

Inclusion and connection in turbulent times

Dear students

I am addressing your generation in particular this year. The world is in flux. Today, we welcome young people born in 2004 to higher education. They are eighteen now and the only world they have ever known is a destabilised one. The latter, dear students, is true for all of you. This destabilisation began with the financial crisis of 2008, followed by the eurozone crisis, the European migrant crisis of 2015, and rising populism including the Trump episode. Meanwhile, climate change is thundering towards us at a staggeringly fast pace, in the context of rising political extremism that was additionally fuelled by a pandemic starting in 2020. On top of that, since February 2022 a war has been raging that is testing Europe's limits. We are in the midst of an eventful period in which organisations, countries and structures are shaken to their foundations.

During the previous academic year, the topics of discussion in the media were climate change, health care, inappropriate behaviour, student initiations, wokeness and so on – but that was all blown away by the energy crisis that hit Europe last summer. Cold and poverty, alongside Ukraine: these are the prevalent issues today. We are entangled in a war situation – yes, there is European war. We will face a difficult time, but afterwards the skies will clear.

But, dear students, the question is: what can we do, we and you together, both at our university and for the world? How do we forge the deep crisis we are experiencing now into an opportunity in which we contribute to humanity and to the world?

1) Inclusion is a verb

Over the past few months, I have had intense conversations with staff about the core values of the University of Antwerp. For now, this debate is for the Board of Governors. Afterwards, we will involve the entire university community.

Who are we, what do we stand for? Our mission statement from 2003 really needs an update. How is our project different from others? Our location in this region is an important element, and over the past six years, the university has invested in expanding our regional network. *Act local, think global*. Our city as the lab of the metropolis. But how can we specify our profound core values?

An important key word in our mission as a higher education institution is: **inclusion**. The entirety of the Antwerp University Association is keen to pursue this mission.

Inclusion... Our society has changed tremendously in recent decades. Over the past thirty years, the democratisation of higher education has been boosted by a sharply increasing demand for highly educated people, combined with the new superdiversity. So it is only natural that there is a large and necessary increase in the number of higher education students, who are therefore recruited much more broadly. Some of these students come from a less favourable position, but our starting point is thus: everyone who has the potential to do so should be able to obtain a higher education degree.

And, dear students, that is why inclusion is a top priority. We want this inclusivity to flow into the development of our society. An inclusive society, and therefore inclusive higher education!

2) Investing in staff training courses

In a previous opening speech, I talked about our policy on student recruitment, study progress and graduation. We will not lower the bar but invest in targeted guidance for students where necessary. All students should feel at home at our university as much as possible – there is still a long way to go to achieve this.

Additionally, we should also focus more on our members of staff. In this rapidly evolving society, it is becoming increasingly important to keep listening to each other's points of view, to give feedback on what is going well and what is not, and to grow in our own role and in our responsibilities. Targeted professional training courses can be a springboard for this, for example on leadership, collaboration, scientific integrity, diversity and inclusion. Take the phenomenon of unconscious bias, such as gender bias: assertiveness in men is generally appreciated but perceived as irritating in women; women who combine a lot of tasks 'lack focus', while in men it is perceived as being 'highly ambitious'. Gaining an understanding of unconscious biases towards certain groups is important in our organisation.

To further strengthen our organisational culture, the university is asking itself whether certain professionalisation initiatives should not be compulsory. This is already the case in teacher training for example. But should we not step it up a notch? We will explore this in the coming period, in consultation with the Board of Governors. Introducing something like this into an organisation with 6,000 staff is not a snap decision, but it is a challenge that takes priority. I can also inform you that the Flemish universities will join forces in this and undertake joint initiatives. The Association will undoubtedly also take interesting joint steps.

When it comes to staff, there are still many opportunities to be more inclusive – as this ceremony with white men shows us. Now you sometimes hear people say: universities and colleges should be as a mirror of society. I disagree with that, because when it comes to staff, we are not a representative sample of society, since we are an organisation focused on higher education. There is nothing wrong with that in and of itself, provided that, first – as far as students are concerned – all those who have the potential to pursue higher education are not deterred from doing so but are given every opportunity to complete a study programme successfully. And provided that, second – as far as staff are concerned – everyone is given the same opportunities within the context of the necessary job requirements.

Both of these aspects are quite challenging. As far as staff are concerned, the male-female balance is perhaps the diversity parameter that has changed the most in recent decades. Incidentally, it is the most significant parameter because it affects half the people! Across Flemish universities, we still see that many more women than men leave university during the postdoctoral phase causing us to lose academic talent. This is not the case in Scandinavian countries. It is one of the many challenges our universities face.

3) A connecting organisation with its own rules, norms and values

It must be clear that opting for inclusion will have an effect on our workplace culture, both for students and staff. To shape that inclusion, we not only need to invest in guidance and professionalisation, but we also need to think about what that means, 'to be connected'. This concerns key concepts such as respect, empathy and understanding; but also freedom of expression and academic freedom.

3.1. Freedom of expression and academic freedom

In the outside world, for instance on the streets, freedom of expression is absolute. Freedom of expression in public spaces means that you are allowed to sharply express your opinion,

even if others find it shocking or hurtful. The only limitations are those set by the law, such as being prohibited from publicly inciting hatred or violence.

However, matters are different in organisations. There, the internal functioning of an organisation is governed by norms and values related to its mission and vision and the need to treat each other appropriately based on that.

Moreover, unlike companies, universities and colleges have academic freedom – which does not coincide with freedom of expression. No, academic freedom is unlimited within certain boundaries. The main principle that applies is that of academic, scientific integrity. Our teaching and research must meet qualitative and ethical standards. Here I refer, for example, to the Code of Ethics for Scientific Research in Belgium¹, which elaborates on the following principles: rigour and caution, reliability and verifiability, independence and impartiality. Additionally, there are also rules on authorship, regulations for tests on humans and animals, the human rights charter signed by the five Flemish universities, and so on. Within these boundaries, the academic freedom of researchers is absolute. In our courses and lectures, we must also pursue academic and scientific integrity.

3.2. Respect and empathy: on inappropriate behaviour

In the way we interact with students and with members of staff, other rules, norms and values apply, which brings me back to ‘company culture’. Respect is related to empathy. Empathy and respect are fundamentally about building relationships. They are positive values that strengthen our organisation.

This is why over the past two years we have heavily invested to adopt a different approach to student initiations in Antwerp. Student initiations of the past, which – as we all know – could go very wrong, need not be the norm for student initiations today. Because contexts change and perceptions change. That is why I invested in a [research report on student initiations](#)² at our university, and why the region’s higher education institutions have worked with the City of Antwerp – with special thanks to alderman Jinnih Beels – to produce a stunning [inspirational guide](#)³, as a guideline for student associations. The university has further amended its regulations on initiations, as it also concerns internal norms and values. The student associations want to be our ally in this, and I want to thank them for being so committed. The key message is this: not humiliating but giving a warm welcome to young people who are starting higher education – that is what student initiations are for!

Demoting student initiations are a form of inappropriate behaviour. Over the past year, the focus in the media was mostly on sexual misconduct. But it is about much more. Bullying, verbal or physical violence, harassment, stalking, discrimination and so on are also types of inappropriate behaviour. It includes any type of unwanted behaviour that crosses your personal boundaries.

There is behaviour that is objectively inappropriate, but the line can be ambiguous, because boundaries are personal and subjective. What is not acceptable to you may be to others. The distinction between what is or what is not appropriate may also be related to cultural or social norms. In short, we are dealing with an issue that is difficult to manage and that is constantly evolving.

¹ Please consult: http://www.belspo.be/belspo/organisation/publ/pub_ostc/Eth_code/ethcode_en.pdf.

² <https://www.uantwerpen.be/nl/overuantwerpen/pers/persberichten-nieuws/2021/eindrapport-dopen/> (info in Dutch)

³ <https://kickoffantwerpen.be/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Inspiratiegids.pdf> (info in Dutch)

What we have already learned from the past months is that we need to focus on our workplace culture. Codes of conduct can be useful, but they lose power when they are too detailed. On the other hand, they are not very effective if they are too general. In any case, you can only build and promote a company culture based on mutual respect by, first, continuously focusing on connection, from empathic leadership. 'Leadership' – that sounds like a high position, but it does not have to be. It can be formal or informal. You can, as a student or member of staff, respectfully and politely make the other aware that you find some of their behaviour problematic. The company culture should be a general spirit, associated with an organisation that we are all proud of and want to promote.

Second, we need to focus on having contact points. Dear students and colleagues, inappropriate behaviour between staff and students, in any shape or form, is an issue that we must handle with great care. Therefore, we decided to make our internal network of workplace confidential advisors and our collaboration with external partner Mensura, also available to students.

Our confidential advisors have undergone a special training programme. You can turn to them for support, shelter and advice. A confidential advisor can also intervene as a mediator to find a solution informally and confidentially. They do a superb job and I would like to thank them for that. For inappropriate behaviour between students, there is the student mediator – my thanks to him too.

All institutions of the association have their own student mediators – sometimes with a different title – and they each have a contact point. All these go-betweens operate with strict confidentiality: those who want absolute anonymity can count on it. The confidential advisor or mediator can do a lot with a view to redirecting behaviour and refining how we interact with each other. I can testify that there are many good mediation processes, which allow us to resolve issues. Being discreet is very important in these processes: this is how professional mediation achieves the best results. If the informal approach does not lead to a solution, the confidential advisor can also refer you to the external service.

Seldomly it comes down to enforcing disciplinary procedures. This happens in very complex cases with issues that have been dragging along for some time. The damage has been done at that point and is often irreparable. Such cases sometimes end up in the press and on social media – this mainly indicates a feeling of helplessness. This is another reason why timely mediation is crucial. In my view, the disciplinary procedures for civil servants, which we also have to apply, generally pay too little attention to victims. On the other hand and obviously, the right to defend yourself is also crucial. In this difficult balancing act, it seems once again that the law, however necessary, is an imperfect instrument for regulating the world.

3.3. 'Social' media: on echo chambers and manhunts

Dear students, you are growing up with social media. Try to stay away from your smartphone's echo chamber as much as possible. Open your windows! Recently, someone spoke to me about their fifteen-year-old daughter with anorexia nervosa. Her smartphone's echo chamber has caused her to get stuck in a spiral of information that only confirms her compulsive behaviour. Dear students, your searches and your retweet buttons and your like buttons feed logarithms, giving you information mostly in line with what you want to hear. This makes you blind to other ideas and information. Because there are other ideas and information. In search of what is true or right, you need to connect with the other side and listen with an open mind to what the other person has to say. And we, as a university and as universities of applied

sciences and arts, hope to open up your world. Because without even realising it, you might be staying on a remote island. Social media are far from being social.

But that is not all. They can generate a spiral of violence with invective prose reminiscent of medieval mass violence on defenceless individuals – as we also see here, in this picture displayed at Museum Kazerne Dossin. It is May 1933, in the small town of Hofgeismar in Nazi Germany. A person, seated on an ox, is wheeled around with a sign that might read something like ‘I am an enemy of the people’, flanked by men from the SA and surrounded by a jeering crowd laughing and spitting at him. It is a manhunt – a recognisable pattern of violence. Words can be violent too. You can do profound, lasting damage with half a sentence; with one word. Again: free yourself from the social media depicted in this photo. This is not how we should treat each other: not ourselves, not the world.

4) Let's shape the future!

Let's shape the future! Dear students, you are growing up in a difficult period. This picture is somewhat symbolic of that. It was taken on that sunny 6 July, at Grote Kauwenberg, near building D that was then ruined. We must care for each other, and this is especially true in the coming months. Help each other. Show solidarity. But we also need to connect with the world. Because even though these are troubling times, you shape the future. You will go in many directions – what can't a person study today! – to graduate as intellectuals, who based on their education view the world in an analytical way. All the objects around you, everything that surrounds you, is the result of research. After all, we live in a high-tech society. You will learn to deal with science, with data, with images and videos, with language and text – to become a driving force of tomorrow's society.

So with the in-depth knowledge you will acquire, you will fly out and into the world. You will grow to become a leader in one way or another – sometimes formally, sometimes informally – through your commitment and through the way you inspire and appeal to people. At our university or universities of applied sciences and arts, you will soon – I hope – get a taste of knowledge beyond your own field of study. You will connect with other students – please come to class! – but, hopefully, you will also learn a few things from other study programmes. Interdisciplinarity is a big challenge for the future. Because you do not live on an island, but in a globalised world that needs to question itself. The big problems coming our way are internally clustered; they are wicked problems. Just look at circular economy and climate change: two incredibly complex issues. And they are, as we realise all too well today, closely linked to world peace.

So learn how to conscientiously handle knowledge, questions, images and video, language and text, and media. And read a lot: reading is fundamental. And in your quest for knowledge strive for inclusion and connection with others. By doing so, you will open the door to interdisciplinarity and 'usness'.

5) Critical and constructive!

I mentioned empathy and respect, but undeniably not everything deserves respect. In those cases you need a less strong variant of that, specifically understanding. By which I mean: trying to fathom, with an open mind and without bias, how things are over there, on the other side.

If we want to end the war with Russia, it can only be done by trying to understand the opponent. How do you find common ground to arrive at a new geopolitical equilibrium? Well, you need to find a way to understand your opponent.

An anecdote. Lately, I have been reading through the unpublished war diaries of Hubert Pierlot, the Belgian prime minister who stayed in London with his war government between 1940 and 1944. Equipped with new information, such as today's Russia, I obviously view these sources, this data, in a different way. You see things that you never noticed before. That is how science works.

In the winter of 1941–42, the Soviet Union holds out against the German army, and this is big news. During these months, Prime Minister Pierlot discovers the Soviet Union and Russia, of which he knew little until then. With great interest, he follows the battles in which, lo and behold, the Germans are driven out of Kharkov, out of Mariupol, out of the Donbas. In the spring of 1942, Pierlot frequently consulted with the Polish government-in-exile in London. On 15 April, Pierlot notes the following about Stalin and his (I will translate): 'terrifying analysis of the regime, which is no longer a Bolshevik regime but a regime based again on imperialist Russian tradition (...). Reappraising Peter the Great, Ivan the Terrible and so on.'

Understanding – we need that too. Dear students, dear people present, we are now going through the same journey as Prime Minister Pierlot and many others with him. However much Pierlot disliked communism, however much he viewed with growing suspicion the rise of a very vast Soviet empire led by Stalin, for the remainder of the twentieth century *Realpolitik* would ultimately determine the course of European history – which eventually included long-term goals, with a view to long-term peace. You must actively pursue such politics and realise them when the time comes.

But I am digressing too much now. However... With a critical and constructive mind, yes. Because that is how we also need to stand in the world. Inclusive and connecting, even in turbulent times.

Dear students, together we are stronger, by being inclusive and staying connected. Because that is how we can care for each other. And then the knowledge you acquire from education and research will allow you to, for example, tackle climate change, transition to a circular economy, and so on. With the knowledge you acquire we will also contribute to creating a sustainable world. There is hope. Never forget that all dark clouds eventually pass.

I hope you all have a strong new academic year.