

## **Speech Anton Pijpers, President Utrecht University**

**The balance between work and relaxation. Work and results create meaning, but also require rest and room to breathe.**

### **Introduction**

Who here is wearing a red square on their lapel? Raise your hands, please. Everyone with a hand up is concerned about higher education and, occasionally, about the welfare of their *close colleagues*...

I take these concerns very seriously.

But let's start on a positive note. Utrecht University, as Annetje said, is doing well. We foresee hefty challenges and have grand ambitions, and that's just how we like it. We work in an exceptionally competitive and fast-changing world. We are elite athletes in a championship game, and all around me I see enthusiastic team-members.

Our goal is to educate students, investing all we have to offer. At the same time, we want to do research that tackles societal problems and to advance our fields of expertise; fields that you chose back in *your* student days because they were so terrifically fascinating and you are so terrifically good in them.

That enthusiasm is invaluable.

However, many of our staff and students also feel stressed. So, we have to ask: How are we all scoring in terms of welfare; is there a balance? And what can we do about the heavy workloads?

### **Staff and student work stress**

Heavy workloads, work pressure and stress are not unique to our university, as Tanja van der Lippe just explained. Nor are they unique to the Netherlands. They are ubiquitous, and an issue of wide public concern, not least in our sector, and at our university. This is something we need to attend to, because our capital is our people, and their wellbeing and balance are vital.

Employee satisfaction, as measured most recently last year, is high overall; people feel engaged and are eager to work at Utrecht University. However, over the past years, work stress has also been rating high to very high.

Our students, too, are satisfied. The 2018 National Student Survey showed that 80% of students in Utrecht would recommend their degree programme to others, and they give consistently high marks for teaching quality. We boast many high-achieving students who are making marvellous strides, as testified by the awards we've just handed out.

But students are also voicing serious concerns about workloads. National studies reveal that students are increasingly prone to stress, anxiety, burn out and depression. Last winter, I met with 200 students to talk about this. They raised red flags like: There are so many choices..., I have to beef up my CV..., I only feel calm when I accidentally forget my smartphone...

Over the summer, national newspapers devoted lots of ink to this issue. They described a pressure cooker of student loans and binding study advice – incidentally, an established performance criterion here at Utrecht. All too familiar was the picture painted by one student psychologist. And I quote: 'the crammed schedules, the studying, the part-time job, debate society, board membership, juicy Instagram page showing how brilliant life is, fancy meals, fun parties, gorgeous holidays, exotic trips... the pressure is immense'. And another: 'like overtraining among athletes, students can suffer from brain-overload. You can only hope they don't turn to alcohol, drugs, internet addiction (...) to escape reality, the pressure...'

So, like I said, this is a serious point of concern. The university needs a solid supervisory structure of tutors, study advisors, student counsellors and student psychologists – but that's not all. In April, the University Council discussed the Student Welfare Action Plan, a national plan drawn up by the Dutch National Student Association (ISO) in concert with central consultative bodies with the aim to discuss the student welfare issue at a higher level. Our own representatives followed this up by launching a Student Welfare Task Force, which hands the initiative to our students. I look forward to this task force's findings and hope it will offer concrete recommendations to apply.

### **Context of the workload debate**

Before delving into the pressure we're under as employees in more detail, I'd first like to outline the wider context in which we, the university sector, are having this discussion.

In response to the calls for additional money and funding for higher education, the Ministry commissioned CHEPS – Twente's Center for Higher Education Policy Studies – to do a study. This will soon be presented to the House of Representatives.

The Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) has also published a report, a broad analysis outlining current challenges, ambitions and pinch points in the university sector titled 'room for investments and talent'. It's worth taking a closer look at what it says.

With more than 270,000 students, enrolment in Dutch higher education is at a record level. Back in 2010, the Veerman Committee was already warning that higher student volumes could erode the quality of education. However, universities are expected, by Dutch society and government, to admit anyone who holds a pre-university secondary school certificate, to improve their educational offering year on year, and to ensure students graduate on schedule.

The existing investment level is inadequate to solve this trilemma (of access, quality and efficient use of public funds). That level has declined steadily since 2000, from just over 20,000 euros per student to 15,000. This has made it impossible for teaching staff to keep pace with rising enrolments on the one hand, and increasing demand for smaller scale intensive education, on the other. The upshot? Heavier teaching workloads for our lecturers.

On top of that, flexible scope for research is shrinking because our indirect funding flow is mainly being matched from our government funding. The more successful our research proposals, the higher the pressure on our direct government funding, the less flexible our core funding.

It's almost a miracle that our students are still satisfied with education quality and that our universities still score high in international rankings. But ultimately, there's a price to be paid, and that price, as we're seeing now, is mounting pressure on university staff.

The Rathenau Institute affirms this in a report that came out this year on the 'motivations of researchers'.

To absorb their expanded teaching loads, university researchers are working longer hours. Almost all academic staff are putting in lots of overtime, because the academic world is demanding: the pressure to produce high-quality publications and write research grant proposals is high. This lack of time is also impinging on the bond between research and teaching, thus on the lifeblood of the university system.

Added to all this is the substantial reduction in the share of support staff and concomitant increase in administrative obligations. According to a Ministry of Economic Affairs report published last year, higher education has become burdened by a profusion of regulatory rules that have only grown over recent years.

### **What are we going to do about it?**

So there you have my analysis... not exactly news to many of you, I'm afraid. The important question, of course, is: What now? What are we going to do about this?

It goes without saying that the public and government have every right to expect universities to roll up their sleeves and not to shy away from tough decisions. If we want our universities and knowledge society to continue playing at the global level, we need everyone to be involved in solving this problem: our employees and representative bodies, our knowledge partners, politicians and the public.

In the time that remains, I would like to explore with you what we can do and should do, at three different levels. The sectoral level, the university level, and the level of each department with its individual staff.

### **First: the sector**

To begin at the sectoral level. What do we, the Dutch universities, want from The Hague?

First and foremost, a reduction in regulatory pressure, and to get serious about

institutional accreditation.

Also, funding that works. Earlier this year, the Education Inspectorate called for a fundamental evaluation of in how far higher education funding is realistically sufficient for universities to deliver on and provide the quality that government and society expect, and what sort of financing system *would* be. That won't be simple; if it were, we would be there already. The option to reallocate budgets may relieve pinch points in some places, but will aggravate them in others. And it should be stated up front that we are against any measures that entail structural cuts to humanities funding. For us at Utrecht, a key concern will be that our macro budget keeps pace with developments in our teaching and research tasks.

In the *near* term, therefore, this is what we are asking:

1. Shift a substantial portion of research funding from indirect to direct government funding. This will accomplish more targeted spending of public resources and a net payoff for academic research, more scope for permanent contracts, due to the structural nature of direct funding, and the reduction of workloads by simplifying the grant proposal process. Happily, this measure is budget neutral.
2. Make student loan system resources available for teaching and workload reduction earlier.
3. Limit the need for matching by making the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) cover more costs.
4. Eliminate the efficiency discount.

The discussion of these changes is an important one that our sector is currently holding with the Ministry.

### **The university**

And then for the second level, the university. Because the first thing the minister will say to us is: 'Sure, I'd love to help out, but we've got primary education to sort out first. So, first, tell me what *you* can do. And, dear universities, haven't you got your own reserves?'

Fair enough.

In fact, the universities are already pursuing a number of qualitative measures,

such as:

- tackling citation pressure via open science;
- tackling proposal pressure with the NWO;
- aligning the degree programme offering nationally.

Besides these, we've identified *three additional near-term financial solutions that universities can implement on their own:*

1. more joint investments in research infrastructure and ICT;
2. tap into more new and private revenue sources such as crowdsourcing, philanthropy and corporate funding;
3. and tighten budgets.

So what does this mean for Utrecht? Over the past few years we've been guarding our purse strings. We had to, because we're facing large and necessary investments in accommodation as well as spiking investments in ICT.

However, I propose that in the coming years we instead invest any budget surpluses – most of which arise over the financial year due to positive financial adjustments by the government – in our greatest asset: our people, and specifically in reducing their workloads. At present, we have sufficient financial reserves in place at both university and faculty level so that any further surpluses can be invested in our talent: our staff.

### **Workload lunches**

Precisely how we should apply these extra funds to alleviate work pressure will probably differ from one faculty to another and should not be dictated from on high. Even so, we can already identify some broad strokes in the workload plans developed so far and from the workload lunches that Annetje and I have been holding.

In the workload lunches we've met with dedicated staff from all the faculties, who took the time to talk candidly about how things are progressing in their eyes and their own daily experience of pressure and stress at work.

I'd like to highlight some of what came out of these meetings.

*First, in regard to teaching*

The pressure generated by our system of teaching periods is felt to be a burden if one has to teach in every period. Quotes: 'There is never time to decompress, to come up for air, to breathe or to attend a conference.'

A different issue connected with teaching:

'I'm on a temporary teaching contract and it's assumed that I'll plan classes in my own time...'

and

'Is our instruction even appreciated?'

*In regard to research*

'To advance my career I have to do research, but I have to do it mainly in my own spare time...'

'I see lots of frustration arising from all the time and effort put into research proposals that end up being rejected...'

*In regard to administration*

'We understand the imperative to digitise processes, but could they please be user-friendly for real, and have a support service?'

'There's less and less support...'

### **Approach at the university level**

The workload lunches made a strong impression on me. Apart from the problems, people also suggested solutions which we will take to heart. Suggestions like:

'Why not evaluate our period system and teaching load model...'

'Give us more trust and professional autonomy as lecturers...'

'Arrange replacements for colleagues who are on extended leave for illness or parental or pregnancy leave.'

It is also apparent to me that short-term employment contracts are a problem. Of course, they create stress in themselves. We want to limit short, temporary contracts to the bare minimum at our university, in line of course with the collective labour agreements. Young temporary lecturers will be offered four-year contracts wherever possible. That way, everyone knows where they stand and there are no false expectations. These employees will have opportunities to develop into strong all-round teachers who can subsequently work in other education sectors too. By creating prospects for this younger cohort, we as a

university can do more to help alleviate the teacher shortage. And that is very much in the public interest!

### **Approach at the departmental/individual employee level (culture/leadership)**

Apart from these measures, there are also actions that we all have to take together, as colleagues. That brings me to the last level: that of the department, the individual employee, and the supervisor.

Because, to quote from the workload lunches:

'Work that is varied gives you energy'

'Why not *stop* doing something? We keep adding more, but what can we subtract?'

'Can we give each other a chance to rest and/or time to reflect?'

'Don't we honour people who put in a lot of overtime?'

This will provide a wealth of input for all the workload plans and discussions to be held and intensified at every level – university, faculty, department and section. This will be a big undertaking for all of us, and for supervisors in particular. From them, we expect a show of leadership and team spirit, to foster a culture of open dialogue and a social safe space, to lead by example, practise transparency and openness, and also to give their team some rest, room to breathe and appreciation. Effectively, this means that besides striving for results we have to make choices, set priorities, and also to have fun, support each other and look after one another.

We at this university are in positions of privilege. Most of us have had a university education, had choices, enjoy our work and in many cases earn above the average.

What can we do to restore or maintain a balance between work and relaxation? The balance between ambition and personal welfare, between education and research, and all those other areas where we want to excel as a university? I myself am also very ambitious, want to accomplish many things, so I have every intention of taking the lead.

We will have to make choices, set priorities, show leadership – vis-à-vis both ourselves and our teams. We will have to think about what we choose to do, and what *not*; about what we can realistically deliver. So, if I add a task in one area, where can I subtract another? Can I say no? Do I sense that the other person would prefer to say no? And, are we as supervisors leading by example? Are we taking good care of our teams? I would like to propose that we all think hard about these questions in our departmental and work consultations over the next month. Have this conversation with each other and agree about what can be done. Within the Executive Board, for example, we like the idea of subjecting every decision to a 'work stress test'.

We also have to grant ourselves moments to relax, get together, have a change of scene. In Sweden, I've read, organisations have what's called a *fika*: a twice-a-day 15-minute workspace break to chat and relax together. To perform at our peak, rest and relaxation are essential. They prepare you to stay at the top of your game!

Could bear to leave each other alone on weekends? During one workload lunch, an employee asked: 'If my professor emails me on a Sunday morning, do I have to answer that day?' No, of course not!

We are ambitious and want to deliver our best in teaching and research, but always balanced by relaxation, autonomy and fun and in interaction with each other. This is what Utrecht University stands for: connections between people, amongst students, between students and staff, and amongst our staff. So let's do precisely that. Watch out for each other, support each other, and appreciate one another!

Have a brilliant academic year!