



Welcome and speech by Anton Pijpers (8 min)

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

I would like to extend a warm welcome to you all, on behalf of my colleagues Margot van der Starre, Henk Kummeling and our new student assessor, Niels Vreeswijk. A special welcome goes to those from Utrecht who are working on human rights within our city and who are here today in the Dom Church. It's great to have you here with us for the start of the new academic year.

Human rights: even if we had had a crystal ball when choosing today's theme, we could not have chosen a more topical and important topic. More on that later.

Looking ahead to the new academic year, I hope in particular that we can work more closely together. Because, in the light of the new government's framework coalition agreement, there are challenging times ahead for Dutch universities.

That framework coalition agreement refers to a number of challenges for the Netherlands. Improving the standard of living for everyone in the Netherlands, for example, guaranteeing our security, working on good governance and achieving green growth. These are challenges to which universities can make an important contribution, at the regional, national and international level. After all, we train future generations to become scientific professionals, conduct groundbreaking research and disseminate the results of this research widely within society.

As universities, we therefore fully endorse the priority that this government will give (according to the framework coalition agreement) to the availability of talent and the strengthening of our knowledge economy. This is crucial for the progression of Dutch society. Because effective education, excellent research and adequate innovation will ensure the long-term prosperity of the Netherlands.

Universities conduct a great deal of research, research which is important to the Netherlands: research into drugs to help treat Parkinson's or Alzheimer's, for example, smart solutions for climate adaptation such as dike reinforcement and heat-proof cities, mental health problems in young people, and the polarisation of society. In short: universities help the Netherlands move forward.

However....

The budget annex of the framework coalition agreement raises major concerns in this regard and, quite frankly, some serious question marks. This government has not



chosen to invest in the future of the Netherlands. On the contrary: it has chosen to make huge cuts in education, research and innovation.

This is **strange, objectionable and unhelpful**.

Three years ago, it was calculated that, if they were to maintain a basic level of education and research, universities would need more than one billion euros. The previous government helped us, through investments, to get that basic level back on track to some extent. And we have just started making some real progress with this. But if the plans from the framework coalition agreement are implemented, this government will knowingly return universities to a situation where they face a structural deficit of more than a billion euros a year.

On behalf of all the universities in the Netherlands, we have produced a video to demonstrate the impact that the intended cuts would have on the Netherlands. I would now like to watch that video with you.

(UNL video plays)

The cuts announced in the framework agreement will be a **heavy blow** to our research and education and, as a result, to the Netherlands.

These cuts will put the Netherlands at a disadvantage, especially when other countries, including our neighbours, have specifically chosen to invest in education. We will fall behind in terms of the future availability of talent, our earning power, our strategic independence and our leading position internationally as a knowledge economy. And all this at a time when demographic trends, labour market requirements and international developments call for targeted actions. As universities, we will therefore continue to speak out firmly and consistently against these cuts.

After all, the quality of university teaching is in jeopardy, and it will most likely be detrimental to our educational offer: degree programmes will disappear, the international nature of the education we provide will no longer exist and there will be fewer lecturers who will have less time to guide students effectively.

Our students are also at risk. You can't learn if you're not allowed to make mistakes. Especially when you are young and have yet to discover what kind of person you actually are and what you are good at. The increased statutory tuition fee for long-term students completely ignores this and increases the already significant mental strain on young people. The increased statutory tuition fee for long-term students also creates an additional barrier for young people from less affluent backgrounds. Given that none of the parties included this increased statutory tuition fee for long-



term students in their election plans, this is clearly a cost-cutting measure that has not been properly thought through.

The planned cuts put further pressure on our employees, who have made it clear that they already feel a great deal of pressure. In a major report back in May, the Labour Inspectorate concluded that many employees of Dutch universities suffer from stress and deal with inappropriate behaviour. This can lead to health problems, absenteeism and incapacity for work.

This problem has been known to us for some time, and we are working hard to address it here in Utrecht. For example, by further reducing the number of temporary contracts, which has actually been achieved in recent years.

In an action plan on social safety, we also focus heavily on discussing things openly. Even if this is uncomfortable or stressful. Two years ago, Naomi Ellemers also said here: embrace the discomfort. This is a really important issue, and managers need to show real leadership in this regard. Because I believe that this will allow us to really get to grips with the problem. Do we give people the opportunity or take the opportunity ourselves to **speak out** about things, **discuss** them with each other, and **agree** on things and then **take each other to task over them.**

Speak out, discuss, agree and take to task.....we can do it, and indeed we must!

Now, back to today's theme, and as I said at the beginning of my speech, we could not have chosen a more topical and better theme for this gathering. Over the past year, democracy and human rights have been a topic of conversation throughout the Netherlands. During the formation of the government, for example, when it came to fundamental rights such as Freedom of Religion.

The topic was also relevant closer to home, in our city and within our own university. Over the past year and in recent months in particular, we have seen many protests in solidarity with the people of Gaza. Some of these protests led to sit-ins at our university. I too have been affected, indeed we all have, by the daily news reports about Gaza and Israel and the human suffering caused by this ongoing situation.

So I understand people turning their grief, anger and helplessness into actions like the ones we have seen.

Demonstrating is permitted and possible within our university. It is part and parcel of our democracy. We give people every opportunity to exercise their freedom of speech. But if we can no longer guarantee people's safety, then it has to stop.



We are often told that people do not understand what the safety issues were during the sit-ins. My colleagues Henk and Margot were also asked this question during the dialogue that they had with students and staff before the summer break. After the sit-ins, I saw that a number of emergency exits in the buildings had been blocked with broom handles, chains, tables and chairs. I hate to think what would have happened if one of the demonstrating students or staff had become unwell. Or if a fire had broken out. It would have been very difficult for the emergency services to provide rapid assistance in that situation.

At the same time, as the Executive Board, we also get to hear about the feelings of insecurity that the ending of the sit-ins caused. And we have also learned that some colleagues and students with Jewish and/or Israeli roots no longer dare to come to our university because they feel unsafe due to incidents that have taken place. Over the coming months, we must therefore consult with each other about how we give people the opportunity to exercise their right to demonstrate within our university on the one hand, and how we keep everyone safe on the other.

As the Board, we also have a responsibility, in addition to the right to demonstrate and the right to safety, to safeguard other rights, such as the right to education. When weighing things up, we take all of these – at times conflicting – interests into consideration.

The past few months have shown that it is difficult to keep talking to each other, but we need to keep having these difficult conversations with each other. As the Executive Board, we remain committed to that dialogue. Maybe we didn't do things as well as we could have done. We underestimated, for example, how important it was to make our conversations concerning and deliberations around this topic transparent. As a board, we want to continue to engage in conversation. Because that's how we do things here at our university. It's how I want to do things, and I know that my colleagues feel the same way!

And we are definitely also committed to ensuring that Utrecht University is and remains a place where peaceful demonstration is permitted. In the 'human rights city' of Utrecht in particular, we all have a responsibility to ensure that we uphold that name.

So, I am delighted to be able to hand over in a moment to our keynote speaker this afternoon. The mayor of our wonderful city of Utrecht, Sharon Dijksma.

In recent months, we have had a great deal of contact with each other, and I have been able to experience up close how you engage with the issues concerned and work on behalf of all the parties, but how you are also clear about what is and is not responsible when safety is at stake and what can or can't be done.



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So I think it's great that, in her speech, she will focus in particular on Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights "The right to demonstrate and establish organisations".

First, we will watch a video together in which people from Utrecht – including scientists from our university – show how they give shape to Articles 1, 2 and 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These concern freedom and equality, the prohibition of discrimination, and the Right to life, liberty and security of person. During the remainder of this ceremony, this video will be shown several more times. And now I would like to hand you over to our mayor, Sharon Dijksma.

Thank you, Sharon, for your wonderful and important words.

In a moment, we will hear from Antoine Buyse, professor of human rights from a multidisciplinary perspective at Utrecht University. Antoine is also director of the Netherlands Institute of Human Rights (SIM), our centre of expertise for human rights research and education. I am looking forward to his speech.

First, we will watch another video, which shows people from Utrecht fighting to ensure the rights to recognition and equality before the law, privacy and freedom of expression.