

Artificial Age. Authentic Education?

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Excellencies,
Colleagues, friends and partners of the university,
Dear students,

Imagine the following.

A student submits an excellent master's thesis.

Its structure is crystal clear. The argument is convincing. The literature appears to have been carefully incorporated. The conclusions are sharply formulated.

But when we ask the student: why did you choose that particular research method?
And on the basis of which assumptions?
And might there not be an alternative conclusion?

There is no answer.
Silence.

So what are we assessing?
A text?
A technology?
Or a learning process that never really took place?

That is the fundamental challenge we face.

Not because machines can now do everything, or rather, all sorts of things.
Write texts, create images, programme software or analyse complex data.

But because artificial intelligence forces us to answer an essential question.
Namely: what does learning really mean?

That is what my message today is about.

About you, students.
About studying at a time when a convincing answer appears almost instantly to almost every question, and it is not always the right one...
About the value of a university degree in a labour market that will look completely different.
And about the values-driven university that we want to remain in that new world too.

For me, the contrast is not between authentic education and artificial intelligence.
The opposite of authentic education is artificial learning: producing a convincing result without having learnt anything.

Fast, but useless.

Authentic education, including education with AI, is much slower, but also much deeper: students retain ownership of their thinking. And of their own learning process.

Students know where the answer comes from, which sources it is based on and which assumptions underpin it.

And they ask themselves whether other conclusions might be possible.

Students take full responsibility for what they submit under their own name.

So yes, AI may take over cognitive work from us.

But only as human augmentation, to extend our capabilities.

AI must never take over our intellectual responsibility.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A new era is taking shape with full force, as we speak.

Universities are on the front line of that transition, of that shift.

One may ask whether we, as a university, are ourselves one of the forces driving this transition, or whether we are simply being carried along by it.

In all honesty, I do not know, and that concerns me.

We can see that generative AI is making an undeniable difference to scientific research.

Research into cancer, new materials and climate models is becoming so much faster and more in-depth thanks to AI.

That is why it is ethically indefensible not to use AI here. The world needs solutions.

But today is not about research. It is about education.

Together with our research groups, our degree programmes are the engines that drive the university.

Artificial Age. Authentic Education.

There is no contradiction, but bringing the two together does come with a responsibility.

The question is not whether students will use AI. They already do so extensively.

Nor is the question whether AI will have a place in our universities. It already does.

Today, VUB is making a clear choice to make artificial intelligence a strategic dimension of its education policy.

I would like to translate the task ahead of us into four concrete commitments.

Our first commitment: everyone who graduates from VUB must be AI-literate.

That applies to engineers and computer scientists, but just as much to lawyers, doctors, psychologists and philosophers.

AI literacy means more than knowing how to use a chatbot and write a prompt.

Our students must understand what these systems can do, what their results are based on, where they fail and which interests may lie behind them.

They must be able to recognise hallucinations, biases and false certainties.

That cannot be achieved through a single general course for all students.

A doctor must ask different questions from a lawyer. An engineer must be able to recognise different errors from a historian.

Nor can it be achieved through an elective course for those who are interested.

No, AI must become an essential part of academic literacy.

Every degree programme will have to determine which AI competencies are essential and explicitly incorporate them into its learning outcomes and learning pathways.

That brings me seamlessly to our second commitment: we will critically review and redesign our curricula.

We must not simply add AI to everything we already do.

That would make already overcrowded curricula even fuller.

Instead, we must ask ourselves:

which knowledge must students master themselves,

which tasks can be supported by a machine,

and which human competencies become more important precisely as the technology grows more powerful?

Paradoxically, AI does not make in-depth understanding less important. Quite the opposite.

If you do not know enough, you cannot judge whether a generated answer is correct, relevant or complete.

Critical thinking without knowledge and understanding is hollow.

You can only assess a line of reasoning if you yourself understand your field.

At the same time, we are investing in new skills:

formulating a problem, designing an experiment and crossing disciplinary boundaries.

And also: creating meaning, making ethical judgements and taking responsibility.

Our graduates will enter a labour market in which jobs will continually change.

That requires an enterprising attitude in the broadest sense: you will always need to be creative and innovative, but also socially aware and responsible.

Sustainability also remains an essential pillar of our educational vision.

The digital transformation does not displace the climate challenge. Indeed, AI consumes energy, water and raw materials. At the same time, however, it can help to optimise energy use, for example.

Sustainability must remain a responsibility of every graduate.

Our third commitment, which I touched on earlier, concerns assessment.

How can we verify that students truly know and can do what they claim to know and be able to do?

Consider the master's thesis once again. The ultimate proof of intellectual maturity.

Yet today, with a few prompts, one can fabricate something that strongly resembles a master's thesis.

That is why we can no longer assess only the final product.

Students will have to make the decisive steps in their entire learning and research process visible: the choices they made, the sources, the tools, the verification of the results and the intellectual contribution they themselves made.

Their use of AI must be transparent.

Not because every use of AI is suspect, far from it, but because transparency is a prerequisite for academic integrity.

If a student is unable to provide sufficient evidence of intellectual ownership, we cannot assess their work.

And that applies not only to the master's thesis, of course, but to all forms of assessment.

We will therefore also step up the fight against all new technology-driven forms of fraud, including in traditional examinations.

And you may be wondering: what about AI detection?

The debate on this is still in full swing.

Personally, however, I am convinced that detection software cannot form the basis of our assessment policy, because it is ultimately a dead end.

It leads to a permanent race between systems that detect AI fraud and systems that try to evade the detection of AI use.

That is why, in my view, we must make a firm choice for demonstrable learning.

For guidance throughout the learning process.

For transparency about the tools used.

For authentic interaction between lecturer and student.

For assignments that require application, understanding and judgement.

And, where necessary, an oral defence.

The central question is not: "How much of this was generated by AI?"

It is: "What has this student learnt, and can they demonstrate it?"

And colleagues here know that we did not only set this in motion today.

Almost two years ago, we structurally embedded the impact of generative AI in our education policy.

We screened more than 4,600 course unit descriptions.

We analysed the assessment methods for all our courses, a course unit is a course, for their risk of AI-enabled fraud.

A huge operation that was only possible with... AI.

All degree programmes and lecturers subsequently received targeted feedback.

That was necessary pioneering work.

But a fraud-risk scan is only a beginning.

The discussion must now extend beyond detection and fraud.

We must make consistent choices about learning outcomes, learning pathways, forms of assessment, final competencies and academic integrity.

I will therefore propose that the existing and new initiatives all come together in the university's forthcoming general strategic plan, known as ASP6.

They should come together in a single coherent policy for generative AI, with clear responsibilities and systematic monitoring.

This exercise is also important in view of the external institutional review that will take place later this academic year.

But let me be clear: we are certainly not renewing our education merely because an external committee is coming to visit.

Rather, we are using the institutional review as an opportunity to make visible the choices that we ourselves consider necessary to safeguard the quality of education.

Dear students, colleagues and partners,

AI literacy. One. Reformed curricula. Two. New forms of assessment. Three.

And now I come to the fourth and final commitment.

AI must not lead to new forms of inequality.

We know that AI can help students learn better and faster. It can test prior knowledge, generate exercises and provide targeted feedback.

We must continue moving towards a personal tutor for every student, tailored to individual strengths and gaps.

Think of students who received too little mathematics or French in secondary school, for example as a result of teacher shortages.

Or students who struggle with the level of academic Dutch.

AI can provide remedial support through targeted exercises and interaction.

Not to replace the lecturer and human guidance.

But to provide individual support that is not always available or possible today, at least not to the same extent.

The Flemish Government has also asked the five universities to develop similar AI projects for schools.

And if all goes well, we will soon launch pilot projects in secondary and primary education in the Brussels-Capital Region.

Tutoring for every Brussels youngster.

Brussels Minister Dirk De Smedt, an alumnus who is also present here today, wants to accelerate the targeted use of AI in Brussels classrooms. We are pleased to be able to contribute.

We see that young people today sometimes use AI as a therapist or “buddy”. This shows how accessible and personal that interaction feels.

We can therefore harness that accessibility for educational purposes, but never without clear boundaries and never without access to human support.

Yet there is a fundamental question here, a social question: do all students have access to the best models and applications, or only those who can afford them?

Otherwise, some students will have a high-performing personal tutor, language assistant or research assistant, while others have to work with more limited and therefore less capable systems.

As a humanist and inclusive university, we cannot accept that.

That is why we recently decided to set up an AI café in the Learning and Innovation Center, where every student will be able to work with the most powerful AI models.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Above all of this lies one crucial question:

which human competencies will be essential in an AI world, and will therefore become even more important?

For my answer, I rely on our compass, on our secular humanist values.

The essential human competencies are and remain:

Critical thinking and judgement.

Creativity and imagination.

Collaboration and dialogue.

Ethics and the search for meaning.

The courage to examine a conviction and revise it if necessary.

This is also where the humanities and social sciences have a crucial role to play, as full co-designers of a world in which technology is ubiquitous.

This, above all, is a task for the university of Free Inquiry.

Thought must never submit to a machine, to a technology, to AI.

Today, free thinking therefore means not automatically believing what AI states with great confidence.

It means asking further questions. Checking sources. Exposing assumptions. Investigating the influence of power. And ultimately taking a position ourselves.

The labour market will change. Some tasks will change profoundly, others will even disappear, while new activities will emerge at the same time.

Our task is to equip students with the knowledge, adaptability and judgement that will enable them not only to adapt to all these changes, but also to help shape them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The question is no longer whether artificial intelligence will have a place at our university.

The question is what kind of university we want to be in the age of AI.

A university that focuses mainly on trying to determine whether students have used a machine?

Or a university that teaches students to use machines critically, creatively and responsibly?

A university that defends what worked yesterday? Or a university that redefines what learning, knowing and being able to do will mean tomorrow?

VUB chooses the latter.

We choose to make every student AI-literate, from engineers to philosophers.

We choose education in which AI explicitly forms part of the learning process, while students retain ownership of their thinking.

We choose assessments that do not merely evaluate a final product, but make visible what a student understands, can apply and can defend intellectually.

And we choose to ensure that access to this technology does not become a new social privilege.

We will experiment and pioneer where others wait.

We will share what works and also say what does not.

We will have the courage to decisively change our degree programmes, our assessments and our own ways of working.

But one requirement will always stand: students take ownership of their thinking, researchers of their research results, and the university of its public responsibility.

We do not long for a world without artificial intelligence. But in a world with artificial intelligence, with human augmentation, we do set higher standards for human beings.

Artificial Intelligence. Authentic Education.

Not as a contradiction.

But as a responsibility.

Thank you.