

Original Dutch version (published 22nd December, 2019):

<https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/digitalisering-bedreigt-onze-universiteit-het-is-tijd-om-een-grens-te-trekken>

Open letter, signed by most vice-chancellors of Dutch universities, calling for a halt of commercial platforms used by Dutch public universities:

Digitisation threatens our university. It's time to draw a line

Digitisation and privatisation in higher education go hand in hand. Dependence on (American) technology companies is increasing. Time to draw a line, vice-chancellors of Dutch universities say.

Students and teachers share information on Canvas or Blackboard. Plagiarism detection is done by sending theses to Turnitin, in the United States. Open online courses use Coursera or EdX. Applications, email services, operating systems, and cloud services are provided by Google and Microsoft. And scientists also use a variety of commercial services such as ResearchGate, Academia.edu, Google Scholar, SciVal, Slack and YouTube in their learning and working environment. The rapid digitisation of Dutch higher education is increasingly dependent on commercial platform services.

It is attractive, because it is inexpensive: the earnings model of these companies is mainly based on the collection of user data, with which personalised advertisements and services can be offered. The student and the instructor become the product; the data is no longer theirs, university or college of higher education. Although digitisation is a good thing and in principle there is nothing wrong with commercial services, something is threatening to go wrong here.

Joint policy

Universities and colleges of higher education have little or no influence on the way in which data is collected and personalised. Most providers are not based in the Netherlands and are less familiar with the public values on which our education is based. Furthermore, freedom of choice is limited: the market is dominated by a few large companies. This creates dependence, complicates the negotiating position and hinders innovation. And, unfortunately, higher education institutions are not yet jointly deciding whether or not to make use of certain platforms. As a result, there is no countervailing power and no joint policy.

This can have major consequences. First of all, education will become dependent on companies that determine and modify the architecture of platforms, without the institutions being able to influence this. This undermines the independence of education and science.

Secondly, control of data from students, instructors, and researchers will shift to these companies, which will be able to exploit this data without public supervision. The conditions under which the services are provided leave great freedom for platform companies to use data for their own purposes. As a result, public supervision of higher education will be eroded.

Thirdly, these commercial platforms place great emphasis on personalised services, learning skills and applied knowledge. This can be to the detriment of attention to education as a shared good. Driven by user data and market forces, the profitable services are offered, rather than services that support a balanced curriculum.

Finally, there is the tension between individual rights, such as the right not to be 'monitored', and the way in which these companies handle user data. This potentially undermines the autonomy of lecturers and students.

Public Values

Over the past centuries, our education has been built on public values such as freedom, independence, autonomy and equality. It is the foundation for equal opportunities for people. This is in danger of being undermined by this development. Enough reason for us to reflect, to draw a line and, in doing so, to work together on a Dutch and European scale. We propose four solutions.

Firstly, the sector must take responsibility for public values. Education is a public good; it must remain widely accessible. Its independence must not be compromised; the rights and freedoms of students and staff – such as privacy and non-discrimination – must be safeguarded. And public scrutiny must be guaranteed. These values must be paramount, also in the case of digitisation and the use of commercial platforms. These values must not be discriminated against or haggled over by institutions. In order to monitor this, a framework must be developed by the sector.

Secondly, the education sector itself will work on a safe and responsible digital environment. Universities and colleges of higher education, together with the government and ICT organisations such as Surf, must examine how

platforms can be developed that allow user data to remain in public hands. Ideally, this should be done at the European level in order to tackle it on a sufficiently large scale. The Netherlands should take the lead in this.

Thirdly, if higher education institutions do use commercial services – and there is nothing against that as a matter of principle – they should not deal individually with different providers, but jointly draw up conditions that apply to all providers. Together we are stronger. Universities and universities of applied sciences must make agreements with each other about, for example, security, privacy and control of the use of study data; the storage of and access to that data.

Google and Microsoft

Finally, the sector needs to learn from other public sectors. Higher education is not unique. In primary education, the platformisation of learning environments is developing very rapidly and commercial providers (Google, Microsoft) are becoming increasingly present. Relevant parallel developments are taking place in the healthcare sector, and Dutch municipalities are also busy with a safe and responsible transformation to a digital organisation.

This should lead to a social perspective: the joint setting of boundaries and conditions for the use of commercial platforms by public organisations.

Karen Maex, rector magnificus, University (UvA)
José van Dijck, professor at Utrecht University
Corien Prins, professor at Tilburg University
Thomas Poell, program director, UvA
Arthur Mol, rector magnificus Wageningen University
Carel Stolker, Rector Magnificus Leiden University
Cisca Wijmenga, rector magnificus University of Groningen
Frank Baaijens, rector magnificus TU Eindhoven
Han van Krieken, Rector Magnificus Radboud University
Henk Kummeling, Rector Magnificus University of Utrecht
Joke van Saane, Rector Magnificus University of Humanistics
Klaas Sijtsma, rector magnificus Tilburg University
Rianne Letschert, Rector Magnificus University Maastricht
Rutger English, rector magnificus Erasmus University Rotterdam
Thom Palstra, Rector Magnificus University of Twente
Tim van der Hagen, rector magnificus TU Delft

Vinod Subramaniam, rector magnificus Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version)