

**The Virtuous University in Troubled Times:
Key Questions for an Academic Community that Serves Society**

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Distinguished guests, dear students, dear colleagues,

It is a great honour for me to stand here before you and to deliver this year's **Gemma Frisius** lecture. After the lectures by professor Jaap de Hoop Scheffer in 2018, and by the *Thinker of the Nation* Daan Roovers last year, it feels like both a joy and a big responsibility to tread into their footsteps and share my thoughts with you today, both to the audience here in this great Church, and streamed to those who are physically elsewhere. I will talk about the "Virtuous University in Troubled Times", or how as an academic community to be a force for good in society.

At the opening of this new academic year, in a manner that none of us foresaw even eight months ago, the inevitable but commonplace thing to say is that the year 2020 has been one like never before. The pandemic and all that has come with it, have already placed our societies before a large variety of challenges, suffering, grief, tough questions, frustrations, and new puzzles, but also with

new insights, the re-appreciation of things previously taken for granted, and for some, room for reflection and introspection.

Over the past weeks, many news articles have appeared which rightfully point out that universities around the world are facing one of the most difficult academic years in history. The restrictions on physical gatherings, social interaction and travel hit us in our core.

But for the universities, the past six months have also been a chance to demonstrate to the world their ability to quickly but quietly adapt to a turbulent and fast-changing external environment. That the universities were able to do this so successfully, testifies to a rare institutional capacity that was acquired, and has been perfected, over the course of centuries. If you were founded in 1614, you're likely to have been in tougher scrapes than this.

Adaptability and continuity in providing education, conducting research and serving our communities have always been the hallmark of our institutions. And in doing so, universities have continuously helped steering the progress of society, while at the same time absorbing the changes of that same society into their own organizations.

At the Faculty Campus Fryslân, we pride ourselves in the fact that the pandemic did not stop us from delivering all of our classes to our students in the past semester, albeit online, and that we have started this new semester providing 70% of our teaching in-class. In this way, we can make sure that our small-scale, high-quality and personalized approach to teaching is minimally affected by the virus. None of this would have been possible without the relentless efforts of our extremely dedicated staff, both academic and non-academic, neither without our stellar building, nor without the continuous support of our

trusted partners in Leeuwarden and Fryslân more broadly, many of whom are here in the room or at the other end of our digital streaming connection.

While it might make sense to use this address to go into the undeniable difficulties of the online classroom, or to talk about the hidden blessings and propelling impact of teaching by using digital means, this is not what this lecture will be about. Online teaching is an important challenge that universities are facing, but one among many. Two of those other conundrums stand out for me as an academic personally, as they relate to my lines of research.

The first is the perceived legitimacy of scientific knowledge, often, but not **exclusively** produced by universities, as the basis for government policy. More than ever in recent history have we seen the importance of independent scientific knowledge in terms of understanding the virus, its spread and the measures that can counter it. In the last six months, we've seen two types of tensions manifest themselves in various countries: on the one hand the tension between **impartial scientific facts** and **partisan political interests**, and on the other hand the tension between **epi-demio-logical and medical knowledge** on the one hand and the insights and values from fields such as the **behavioral sciences, economics and legal and constitutional studies** on the other. Both types of tensions, and how differently they are reconciled – or not – in various countries, are important ingredients for what in my field has come to be known as the “**national policy advisory system**”, a concept that has had my research interest over the past years. Luckily my book on the policy advisory systems of the Netherlands, Sweden, the UK, Canada, the US and Australia came out in January this year just before corona spread across the world. The second edition will inevitably be all about the lessons of corona, when the time is right to say something more or less definite about it.

The second conundrum universities are facing at all times, but one that to my mind has come to the fore particularly strongly in the last couple of months, is the question of the societal responsibility and added value the academic community has towards a **just** society. That community consists of the university as an institution, its staff, and its students.

At Dutch universities, the ceremony in which PhD candidates are granted their doctoral degree, right after the public defense of their thesis, is always concluded with the formula that stresses the duty and the responsibilities of the young doctor towards science **and** towards society. In recent years, our responsibility towards **science** has – quite rightfully – been made more and more explicit, for instance through the national Code of Conduct on scientific integrity. **However**, what our responsibility towards **society** really means, remains much less clear.

This is all the more interesting, as our educational philosophy at Campus Fryslân is strongly rooted in the didactic tradition of Liberal Arts and Sciences, which, going back to Aristotle in the fourth century before Christ, stresses the importance of not just **internalizing** knowledge, but constantly asking yourself those few fundamental questions: “Now that I have access to this knowledge, what does this knowledge mean to me, and to the world? What does the substance of this knowledge mean for my role and place in society?”

Over the past months, the news has been filled with a wide range of societal groups of many different types who feel insufficiently seen, heard and represented. Against that background the question of how a university can be virtuous not just for the individuals who work and study at it, but also how it can be a force for a better and more just society as a whole, deserves our attention.

In an attempt to explore the answers to those questions, I want to take you back to Fryslân in the early sixteenth century, where in the town of Dokkum, about 25 kilometers northeast from here, a boy who later became known as Gemma Frisius, the namesake of this lecture, was born in 1508. He was an interesting fellow. Frisius became a famous mathematician and astronomer in his own age, and was also a practicing medical doctor. Over the summer I delved into his biography. As it turned out, there was plenty to find that can inspire us in our attempts as an academic community to contribute to a more just society.

To begin with, Gemma Frisius was born into a relatively well-to-do family, but his fortunes suddenly turned around for the worse when he became an orphan around the age of eight. In addition, from his birth he had suffered from deformed feet, which meant he could only walk with crutches as a child. In spite of these setbacks, he was admitted to study medicine at the University of Leuven in his late teens. It wasn't his high birth or financial wealth that got him there, but his intelligence and perseverance.

Secondly, after graduating he first started to work as a doctor. He became famous for his **social engagement** as a practicing physician. Based on his Christian principles, he believed that for God, the life of the poor had as much value as that of the rich and powerful. So, he treated the poor for free, and let the rich pay largely for his medical services.

Thirdly, next to being a physician, Frisius became increasingly devoted to mathematics, astronomy and geography, which he then started to teach at the university. He was not the professor to shyly sit in a corner and be conformist to the then dominant ideas. In 1545, just two years after Copernicus' publication of his theory of helio-céntrism, Frisius advocated Copernicus'

hypotheses about the revolving of the planets around the sun. This has to be seen as an act of academic and political **bravery**, when we realize that this was right in the middle of the religious strife, and that Galileo Galilei, even much later in the 17th century, was convicted to lifelong house arrest for doing the same as what Frisius did.

Fourthly, Frisius' **impact** on the world around him has been profound. He created important cartographic globes, invented the camera obscura, improved the mathematical instruments of his day and applied mathematics in new ways to land surveying and navigation. All small steps that helped accelerate the Age of Exploration, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment. One of the people he taught was Mercator, who later became the most famous and revolutionary cartographer of the sixteenth century.

To summarize, from the life and career of Gemma Frisius we can take at least four leading virtues to be inspired by if we want to be a societally responsible academic community:

- 1) **First: classic meritocracy**: that is the idea that not your background or your financial status gives you access to knowledge and social mobility, but the sum of your talent and effort;
- 2) **Second: Ethics**: that is for instance treating every patient with equal care, and not charging those who can't afford it;
- 3) **Third: Courage**: that is always taking a critical stance towards generally accepted knowledge, and standing up for your academically founded convictions, also when they challenge the belief systems of the powers that be;
- 4) **Fourth: Impact**. That is developing ideas and creating instruments that are useful to the real world and fulfill a societal purpose.

Now back to our own place and time, the modern University six months into a global pandemic and amidst growing societal turbulence, identitarian divisiveness and cultural conflict. In this context, academic communities take an paradoxical position. On the one hand universities are clearly seen as institutions that represent hierarchy, privilege and elitism, and are therefore understandably among the focus of resentment of various discontented groups, ranging all the way from illiberal populists and authoritarians to those who lead the Black Lives Matter movement. On the other hand, throughout history universities have also been the centers for reformist thinking and as such, vehicles for societal change.

If our academic community wants to be a force for good in our local, regional, national and global societies, what questions should we ask ourselves concerning the four virtues we take from Gemma Frisius' life story?

First, let's take **meritocracy**. Our students are in many ways among the luckiest people in the world, and I've told them this last week during one of the introduction week sessions. Only **seven per cent** of the world's population has the chance to get a university education, and they are in that seven percent. But it doesn't stop there. Out of all the **twenty-five thousand** universities in the world, they get to get their degree from a university that belongs to the global top one-hundred of universities. Out of every 100.000 dwellers of the earth, not even three people are as lucky. That's right. Not even three out of 100.000. But it still doesn't stop there. More than most other programs at the University of Groningen, to study at Campus Fryslân means to study in a small-scale, intensive, personalized academic environment, with top facilities and lots of opportunities to design your own curriculum.

When we realize how few people befall that chance, how do we justify the fact that **our students** are here, and not others, who might have wanted to be here equally strongly? The quick answer is that we select based on merit: that is the sum of someone's talent and effort. We operationalize that idea by looking at formal qualifications, i.e. high school diplomas, average grades, societal engagement and extracurriculars, and motivation demonstrated in an interview.

With that, in a formal sense we tick the box of merit selection. But that is of course only a superficial part of the story. Merit selection based on these criteria ensures that all who enter have done so based on the rules, but not that everyone has an equal shot at entering.

It is no news that there remain structural barriers that make it more difficult for some to acquire the qualifications that we select on than for others. Those barriers can be of various natures, including economic, cultural, and geographical. We know for instance that in Fryslân, a smaller proportion of high school graduates continues to study at a research university than in other parts of the country. Explanations for this can be both cultural and geographical, and the founding of Campus Fryslân is also intended to at least alleviate geographical barriers for Frisian high school graduates to enter a research university.

Next to these structural barriers, our capacity to work hard, to a real extent also depends on factors beyond our control: such as our natural endowments and our upbringing. So, even on the highest levels of achievement, there is enormous contingency at play.

Dutch author Joris Luyendijk coined this phenomenon as “the seven tick boxes”: your ethnicity, gender, sexuality, your parents' level of education, your

own level of education, your way of speaking, and whether you live in a metropolitan or rural region, all co-determine your exposure to opportunities. Those who tick all of the seven boxes in the most favorable way, not only have access to most opportunities, they are also shielded from different sorts of vulnerabilities. Interestingly, this group is seen as the norm: white, male, straight, highly educated just like their parents, without a regional or urban accent and living in the metropolitan parts of the country. And even though those who fit “the norm” are only 3 per cent of this country’s population, in our everyday speaking, thinking and implicitly also in our public policy formation, the **other** 97% are regarded as the minorities.

So, while our society selects and promotes individuals based on merit criteria, we need to stay aware that those people deserve their positions in the same way in which people who buy winning lottery tickets deserve their winnings: they got them by a proper application of the rules.

And that leads us to an essential realization for our time: that the ideal of meritocracy can confuse two different concerns. One is a matter of efficiency; the other is a question of human worth. Yes, merit leads to **efficiency** in selection, because it ensures that we get candidates with the right combination of aptitude and willingness to perform difficult jobs. But merit selection tells us very little about the **human worth** of achievers in relation to those who are achieving less or whose achievements are not valued at the same level by the society.

The point here is that whether you are in the centre or remain on the sideline remains determined to a great extent by factors that you did not control. And the **ethical** concern here comes in, in the sense that in a society that runs on the myth of meritocracy, there seems to be a tendency to insult those on the

sideline by saying that the reason they're excluded is that they didn't measure up, as if they have failed at every chance they were given.

When those with less luck, and who face structural barriers for societal achievement are not only less rewarded, but also denied dignity by a group defined by education and specific values, we not only get in ethically troubled waters, we also get into a politically tricky situation. Over the past five years or so, but particularly in recent months, we are witnessing across the western world how strong the resentment of groups of ordinary people towards the more cosmopolitan, degree-laden people, who are a minority of the population but who are very visible in the media, public culture and the well-paid professions, really is.

While I'm not the first, nor the only one to have come up with this analysis of how populist and anti-system movements have been able to grow, it is important for our academic community to reckon with this, in the sense that we should make sure not to step into the pitfall of contempt for those who have not had the same opportunities as most of us had, and those whose living world looks different from ours.

It is maybe tempting to retreat into our own bubbles, but let's not write off too soon the people who have had fewer opportunities in life than ourselves.

Before we dismiss anyone as backward, ignorant or unworthy, we should ask ourselves: have we made enough of an effort to reach out to them, to get to know them, and to understand where their ideas and concerns are coming from?

Don't get me wrong, as a teacher, I couldn't be more proud of our students' societal engagement. When in the last term before the summer break, me and my colleague Alex were teaching a Political Science course, in which inevitably

we were debating the social inequalities laid bare in the corona crisis and the injustices of racism, it was almost as if we could see the fire of in some of our students' eyes, which is quite remarkable given that they were at the other end of a **digital** classroom, and even **more** remarkable given that for most of the time, students had their cameras switched off.

But what I wish for our students is to not get bundled up in convictions about purity, and look down on or look away from those whose experience and outlook is different. Of course it is convenient to surround ourselves with people who we already agree with, and who are affirming the beliefs we already hold. But instead, use your engagement, your curiosity and your privileged place to reach out to those who think diametrically different from you. As an academic community, our ability to be a force for good in our local, regional, national and global societies becomes a lot bigger if we engage with those with whom we seem to have the most opposing views.

It will be hard to match the **courage** Gemma Frisius had in going against the grain of his time, but perhaps our interpretation can be this: to continue to challenge the complacency of those who think a just society has been fully achieved, while at the same time staying away from the now popular call-out and cancel culture. When someone doesn't agree with you, invite them over, rather than telling them they can't be part of the conversation.

That brings me to the last of the four virtues taken from Gemma Frisius' life, which is **impact**. Within our Faculty, our goal is provide local solutions to global challenges, and we span a wide range of scientific disciplines that we can tap into to do this. And there is **a lot** that our community wants to do:

- we want people of all age groups to be healthy and well-fed,
- we want a sustainable energy system,

- we want to enrich and preserve our cultures and languages,
- we want to optimize the opportunities of the digital world while not giving in on our ethics and fundamental rights,
- we want to have strong and thriving rural regions,
- we want to save and restore our physical environment and biodiversity,
- we want to transition to a circular economy and nature-inclusive way of farming.

Universities have proven that they are able to technically find the solutions to these challenges and puzzles, but that doesn't mean that the transitions we want to see are accepted, funded or implemented just like that. Transitions often come with short and medium term pain and costs that need to be carried collectively, or as the transition will either not fly, or strand quickly.

My point today is that while for many problems the technical solutions are available, frontrunners will only be able to achieve real **impact** if their ideas are supported by a broad societal base. The transitions we want, can only succeed if they are fair for all and not leave anyone behind. That means reaching out, listening, compromising, improving and repeating that cycle.

Let me conclude. While we may be living in a troubled time, academic communities have a unique potential to be a force for a more just society. This was the case in **Gemma Frisius'** time, this is the case in **our** time. And let us honor the timeless virtues of real meritocracy, of ethical behavior, courage and stay focused on impact in the real world.

And as we continue to grow and expand as a Faculty, my wish and message for our academic community is this: let us work together to marry untempered **ambition**, with the **humbleness** to listen to and include those holding different views on the world.

There's always something to learn, there's always progress to be made.

The society that allows you to be here, counts on you.

Thank you, and have a great year this year!