve brought something with me. It’s an extremely useful innovation. And you all know what it is. It’s an e-reader. Smaller than the average pocket. Thinner than a Flipback. It can store hundreds, perhaps even thousands of books. On average, they’re about half the price of paper books.

So you might think that the e-reader trumps the paper book on all accounts.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

At the beginning of this year, the Netherlands Institute for Social Research SCP published a study of reading habits. This study indicated that e-books account for no more than six and a half per cent of the total number of books sold. At just three point six per cent, their market share is even lower, because e-books are cheaper.

This fact does not mean that the major growth is yet to come. In fact, growth is stagnating. E-readers seem to have reached their peak.

Clearly, there’s something that makes people put up with the inconvenience of paper books. Some like the feel of the paper or the sound of it rustling. Others like the smell. Even though they have access to a far better, far more rational alternative, people still cling to the trusted old paper book.

The e-reader is a good example of an improvement that is not perceived as such by everyone. An improvement on the original that cannot, however, replace the original. Because the original – the conventional book – is more than its primary function: A medium through which knowledge can be transferred.

We are currently in the process of a digital revolution. Universities are subject to all kinds of innovations, most of which enhance education and research.

If knowledge is your field, you’ll welcome big data with open arms. Because the more data we have, the more we can learn...
Digitisation brings with it new opportunities. It makes work easier. And it creates opportunities.

Take online lectures, for example. I understand that an online lecture delivered by Michael may well inspire Dutch students in their first year of university more than a live lecture delivered by their regular lecturer.

It’s better for both parties: the student gets more inspired by Sandel – even from behind a screen. And the student’s lecturers can focus on areas where they can add more value: their tutorials, for example, or their research.

There are countless examples of the positive impact of digitisation. Equally, there are countless examples of risks. For instance, take the fact that people who are better educated appear to benefit more from digitisation than people who are less educated, which just serves to widen the existing gap further.

There are also uncertain developments that might turn out to be opportunities or threats. Take the debate on globalisation, for example. As a result of the digital revolution, geographical borders are becoming ever less important. This trend provokes a reaction. Some people want these borders to be restored. How do we tackle this issue?

To my mind, however, there is one constant factor in education. One irreplaceable factor that will, and indeed must, survive the digital revolution. Even if more efficient, more rational and cheaper ways of delivering education are devised. That factor is the lecturer.

More specifically, a lecturer who is physically present and who has personal contact with their students.

Such lecturers will never be fully replaced by a digital version, nor should they. Just as the paper book will never disappear as a result of the e-reader.

In my opinion, there are three reasons for this phenomenon:
The **first** reason is that lecturers have unique qualities which embody the essence of education. They can both acquire and transfer knowledge, educating their students in the process.

Lecturers have been doing so since the universities were first established – eight hundred years ago – and will never cease. No robot can combine these three qualities: the generation, acquisition, transfer of knowledge.

What has changed, however, is the amount of information that is available and the ways that the student or researcher should deal with it. I touched on this point earlier. Nowadays, you can do far more with an iPhone than you could in the past (when I was a student) with a leviathan of a desktop computer.

(You probably know what I’m talking about: a black screen with a flashing white cursor where you had to enter codes to get the thing to work at all.)

Which takes me to the **second** reason.
This huge overload of information calls for creativity and maturity. Knowing where to look if you want to find that needle in the haystack. Knowing which questions you need to ask. And how to process the information that you retrieve.

You can give students the data but, as Martha Nussbaum says: a collection of facts on their own, without the skills to evaluate them, is pointless. Because, in that case, students will not be able to distinguish sense from nonsense.

Nothing and no one is better equipped to teach students how to put the facts in context than a lecturer.

Finally, the **third** reason:
Dutch higher education is by and large publicly funded. This situation brings with it responsibilities. **Social** responsibilities.
Universities educate their students not only for the labour market but also for society as a whole. Public values and citizenship are an integral part of the mandate assigned to higher education. And this important task cannot be left to robots or artificial intelligence.

It requires real-life lecturers. People who bring empathy and experience; who can convince their students that knowledge only becomes meaningful in the hands of the user.

Moreover, the digital revolution is under way in every aspect of society. To this end, we shouldn’t just consider its impact on education – and the ways in which education can best benefit from it. We must also consider its impact on society.
As digitisation is a broad social challenge, society looks to the universities for answers. Which makes it all the more important that you are well prepared for the digital revolution.

Not just the university, but the whole of society is counting on you!

I have no doubt that you will be worthy of the trust that society places in you. You are well aware of your responsibility to society. Even more than in the past, you will have become aware of it in recent years.

Not in the least due to the inspirational leadership of your Rector Magnificus, Professor Bert van der Zwaan.