

## Speech by Anton Pijpers, Chairman of the Executive Board

Start of the Academic Year 2022-2023, 5 September 2022

Dear students, colleagues and relations of Utrecht University, both here in the Dom Church and those attending online,

Allow me to welcome you all on behalf of my colleagues Margot van der Starre, Henk Kummeling and our new student assessor, Anneloes Krul. It's wonderful to join you here as we mark the start of the 2022-2023 academic year.

Thousands of new students got an introduction to our university over the past few weeks during the UIT. This year's edition was the first to be attended by senior secondary vocational education students. The UIT board organised a truly memorable week. On behalf of our Executive Board, I would like to thank the organisers and extend a warm welcome to our new crop of students.

I think I speak for the entire UU community when I say that we're looking forward to getting to know you, sharing our knowledge and learning from *you*. We'll be doing everything we can to make sure you realise your full potential. After all, that may well be our most important role as a university: nurturing talent; educating people, and making sure our students graduate with the latest knowledge and an open mind.

The Executive Board is working to create all the necessary preconditions, and I should point out that we reached a new administrative agreement with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science just before the summer holidays. In the current coalition agreement, the government has pledged additional resources for higher education in an effort to unburden our staff. The Administrative Agreement contains arrangements on how these additional funds will be made available to the universities. This will mainly take the form of start-up grants and incentive grants for assistant professors, aimed at reducing workloads, competition and the high volume of applications. However, the Agreement also contains sector plans aimed at building capacity, encouraging academic talent and increasing the number of permanent contracts, while ensuring cohesion between education and research and facilitating agreements on profiling and interuniversity cooperation.

The amounts in question are certainly substantial, totalling around 48 million per year in the case of Utrecht University. As you would expect, we greatly appreciate this financial support. However, it also presents us with a challenge. I'll spare you the technical details, but we'll definitely have to be creative and selective if we aim to ensure those funds are actually used to unburden our staff. In more concrete terms: The overall academic sector – and UU in particular – needs *more* permanent contracts and *lower* workloads. The additional funds should also contribute to our strategic efforts to promote interdisciplinary education and research. This is UU's main strength and happens to be the kind of knowledge our society so urgently needs.

The deans will now begin putting this into practice. Utrecht University previously launched the Impuls programme in anticipation of these additional government funds: 50 million will be made available over the coming five years in an effort to unburden our staff and expand the number of permanent contracts. We will now be working with the faculties to continue and intensify this policy. When it comes to the temporary appointments, we aim to take an even more critical approach and prioritise the creation of assistant professor positions combining teaching and research. In cases where the use of temporary teaching staff is unavoidable, we will make every effort to provide solid four-year contracts with scope for development. This is a key priority.

If we aim to meet our own quality standards, Utrecht University must also create a climate in which everyone feels safe and welcome. This issue is relevant at several levels.

In terms of physical safety, for example, the Executive Board expects all students and staff to stay vigilant for symptoms of COVID, both for your own health and that of your more vulnerable colleagues and fellow students. Although the media's focus has shifted and you are no longer receiving regular COVID updates in your inbox, we ask that you keep taking tests if you have any symptoms. In the case of infection, stay home.

That all seems pretty clear to me.

To some extent, this also applies to the *social* component of a safe working and learning environment. We aim to create a climate in which everyone respects each other's boundaries and inappropriate behaviour is never tolerated.

While some boundaries are obviously clear to everyone – for example, we all realise you're not supposed to make overtly sexist or racist remarks – some are unfortunately less clear. Behaviour can be interpreted and experienced in very different ways.

The Orange Films crew interviewed students and staff on campus to find out how they felt about social safety. Let's take a look.

[VIDEO]

Social safety is definitely at the top of people's minds, and we need to take it seriously. Active bystander training is important, but it's not enough. Especially not if – as Sanli put it – the people who seem to need it most aren't willing to take part.

I've also been involved in some complaint procedures myself and have seen how much distress people are going through. That really left an impression. Some of the victims are stuck at home, completely exhausted. I've also seen accused parties who feel they've been ignored. Meanwhile, the people around them feel the university isn't taking them seriously because, in their eyes, communications about what happened are lacking.

As the video also highlighted, dependency relationships and strict hierarchies are common in the academic world. Many talented young people are eager to pursue a career in academia and they all depend on a limited number of gatekeepers. That increases the risk of incidents. It also makes people far more reluctant to report issues, as the figures confirm. According to the employee survey, many people have had unpleasant experiences without having reported this. That worries me. The number of reports submitted by confidential advisors each year is also low when compared to the numbers of students and staff.

Thankfully, a lot of people are concerned about these issues, and I'm glad to see Utrecht University taking action. Student organisations have launched all kinds of projects to encourage debate on sexually transgressive behaviour in student life. Students and student representatives have carried out independent investigations into inappropriate behaviour and written recommendations for the Executive Board. Among other measures, they advocated improved support for reporting parties and victims and better after-care. Based on these recommendations and various external evaluations of our complaint handling procedure, our entire reporting and complaint handling system has been thoroughly evaluated over the recent period. The new complaints procedures and protocols will be discussed with the University Council and University Labour Representation Board this month. We will start applying them as soon as the feedback has been incorporated.

We have also set up a new committee to investigate any allegations of improper behaviour: the Committee for Interpersonal Integrity. This new committee is designed to empower students and consists of students, internal members and external members with specific expertise in the field of social safety and integrity. An external chairman has also been appointed to safeguard independence from the Executive Board. Staff and students can now directly contact the committee to arrange a preliminary meeting or report inappropriate behaviour without having to submit a formal complaint.

You can also contact a confidential advisor or ombudsperson: we will also be appointing a special ombudsperson for students. Check the website to see who they are and find out where to turn with specific issues. If there are still any questions on that front: these specialised staff members form a one-stop-shop that can quickly and efficiently refer you to the most suitable resources.

I believe that's crucial. However, I also realise regulations and improved helpdesks won't solve the problem. That will require some structural changes, better leadership and a more open debate on the issue of inappropriate behaviour. We've been taking the first steps in that direction over the recent period, including by means of the Mindlab performances. There are links with the Recognition and Rewards programme, which explores how we value teams and people. The EDI programme – focused on diversity and inclusion – is also relevant in that regard. We organise leadership programmes that pay attention to this theme. We offer active bystander training about steps you can take when you notice something happening in your environment, and we are offering a special consent matters module for students, which we will make widely available this year together with the degree programmes.

Still, we're not there yet. This will be a long-term effort, which we are giving high priority. That is why we are having this conversation here today, at the Opening of the Academic Year in the Dom.

We asked Naomi Ellemers to help us reflect on ourselves. Naomi is a distinguished professor and one of the most prominent experts in the field, and we intend to take her recommendations very seriously. A major Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences report on social safety was published under her presidency in July. Reading the report and the interviews with Naomi certainly got me thinking. I realised we need a genuinely holistic approach that reflects the way in which our processes are organised. On a more personal note, I also started reflecting on my own position of power, and its impact on my own outlook and that of the people around me. I decided I'll be making more of an effort to ask colleagues how they perceive my behaviour. That's something I haven't been doing enough.

As Naomi recently commented in the Digital University Journal: “Utrecht University also needs to systematically review the procedures and conventions we've all gotten used to. We need to constantly ask ourselves and each other whether they really still reflect the way we want to work together in future, and contribute to our shared vision of an innovative, inclusive and independent university.”

That certainly sums it up.

Please welcome Naomi Ellemers.