

## Speech Opening Academic Year 2019-2020

Prof. Rutger Engels, Rector Magnificus

### Towards Student wellbeing

Honoured guests, students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends of this university:

Two weeks ago, at the start of the Eureka week, the introduction period at our university I saw more than 4,000 excited young people, looking forward to what the future holds – a new period in their life. And as we all know, this is the start of a major formative period; it will shape students' identity, friendships and future.

Most of our students have a wonderful time, and function really well.

But some of them suffer from emotional issues.

At the start of this academic year, I want to address how the Erasmus University deals with the well-being of its students. This is of concern for me as rector, but also as a professor in psychology.

Let me start by presenting you some interesting results on mental health. International research in 21 countries shows us that one out of five students suffered from a psychological disorder in the last 12 months<sup>1</sup>.

The most common disorders are: anxiety, depression and substance abuse, such as alcohol and drug misuse. We do not have very detailed results for the Netherlands. But it is very unlikely that our country is outperforming other western countries in this respect.

What I find fascinating is that for the vast majority of students with a disorder, the problems started before they entered university.

Further, there seems to be an increase in problems in youth.

A study just published a few months ago, using national representative data from the US, by Twenge and colleagues <sup>2</sup>, showed that in a timeframe of nearly a decade, depression rates increased substantially for both adolescents and young adults.

Another study, by Curran and Hill, also from 2019, shows that levels of perfectionism have been rising in the last 30 years.<sup>3</sup> Young people are becoming more self-critical; they perceive their environment as more demanding, and they impose more and more unrealistic standards on others.

What do these findings imply? Two things.

First, there is a substantial number of young people experiencing mental problems.

Second, it implies that our university system in itself does not cause a dramatic rise in mental problems. But, we do not seem to counter these issues either.

Why do we see more young people having problems? There is not ONE single reason; there is mix of explanations.

For instance, we all know that our society has become more performance-oriented, and calls for complex social and communication skills.

Further, students experience more stress because they have to make important life choices at an earlier age. And they feel the burden of financial commitments.

The extensive use of social media magnifies the negative impact of social comparison for youth, and our smart phone use leads to sleep deprivation. Just to mention just a few.

In line with psychiatrist and philosopher Damiaan Denys, I think that a key factor is that youth nowadays feel they can become anything they want, as long as they work hard. However, we can't always get what we want. That is not how it works; the reality is much more fluid. <sup>4</sup>

The question is: what is the responsibility of the university?

Let me be very clear: each student is responsible for their own life. Yet, we do create a highly competitive context. Students realise they have come to one of the best universities in the world.

That is demanding and challenging. Yet, the society in which they will soon work is challenging too, and we have to prepare them as best as we can. That is **our** responsibility.

We already do a lot to support our students. But, in my opinion we have a moral obligation to step up our efforts.

Therefore, the well-being of students is an important theme for the coming years and part of our new strategy.

In 2018, we compiled a policy plan for students with a functional impairment. This year we drafted a comprehensive plan to foster well-being, together with students, faculty and experts. We will start implementation this year. I will briefly mention a few initiatives.

First, I want to stress that it is important that we focus on what our students need and not on what we think they need. We have to connect with their day-to-day life in which digital tools are indispensable. This means that programs need to be blended: a mix of tech-driven and personal.

We need to deal with stigma on mental issues. Both students and faculty have to learn how to recognize symptoms, and learn what to do, when they suspect someone is having issues.

Of course we shouldn't wait until it's too late. Prevention is pivotal. We need to ensure that resiliency training, both personal and digital, is available for all students. This will help them to prevent serious problems, that impair study progress.

For those who need it, we must improve the accessibility of student counsellors. And we have to set up a network with stakeholders like the Erasmus medical centre, general practitioners and mental health agencies, to refer students to the right professionals.

And last but not least: our interventions should be evidence-based. It is quite disappointing that for emotional health interventions, much is not based on facts. We can't do that. We need to rely on data. And we will do that with our academic experts.

Again, it is our responsibility to provide a supportive and safe environment for young people in a formative period in their life, in which they can explore, experiment, fail and learn.

We start this year. That's my duty – simply because I care.

It is with great pleasure that I now declare the academic year 2019–2020 officially open. I wish you all a healthy and resilient year!

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1. Auerbach, R., Alonso, J., Axinn, W., Cuijpers, P., Ebert, D., Green, J., . . . Bruffaerts, R. (2016). Mental disorders among college students in the World Health Organization World Mental Health Surveys. *Psychological Medicine, 46*(14), 2955-2970.
  2. Twenge, J. M., Cooper, A. B., Joiner, T. E., Duffy, M. E., & Binau, S. G. (2019). Age, period, and cohort trends in mood disorder indicators and suicide-related outcomes in a nationally representative dataset, 2005–2017. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 128*(3), 185-199.
  3. Curran, T., & Hill, A. P. (2019). Perfectionism is increasing over time: A meta-analysis of birth cohort differences from 1989 to 2016. *Psychological Bulletin, 145*(4), 410-429.
  4. <https://www.brainwash.nl/bijdrage/we-zijn-gelukkiger-en-tegelijk-depressiever-dan-ooit>