

The University of Antwerp:

A new mission statement

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Herman Van Goethem

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*Academic address delivered by Herman Van Goethem, rector of the
University Antwerp, at the opening of the Antwerp University
Association's academic year 2023-2024.*

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University of Antwerp
Artesis Plantijn (AP) University College
Antwerp Maritime Academy
Karel de Grote University College

The University of Antwerp: Laboratory of the metropolis

Antwerp: Laboratory of the metropolis. This was perhaps the most important one-liner in my first academic opening address as rector in September 2016.

September 2016... Hillary Clinton was expecting an easy electoral victory, but a month and a half later, we all knew better. Beginning in 2017, we underwent four years of Donald Trump, with ideological polarisation that continues to increase to this day all across the world, including here. In 2020-2021, the COVID-19 pandemic struck. In 2022, war broke out in Ukraine — and all the while, global warming is becoming increasingly widespread. How different today's world is!

Within such a context, universities — with their close link between teaching, research and service — are more than ever before beacons for applying interdisciplinary expertise to build tomorrow's world in a creative manner. To this end, the University of Antwerp is working within this Flemish landscape, in close collaboration with the Antwerp Maritime Academy (until recently, the Hogere Zeevaartschool) and with the Artesis Plantijn and Karel de Groot University Colleges, proceeding from a shared and focused intention to form young people who will shape the world.

Now more than ever, our university community must ask itself: 'who are we, what do we stand for and how do we want to shape and co-direct that world of tomorrow?'

The University of Antwerp has recently finalised a new mission statement, in which we give our own contemporary answer to the challenges ahead (uantwerpen.be/missionstatement).

Quality and polyphony

With all higher education institutions in Flanders, Europe and far beyond, The University of Antwerp obviously shares the ambition to be

innovative, with a high level of quality and integrity, proceeding from a commitment to excellence in which its own expertise is valorised. In that respect, every institution of higher education would like to adopt the University of Antwerp's baseline slogan: 'Let's define the future!'

As an intellectual centre separate from political action, our ambition is to reflect on all societal questions and challenges in a spirit of polyphony. Allow me to cite the mission statement:

The University of Antwerp is differentiated from activism by the multiplicity of perspectives inherent to scientific methods. It visibly promotes the public debate and conveys its values through science communication that connects (...).

We obviously proceed from an ideological basis, and especially from the framework of democracy and human rights. We share this foundation with all institutions of higher education in Flanders, Europe and far beyond. In doing so, we explicitly view diversity as added value and inclusiveness as the norm.

In these efforts, it is important not to be infected by the culture war that is taking on dimensions as disturbing as they are grotesque, especially in the United States. Amidst the sometimes-overblown debates on such themes as decolonisation and 'woke', however, there is a common thread that deserves all possible attention: 'respect'. It seems particularly useful to adopt new perspectives and use innovative insights to reflect more deeply on issues of concern, such as prejudice, discrimination and inequality.

The university recently renamed the ceremonial lecture hall in the Rector's Office building — the former Belgian Colonial College. This lecture hall was officially named after the late Patrice Lumumba. In doing so, we wish to honour someone who is connected to our own history and who, after his death, has become an important symbol of emancipation, self-determination, equality, human rights and hope.

With this solemn naming, we have added to an existing layer of meaning, notably the former ceremonial auditorium in that colonial building of yore. As in 1566, iconoclasm is rarely a good thing. Art, humour and poetry offer us highly usable alternatives. For example, take the ‘black Petes’, who are no longer acceptable in their old form in our diverse society, and which have been replaced by ‘sooty Petes’, both in this city and at our university. Or take the statues of Leopold II — which I would leave standing but position at a fifteen-degree slant, thereby making the situation immediately obvious. Adding layers of meaning with finesse and looking for alternatives in order to counter polarisation and encourage respectful dialogue: this is what we must do if we wish to contribute to constructive dialogue that will help us move forward.

Within that context, freedom of expression is sometimes wanted today. This freedom is absolute, within the limits of the criminal law. Having acknowledged this, however, academic staff work within a specific and otherwise very pleasant context — academic freedom — which does not completely coincide with freedom of expression. Within this context, we work and function according to academic and professional standards. Publications must meet scientific standards. When we speak publicly from a university, using our positions and titles, we do so from the authority attached to our positions. Although there may be a high degree of academic freedom at a university, it is not the case that professors can truly make any claims they wish.

To be sure, it should be possible to ask all research questions. Even here, however, difficult cases are conceivable. In this respect, I am fond of the legal ‘marginal review’: although we make no pronouncements on fringe cases, very occasionally, a question will manifestly exceed the limits of what is socially acceptable. In such cases, we often find ourselves mired in extremist political-social rhetoric. Even then, however, we might — very occasionally — be wrong. The future will rehabilitate the outcasts of today.

Our individuality

The discussion on the mission statement sparked an interesting debate concerning our individuality. In what ways do we truly differ from other universities?

The University of Antwerp is proud of its special relationship with its students. It was formed in 2003, now 20 years ago, from a merger of three small universities. The scale and organisation of the University of Antwerp — which currently has around 22,000 students — generally allows for a relatively small distance between professors and students. We have indeed been able to preserve an old tradition of accessibility and personal interaction.

This is also the reason why student participation at the University of Antwerp has expanded so much. The university realises its academic and societal ambitions in co-creation with students, and in shared responsibility. As expressed in the mission statement:

Through committed engagement and a sense of initiative, and the appreciation thereof, we cultivate a sense of responsibility amongst our students, so that we can work together as full partners to shape the academic and societal policies of our institution.

This also explains our baseline slogan, 'Let's define the future!'

Hereby, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the student representatives and student organisations for their fine, intense and highly professional collaboration.

The most important foundation for the individuality of our university, however, is its location. The university operates out of Antwerp, a medium-sized city with, as I described it back in 2016, a significant cultural past and an engine of development and innovation, at a crossroads, with a large inflow and outflow of people from all over the world, and with a global port in close proximity to an industrial fabric that includes none other than the world's second largest chemical cluster. For example, it is no coincidence that this city is also home to the Institute

of Tropical Medicine, and that our university has a long research tradition that ties in with it.

The University of Antwerp is therefore a centre of learning and knowledge that questions and co-directs societal developments from within its regional setting. *Act locally, think globally.* A laboratory of the metropolis.

No, Antwerp is not a metropolis. The University of Antwerp is nevertheless the only university in the Flanders region that, like the Free University of Brussels, is located within a multifaceted urban network that, though limited in size, marks the contours of the metropolis in the 21st century. Now more than ever, our university and the landscape of higher education in Antwerp are a space in which the society of tomorrow will develop.

Only through collaboration can we fulfil this special vocation. This will entail building upon the regional ecosystem, which in itself is synonymous with internal cooperation, in addition to engaging with broader partnerships in Flanders and throughout the world.

Collaboration: Our ecosystem

The ecosystem of the Antwerp region is broader than the borders of Antwerp, with its districts and their nearly 540,000 inhabitants. The healthcare sector provides a good proxy. The landscape of healthcare in our region is a biotope of some 1.2 million people, which extends towards the Mechelen-Brussels region, deep into the Waasland region and across the national border, as far as the southern Netherlands. It encompasses not only hospitals, but also, and of equal importance, GP practices, elder care and mental well-being. Within this landscape of healthcare, university hospitals are a very important player. Moreover, a very interesting evolution is taking place in the Antwerp region.

In the past two years, the University of Antwerp and the Antwerp University Hospital have fundamentally strengthened their ties. Proceeding from a new shared vision and strategy, we are anticipating

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shifts within the region's hospital landscape with active interest. We welcome the imminent merger between the Antwerp Hospital Network (ZNA) and the GasthuisZusters Antwerpen (GZA) hospitals as a great opportunity for working with them and our other partners — with respect for the individuality of all parties — to build an optimal chain of healthcare in the region, in which the interests of the patient are the first priority. The University of Antwerp is closely following the regional hospital consultations that are currently underway, in which important cooperation agreements are being prepared, not so much from the top down, but from the bottom up.

How many times in the past have institutional innovations in Antwerp been the prelude to trajectories that were subsequently adopted across the country? Working from a joint strategic healthcare plan, if the Antwerp region succeeds in developing coherent lines of care, I have no doubt that it will be a model for healthcare reform in Flanders.

The merger of the ZNA and GZA is of the utmost interest from another perspective as well, particularly with regard to the ideological aspect. Two decades ago, who would have dared to predict that, put succinctly, the Saint Augustine hospital would merge with the hospital of Antwerp's Public Centres for Social Welfare (OCMW)? It has now come to pass. This case provides a full illustration of the extent to which the concept of regional organisation continues to expand.

The founding of the University of Antwerp (now 20 years ago) was based on an analogous ideological movement, with the merger of three universities, including the Universitaire Faculteiten Sint-Ignatius, founded by its Jesuit fathers in 1851, and the Rijksuniversitair Centrum Antwerpen, which, upon its founding in 1965 (again, put succinctly), had close ties with the organised liberalism of Ghent. The University of Antwerp is also part of the Antwerp University Association (AUHA). It is a true association, in which we are partners to each other on an equal footing. This association can therefore provide a good basis for further shifts in the landscape of university colleges in the region.

A coherently organised healthcare system and a coherently organised system of higher education — these are two of many areas in which the University of Antwerp seeks to engage in constructive collaboration.

Why is it so important to transcend the old ideological frame? Because it is dated and passé, and because this region bears the traces thereof. As early as 1921, Antwerp provided Belgium with a model for an ideological turnaround towards pluralism, with the ‘mystical marriage’ between Flemish nationalist Catholics and socialists, who went on to govern the city together. Let us also not forget the Antwerp’s Meeting Party, which equally left the old ideological lines behind from the 1860s onwards.

We must sometimes dare to let go of the past — on the one hand because all that remains is a difference in corporate culture, although it does allow us to seek convergence and learn from each other. On the other hand, we must let go of the past because we all stand behind the concept of pluralism in society, striving for an inclusive world, in mutual respect for each other.

The University of Antwerp’s history and location serve as a link to a unique urban environment, as is also the case for the university colleges of Antwerp. If they wish to play an active and engaged role in regional and urban development in the social, economic, educational, cultural and environmental domains, they will do so together, in partnership with the city and port, as well as with the province, the business community, civil-society organisations and other entities. Higher education in Antwerp thus has much to offer with regard to extending the regional ecosystem.

I am grateful to the many partners in the region for their intense cooperation over the past years. We will continue on our journey together. *You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.*

Collaboration: Transdisciplinary and actively pluralistic

Universities are highly compartmentalised organisations, with faculties existing as veritable silos. At the same time, however, today's societal challenges are distinctly transdisciplinary and global.

For this reason, we have opened up undergraduate courses by introducing more general education in the form of university-wide interdisciplinary courses. The intermediate structures we have strengthened are also of considerable importance. Institutes like the Urban Studies Institute (USI) and the Institute of Environment and Sustainable Development (IMDO) have become fully-fledged, successful interfaculty and interdisciplinary players within the university organisation. This is because Antwerp is also a laboratory of the future, in which the active pluralism of the University of Antwerp and our university college partners can serve as a model for the world of tomorrow.

One interesting aspect is the substantive shift in the University of Antwerp's concept of 'active pluralism'. At the university's inception in 2003, respect for religious beliefs was the main focus. Today, we interpret this much more broadly. Once again, allow me to cite the new mission statement:

The University of Antwerp is actively pluralistic, with a desire to encourage substantive dialogue between individuals and groups, each with their own views and ideological convictions. The university provides an open forum in which all issues are open for discussion and in which everyone can be heard within an atmosphere of mutual respect. It invites everyone to participate in this and seek nuance, with an active interest in each other's principles.

This should be read together with the paragraph on diversity as added value and inclusiveness as the norm:

The University of Antwerp sees diversity as an enrichment for people and the world, and as an essential part of our society. For the university, this means a policy of inclusiveness, proceeding in mutual respect from the basic principle of equality between people.

Collaboration: A playing field of five universities

The five Flemish universities work very well together, notwithstanding the differences of opinion that sometimes exist. The Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) is an excellent basis for consultation, from which we advocate dossiers to the relevant ministers. The societal impact of positive interplay between universities became very concrete during the COVID-19 crisis.

For example, there is the Hannah Arendt Institute (HAI), in Mechelen. The initiative for this institute emerged from the the Free University of Brussels and the University of Antwerp, with their common issues that are peculiar to urban space. The basic idea was to us bring together researchers from the two universities in the same workplace. This was expected to strengthen us and provide a new impetus for research and research valorisation. We found a constructive partner in the city of Mechelen, which is located between the two universities, and this enabled us to get started.

Flanders is one of the most densely populated regions in Europe, with large clusters of urbanisation, all within a high-tech society. It is therefore clear that we should join forces to help drive these urban ecosystems.

The HAI aims to unlock scientific insights. This does not necessarily involve publications in A1-level journals, but rather the dissemination of these insights to policymakers, professionals and citizens so that they can use them in practice. The HAI focuses on societal challenges, including migration, diversity and inequality, as expressed most strongly within an urban context. In addition, the HAI examines more general contexts that can disrupt society, such as the impact of disinformation and polarisation and the pressures that are being exerted on democratic values.

The institute was established in early 2020 by the Free University of Brussels, the University of Antwerp and the city of Mechelen. In the meantime, KU Leuven, Ghent University and Hasselt University have joined as well.

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For the more general contexts I have just mentioned, the operation of the Kazerne Dossin Museum, which is a stone's throw away from the HAI, is obviously another opportunity.

Apart from the HAI, a special partnership has also developed between the University of Antwerp, the Free University of Brussels and Ghent University. The three universities are pursuing collaboration on an equal footing and with respect for the individuality, profile and autonomy of each partner. They have no desire for a model of merger or takeover, instead pursuing an alliance that proceeds from the urban anchoring of each partner. The partnership is aimed at the joint pursuit of sustainable urban and societal development in all its facets within the context of education, research and services. We do this through the special opportunities offered by the urban environment, including innovation, the emancipation of disadvantaged groups, entrepreneurship and enterprise, professional networking and cultural participation.

The three universities share a strong focus on urban diversity, inclusiveness, citizenship and societal cohesion, with an orientation towards issues including poverty, the quality and organisation of Flemish education, and the relationship between social security, welfare and well-being. They regard increased commitment to intake, advancement and graduation of disadvantaged groups in higher education as a key policy priority.

To this end, all three universities are pursuing sustainable collaboration, as it allows for optimising the joining of forces based on geographic proximity. The three institutions aim to exercise teaching competences to the fullest extent in their own locations and, proceeding from their university hospitals, all three seek to embed quality healthcare within a regionally organised healthcare strategy, which will be beneficial to patient care.

This will require making joint agreements, setting up projects and, above all, continuously consulting and exchanging information. We are pooling our internal research-support services with a view to the joint acquisition of European and international projects, including within the context of pan-European research consortia.

We regard each other as privileged partners for building new degree programmes at the crossroads of interdisciplinary knowledge.

One of the greatest challenges in higher education is lifelong learning, which will gradually replace our concept of graduation diplomas. Ghent University, the Free University of Brussels and the University of Antwerp have therefore established a joint platform, the Nova Academy, from which we will work together to provide and develop our range of opportunities for lifelong learning.

All of these ideas are new, and they will take time, but the mutual dynamics that are created in the process are particularly inspiring.

Collaboration: A global engagement

Our mission statement obviously devotes substantial attention to internationalisation and global engagement in teaching, research and service. The University of Antwerp is an active player in the international scientific world, and it is a pioneer in networking with foreign partners from all over the world, including in the Global South.

Our interuniversity alliance, Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE), was co-founded in 2019 at the initiative of the University of Antwerp. This transnational alliance is composed exclusively of young universities with a strong focus on research. Within a confederal model, it strives to become an inclusive university with a strong European identity that, proceeding from education, research and service, allows its students, staff and alumni to take a broad view of the European challenges of tomorrow. Since its creation in 2019, the YUFE has been one of the most promising European university initiatives to create a European Education Area in partnership with the European Commission.

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Are there any collaborations that we exclude? Flemish universities apply the human rights test, as elaborated within the VLIR in 2019. Researchers and policy officers face issues relating to human rights: in collaborations in certain countries, with partner universities and with individual researchers. One crucial point in this regard is that we do not apply the human rights test at the level of countries or regimes, but at the level of potential and current partners and activities within the context of university collaboration. The human rights charter adopted by Flemish universities thus proceeds from the basic principle that the human rights test is applied project by project. In estimating this, the nature of the institution may also play a role in concluding whether the project before us will or will not get the green light.

Are there collaborations to which we assign privilege? As a rule, no, based on the basic principle of free enquiry. We obviously work from within a research tradition, with each university having certain priorities, along with a historically built network. The naming of the Patrice Lumumba Ceremonial Auditorium is not just a ritual with historical reference; it is also a commitment. Our new policy vision is taking shape in a concrete way. Throughout 2021 and 2022, several groups worked to update the university's strategy, including the elaboration of an Action Plan for Global Engagement (formerly the University Development Cooperation) and a five-year VLIR-UOS Global Minds project.

The renewed strategy is in line with our tradition of solidarity in cooperation with the Global South, but takes into account the current systemic challenges to humans and the planet. These challenges turn us all into 'developing countries' in search of sustainable transformations, and they force us to positively embrace global diversity and an equal, decolonised exchange of knowledge.

And so, honoured guests, the University of Antwerp seeks to work with its partners, here in the region, in Flanders, in Belgium, in Europe and throughout the world, to contribute the societal structure. It is a commitment on which you all can rely. Let us join hands and commit to the world of tomorrow with even more dedication and enthusiasm.

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