

Diversity of views: the university as a safe haven

Brief address by Professor Carel Stolker, Rector Magnificus of Leiden University, on 8 February 2018, on the occasion of the 443rd Dies Natalis of Leiden University.

As Rector of the University, I am often asked about contributions made by Leiden scholars to political debates. On Twitter, in blogs, at alumni events, and even at the local market in Leiden, concerned individuals want to have a quiet word with me. They ask about Afshin Ellian, Leo Lucassen, Paul Cliteur, or Geerten Waling, for example: shouldn't you (@carelstolker) do something about it? This is Cleveringa's university we're talking about, after all.

These individuals almost seem embarrassed about their university, the very university you hope they would be proud of. I understand where their questions come from. And at the same time, asking the Rector, as someone responsible for managing the University, to silence his professors strikes me as somewhat alienating; precisely because Cleveringa himself – I would say – stands for the courage to speak truth to power.

I would like to take the opportunity of our birthday today to say a few words on this subject, and there are two points in particular I would like to make. The first is that the University – more than any other institution – must be a safe haven for the spoken and written word, and this calls for *courage*. And the second is that this is only possible if we are prepared to conduct a serious debate with those who hold different views.

The university as a safe haven. This concept is referred to internationally as 'diversity of views'. This week *Mare* had an interesting interview with British scholar Joanna Williams. Particularly in the academic world, she says – and I know almost nothing about her political views – controversial ideas are absolutely essential:

*'They challenge you. If you disagree, you can use them to refine your own opinion. In the past, new knowledge has often been seen as offensive. Plenty of efforts were made to get rid of the theory of evolution. If the university's goal is only to give space to insights that won't offend anybody, you won't get anywhere.'*¹

Even so, I recognise unreservedly that the daily reality can at times be difficult. The heated debates that are currently being conducted in America about free speech on campus demonstrate this very clearly. And for us in Leiden *Praesidium Libertatis*, the motto of our University, is far from being an automatic feather in our cap. Leiden has learned its lessons well in what has become known as the "Buikhuisen Affair. As I have said often enough, being a bastion of freedom is a task of which we have to be mindful every day.

A truly open debate requires not only the courage to conduct it, and for university rectors and deans to let such debates take place; it also requires proper codes of behaviour and an atmosphere of safety in which the debate can take place. This makes the University much more a community of people than an organisation. Good mutual relations are essential for a community. Take, for example, our scholarly associations, our societies and academies, our institutes and faculties, all of which are focused on discussion and debate. Within these communities, we strive for optimum freedom and safety to conduct the debate.

¹ *Mare* 1 February 2018. Joanna Williams is the author of the book, *Academic Freedom in an Age of Conformity. Confronting the Fear of Knowledge*, Palgrave Critical University Studies, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2016.

At the same time a community runs the risk of mainstream thinking. It is tempting, but open debate is what makes the University more than just a speakers' corner. On a site where, for example appointing people who are like ourselves and who think as we think. The same applies to the danger of appointing people who are like us and who think as we do. This is why the increasing focus on diversity is so important, not only in terms of gender or cultural or social background, but also above all in terms of opinions.

Esteemed guests, if you're looking for the right direction to take, it's always good to find out where you're coming from. And then you discover that 'diversity of views' has very old roots. The history of our own University shows, for example, that from its foundation 443 years ago, diversity of views has always been the mainstay of its appointment policy. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the board of governors of our University were careful to ensure that the different schools of thought were expressed in the curriculum and that opposition was actively sought rather than obscured. In his book about the history of the University, *The Bastion of Liberty (Het bolwerk van de vrijheid)*, Willem Otterspeer cites many examples of this practice. And even in cases of unmitigated polemic division between schools of thought, the board of governors did their best to find a balance between the different ideological, philosophical and scholarly trends of the day. If an Aristotelian was appointed, this was balanced by the appointment of a Cartesian. And the conflict between Arminius and his Flemish opponent Gomarus arose from deliberate appointments², a conflict that in the end would drastically divide the city and the University.

There were three main reasons for the board of governors' policy, Otterspeer writes. First, the clashes fuelled the debate on fundamental scientific principles, something that is crucial for a university. Second, they served as a 'lightning conductor', not preventing the lightning of debate from striking, but generally bringing it under control. And third, in this way, the University functioned as 'an intellectual information service that translated the great issues of the day into intelligible, accessible language'. Otterspeer calls this a 'kind of guide for the baffled'.³

This is a tradition that universities should still cherish today. In Leiden we put it as follows:

*Our University stands for freedom of spirit, thought and speech, and for the independent development of research and teaching. It is a safe haven where all questions can be asked and answered freely. Our academics are guided by the highest ambitions of quality and academic integrity. The University also strives to instil this attitude in its students. The University has a clear responsibility towards society. In meeting this responsibility, it focuses not only on the present day but also on the interests of future generations. The University is committed to developing, disseminating and applying academic knowledge, and is a reliable beacon in national and international societal and political debates.*⁴

And this is why I am happy with those academics who throw themselves not only into scholarly debates, but also into public and political debates, and I am happy with the freedom that we as a university afford them. Many countries, such as Turkey or Hungary with the CEU, do not have – or no longer have – this freedom for their academics. So, let the lightning strike, I say.⁵ As an administrator of this University I am as a matter of principle not supposed to interfere in the subject

² Willem Otterspeer, *The Bastion of Liberty. Leiden University Today and Yesterday*, Leiden: Leiden University Press 2008, p. 58 ff. Otterspeer's book is full of examples.

³ Willem Otterspeer, *op. cit.* 2008, p. 66.

⁴ *Freedom to Excel (Excelleren in vrijheid) – Leiden University Institutional Plan 2015-2020*.

⁵ See also: Martijn van Calmthout, "Academics should engage more explicitly in public debate. Right now the debate needs academics, including those from the right", *de Volkskrant*, 9 December 2017; editorial in *Scientific American*, February 2018, "Universities Should Encourage Scientists to Speak Out about Public Issues. When universities discourage scientists from speaking out, society suffers".

matter of the debate, but I do bear responsibility for shaping and facilitating the debate, and for seeing that good relations are maintained.⁶

Without this, debate would be impossible and the so highly vaunted academic community could fall apart. For a Rector or a Dean of a faculty there is nothing so satisfying as two opponents battling with each other in an environment that invites debate. One such 'lightning strike' was that between Leo Lucassen and Geerten Waling on the question of whether historians may compare the position of Jews in the 1930s to that of Muslims today; this dispute was kept under control by the regulated environment of the Dutch TV debate programme Buitenhof. Or take the diversity of views on the question of how, nationally and internationally, we should treat groups that do not observe the rules of constitutional law, with highly diverse authors such as Ellian, Lawson, Molijn, Cliteur and Rijpkema. This particular debate ended in the regulated form of a joint book – the recently published *De strijd om de democratie – Essays over democratische zelfverdediging* (*The struggle for democracy: Essays on democratic self-defence*).⁷

Does this mean there are no limits to what is acceptable? There certainly are: we are all bound by the limits of the law (do not insult, blaspheme or incite hatred) and academic integrity (do not cheat, commit plagiarism or fabricate research results). Moreover, whether it is a matter of a tweet or a column, questionable conduct by academics strikes at the heart of one of academia's main tasks: to be a reliable beacon for the world. My predecessor, Paul van der Heijden, commented at length in 2002 and 2003, when he was still Rector at the University of Amsterdam, on the role and position of so-called 'public intellectuals'.⁸ He referred quite rightly to his own responsibility. Columnists are in an attractive twilight zone. Whereas within the academic arena scholars are required to be accountable for the quality of their work, the situation is quite different outside academia. As Van der Heijden pointed out, there it's a free for all: these columnists are not employed by the newspaper that publishes their work, nor by the company that broadcasts their work; they are employed by the university but this aspect of their work is not within the context of their academic position. It is important that they are aware of the unusual position in which they find themselves.

So, let the lightning strike and control its effects: this is what history teaches us, I believe. But for anyone who thinks that we're done now and can move on to the drinks, there's still something more to be said. The ambition of diversity of views also applies to all those whom we - and that includes our students - want to invite to speak at our University. One of our study associations recently invited Thierry Baudet, an alumnus who obtained his PhD in Leiden. This issue of who to invite is currently being hotly debated at American universities: who do you invite and who should you, as a Dean or prevent from speaking at your campus. UC Berkeley recently made world news with its attempts to separate 'politically correct' opinions from 'non-politically correct' ones. Last year, the new Dean of Law at Berkeley, Erwin Chemerinsky, published his book *Free Speech on Campus*⁹, in which he emphasises that the university more than any other institution should be the forum "for the new, the provocative, the disturbing, and the unorthodox."

⁶ Willem Otterspeer, *The Bastion of Liberty. Leiden University Today and Yesterday*, Leiden: Leiden University Press 2008, p. 60.

⁷ *De strijd om de democratie – Essays over democratische zelfverdediging*, with such diverse editors as Afshin Ellian, Gelijk Molijn and Bastiaan Rijpkema, Amsterdam: Boom 2018.

⁸ Paul F. van der Heijden, *Publieke intellectuelen*. Address on the occasion of the 371st Dies Natalis of the University of Amsterdam, 8 January 2002, *Vossiuspers* 2003; idem, *Publiek vertrouwen*, Address on the occasion of the 372nd Dies Natalis of the University of Amsterdam, 8 January 2003, *Vossiuspers UvA*, 2003.

⁹ Erwin Chemerinsky, Howard Gillman, *Free Speech on Campus*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2017.

But he goes further, quoting the 1974 *Report of the Committee of Freedom of Expression at Yale*, a committee headed by Yale historian Vann Woodward:

'Without sacrificing its central purpose, it cannot make its primary or dominant value the fostering of friendship, solidarity, harmony, civility, or mutual respect. To be sure, these are important values ... but ... never let these values, important as they are, override the central purpose.'

In the spirit of the First Amendment, the Committee advises us: never allow friendship, solidarity, community feeling, mutual courtesy, reciprocal respect or the desire to give our students an 'inclusive learning environment' – however important that may be – to dominate over freedom of expression. In saying this he is showing us that the issue of diversity of views at the academy is far from simple. Because, just like the danger that a university community runs of appointing mainly clones of themselves, there is also the danger that we are so nice and accommodating and inclusive towards one another that true debate is almost impossible. The core values of diversity and inclusiveness can sometimes be at odds with one another.

I will be guided by the lessons that our history teaches us: let the lightning strike, control its effects and nurture good and open relations within the academic community. Let us above all not fear 'the provocative, the disturbing, and 'the unorthodox'. Quite the contrary. The academic world is the very place where we do not have to agree with one another unnecessarily, as the Tilburg law professor Schoordijk once said.

And if our students want to invite Thierry Baudet – or any other speaker - that's fine. Being a bastion of freedom is something you have to work for. Two years ago the American Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch – a respectable American lawyer serving under a respectable American president – came to speak at Leiden University. Although nothing at all disturbing or provocative was expected, our students would be asking questions; questions that would be answered by the Attorney General. One question they wanted to raise was on the sensitive issue of the death penalty in the US. Without the Attorney General being aware of it, just an hour before her speech her staff asked us to remove this particular question. Our response was that, in that case, the Attorney General would not be welcome. Attorney General Lynch came, she gave her speech and she discussed the issue of the death penalty at length and in detail.

I believe this is precisely how things should be at an academic institution – and they should be this way precisely because of Cleveringa.