

Ghent University's Educational View and Strategy

A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing. It is better to have a variety of models and archetypes so we stay flexible and open.

Kenneth Burke

Multiperspectivism as a Philosophy of Education

“Dare to Think” is Ghent University’s credo. In its Latin form, Horace’s phrase “Sapere aude” has been the motto of numerous great, critical minds and independent scholars. It was the slogan of thinkers who refused to acknowledge truths that relied on the authority of others. In the 18th century, Immanuel Kant reformulated the phrase as “Have the courage to use your own reason”, which was the central idea of the Enlightenment. In that form, in which audacity, courage, independence and faith in the human mind play a pivotal role, “Dare to think” seamlessly ties in with the mindset at Ghent University, which is pluralist, independent, critical.

This rebellious streak is something the university and its insurgent hometown have in common. On the one hand, inhabitants of the city of Ghent have a reputation of embracing deviating point of views, of daring to be different. On the other hand, they are also known for their common sense and realism.

Similarly, Ghent University combines intellectual courage with a commitment to reality. As a result, it aims to instill a sense of intellectual courage in its people – students and staff alike. This objective is translated into a mission statement that is both moral and intellectual at the same time. From a moral point of view, Ghent University has the ambition to train its students to be risk-takers in a world full of challenges, to be able to adequately assess a situation and take calculated risks. From an intellectual perspective, it aims to educate its students to be seekers, who do not only use the best knowledge available at a certain moment to solve particular issues, but who also seek to generate more and better knowledge.

How, then, can these reality-oriented seekers and risk-takers be trained? For one thing, seekers and the more daring among us are people who transcend existing assumptions, who are able to think outside of the box, thus generating new insights. The road that leads to such insights is one in which students are confronted with a multitude of perspectives and approaches to their discipline. In other words, what Ghent University actually aspires to is educating its students within a context of *multiperspectivism*.

“Perspective” is a visual metaphor referring to the way in which something presents itself to a viewer in a particular position. As human beings, we inherently approach our surroundings from a particular viewpoint, with certain presuppositions and implicit background theories. New knowledge usually originates in places where researchers go beyond the existing assumptions and even question these assumptions. As such, they shed new light on reality. Any kind of innovation in a discipline or in the way in which problems are defined can often be traced back to input from people with a different background, or to some kind of friction related to new social issues. Ground-breaking knowledge can often be found at the crossroads of various disciplines, when

multifaceted problems are viewed from different angles, by different disciplines and in different ways.

If questioning one's own viewpoints paves the way for new insights, then it is crucial for any knowledge centre to offer students the attitudes, processes and structures that create a sound basis in their academic field, while also providing the tools to transcend the limitations of that field.

One of those tools is a change of perspective. Biology today, for instance, has been revolutionized because plant morphology is now examined through the eyes of geneticists or, in the processing of biological data, from the viewpoint of engineers. Another example can be found in political philosophy, which has undergone profound changes thanks to the use of tools from economics. Scientists' problem statements are strongly influenced by the way in which their own expertise may contribute to finding solutions to social challenges. Seen like that, an outsider perspective or the combination of multiple disciplines may generate innovative knowledge.

It is exactly this sensitivity to the value of thinking differently that Ghent University aims to incorporate into its educational processes. Credible higher education should sufficiently and regularly confront students with conflicting sources of information and theories. When incongruous information is provided and possibilities to use a different perspective are offered, this allows us to adjust the specificity and fixed nature of our own perspective. The ultimate goal of this kind of education is that one automatically acts from the belief that, in Kenneth Burke's words, each way of seeing is also a way of not seeing.

In this sense, the term "multiperspectivism" may give the impression that the curriculum at Ghent University offers training in various methods, theories and paradigms all at once. However, this would inevitably lead to a general scepticism (*there is no truth*) or relativism (*anything goes*), which is definitely not the case. Expanding one's perspective is only possible with a sound basis and should therefore be combined with thorough training in one's own discipline. Real and constructive criticism is only possible with a sound basis. Moreover, it is important that this awareness of multiple angles does not stifle thinking or cause an inability to work on syntheses or make theoretical choices.

Ghent University's philosophy of education can be linked to a wide variety of cognitive-constructivist approaches. This constructivism is based on the assumption that people assign meaning to their surroundings on the basis of implicit background theories. These theories make it possible to interpret data. They remain unaltered as long as they allow us to interpret information. However, if they are too incompatible with the information at hand, they will be adjusted themselves, thus allowing for a new and improved interpretation. As the revised theories integrate new viewpoints, they are able to reduce the existing dissonance and provide a more accurate interpretation of the available information. In other words, we gradually develop more powerful theories, which allow us to integrate more data and which, in that sense, are more in line with "reality".

In sum, multiperspectivism does not lead to a situation in which all viewpoints are equally valid and worthless at the same time. Rather, it involves a mindset in which doubt in itself is a motivation to create a more truthful approach focused on reality and problem-solving. It is the unease of this doubt that encourages us to embark on a new journey in search of the truth, not the satisfaction of being right (Charles Peirce). "Dare to think" means facing this doubt and looking it straight into the eyes. As Ghent

University encourages its students and staff to “dare to think”, it trains them to be courageous in the face of doubt.

This attitude is expressed in several ways in the programmes at Ghent University, but it is also reflected in its projects. The museums that store its academic heritage and make it accessible to the public do not regard scientific activity as a triumph of the sciences. What is central is the difficult quest to arrive at a more accurate viewpoint, tying together the numerous loose ends in the history of science, and how 1% inspiration is the result of 99% perspiration (Thomas Edison). Similarly, the idea behind our study programmes is that the end goal is never reached, that even the most established laws of nature are susceptible to review and that all knowledge – in the broadest sense of the word: insights, skills, attitudes, not simply “knowing that” but also “knowing how” – is essentially tentative until we restructure the known: acknowledging that Newton’s world is similar to Einstein’s, and Einstein and Heisenberg’s worlds are similar to a theory that is yet to be developed. Making students aware of the tentative and transitory nature of scientific results, while showing them the grand and unyielding power of scientific ambitions: that is our aim.

Multiperspectivism in science is not relativist at all. Instead, it considers the unfinished elements of science, thus contributing to more and better science – which is, incidentally, how science has always evolved. After all, it is only when an absolute truth is assumed to exist that knowledge production comes to a halt.

The Numerous Aspects of Multiperspectivism

Multiperspectivism is reflected in other ways in the objectives that Ghent University has set itself. They are listed below:

1. Ghent University is a pluralist institution that remains neutral. However, this does not mean that it is indifferent to the ideological, political, social and cultural backgrounds and convictions of its students and staff, but rather that it aims to treat all these backgrounds and convictions with equal respect. Ghent University provides education in which ideological, social, cultural and physical differences can and may play a role. The university actively caters to a wide range of perspectives and is respectful of the diversity of its students and staff, as is reflected in its student and employee policy. Ghent University wants educational facilities that promote equal opportunities. An essential component of this is its goal to reduce initial inequalities among students as much as possible. Ghent University sees diversity of perspectives among its members as an enrichment, as a quality that brings it closer to everyday social reality.
2. Ghent University has adopted an active policy of internationalization which, relying on the university’s embeddedness in its own language and culture, focuses on external contacts, exchanges and collaborations in terms of both research and education. This is an enrichment and is preferable to a more self-centred attitude. It not only involves collaborations with renowned institutions at the thematic, regional and multilateral level, but also development cooperation with partners in the south. This way, Ghent University strives to be a link in the production and circulation of knowledge worldwide. After all, knowledge is one of the most vital resources that we have. It cannot simply be created in cooperation with the strongest possible academic partners, but should be shared

with partners in the south, not only because this is the right thing to do but also to achieve mutual development.

3. Ghent University aims to shape a development-oriented learning and research environment, in which:
 - a. education is based on current research as much as possible and both education and research are regarded as tools of problem-solving, discovery, cooperation and confrontation;
 - b. students learn from lecturers, lecturers from students, students from students, and lecturers from lecturers;
 - c. problems are formulated and examined from the perspectives of different disciplines, which all complement each other to ultimately construct a rich and multi-faceted approach (*multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity*)¹.
4. The university does not only want to involve university stakeholders (e.g. students, parents, teachers) in the organization and quality assurance of its education, but also strives to valorize the perspectives of stakeholders from the field (e.g. culture, economy, healthcare, justice, governments). These stakeholders are not just important because they are the ultimate target of higher education, but also because education would not be relevant without their input. The university therefore actively pursues the participation of these stakeholders in all aspects of education. Higher education today should be a balanced combination of all the perspectives of all stakeholders. Even though the academic expertise of lecturers is the basis of their professional autonomy, higher education is not meant to be a closed and self-oriented activity. Professors are not, as often used to be the case, both the engine behind higher education and its end goal at the same time. Our education is a public good and should therefore be shaped as such. Ghent University offers education that is centred around social accountability: in the end, it is devoted to broadly defined social interests and objectives, as far as this is possible and meaningful. Social accountability is a key concept for disciplines with a professional purpose that is driven by academic research: (veterinary) medicine, pharmacy, law, engineering, psychology, business administration. Ghent University trains its students to be professionals who excel because of their professional autonomy as well as their ability to contribute to identifying scientifically sound social problem statements and their solutions.
5. In general, Ghent University stands for scientific research that can be justified in a broad social context. However, it does not interpret this connection to society in a strict sense by demanding that each study is profitable and applicable in our society. Ghent University is not a technical partnership, but a university. This means that it aims to put the universality of knowledge at the service of human development. It intends to achieve this by constructing points of contact and building bridges between the different scientific disciplines.

¹ Multidisciplinarity refers to the cooperation of researchers from different disciplines, each approaching a particular problem separately. Interdisciplinarity refers to a cooperation that may lead to an integrated approach to a problem. Transdisciplinarity involves an approach in which each researcher uses tools from several disciplines to solve a particular problem. For the sake of convenience, the umbrella term “interdisciplinarity” will be used in the remainder of the text to refer to one of these three forms, unless otherwise specified.

- a. Different kinds of development: At one end of the spectrum, research may contribute to strictly economic development or technological innovation, or it may aim at training highly qualified graduates who possess the skills required in our current society. At the other end of the spectrum, research may also involve the development of argumentation skills and a level of empathy needed to shape society and life itself. Between these two extremes are all kinds of other social interests to which science can and must contribute. Among these interests is the act of expanding knowledge itself (“knowledge for the sake of knowledge” is also socially relevant).
- b. Different kinds of disciplines: On the one hand, in academic disciplines that are professionally oriented, socio-economic objectives are a given. In these fields, Ghent University explicitly qualifies its students as researchers/professionals (e.g. doctors, engineers, lawyers) who meet the need for highly qualified human capital. In the humanities, on the other hand, research revolves around the cultivation of scholarship: the profound mastery of a discipline by the long-term practice of it. Although the product of the humanities is the scholar him/herself, trained in the development of an oeuvre, there is also a social purpose here. Disciplines such as philosophy, history, literature and linguistics, or art studies train people in thinking and developing insight into content and approaches that largely fall outside of the direct scope of sciences. They focus on a general sort of reflexivity, inviting people to position themselves in history, in a global context, in a network of meanings, a multitude of visions. Among other things, these disciplines look into the meaning of technological innovation, the meaning of expanding scientific insights. They investigate what makes life meaningful, how viewpoints differ from each other both historically and locally, or how a society should be organized. Between the professionally oriented academic disciplines and the humanities, we can find the sciences and social sciences. The sciences may be pure, aimed at strategic basic research, or targeted towards applied research. “Pure” research, too, fits in with a broad interpretation of a focus in social interests. Without fundamental research, there would no longer be a platform for strategic basic research and applied research. Ghent University sees the contribution to fundamental research as one of its most vital research objectives. After all, it is this type of research that is the precondition for research that is useful in a direct sense – a lasting condition that is threatened by an overly short-sighted interpretation of what is socially relevant. While the social sciences are also partly application-oriented (e.g. in policy research or research on government or corporate governance), they have a fundamental component too. In this respect, they are related to the humanities, since they encourage reflexivity in terms of the study of social organization and processes.
- c. The idea that Ghent University conducts scientific research with a social purpose also brings along questions about the reason and purpose of research. As far as education is concerned, this attitude leads to the creation of points of contact and bridges between practice-oriented research and reflection on research. For example, biotechnology, (veterinary) medicine, or engineering also examine ethical or more general, philosophical questions and approaches, especially about the

rights and interests of patients, animal welfare, or values on technology assessment. When we aim to tackle the major questions, the humanities and social sciences and their methods play a considerable role. This way, these bridges between the “two cultures” (C.P. Snow) create a broad view of the social responsibility of sciences.

6. “The university is not alone” is an important element in Ghent University’s self-awareness. Multiperspectivism is reflected in the realization that the university as a knowledge centre is but one link in the wider knowledge ecology that drives our society. Different types of knowledge centres each have their own role to play in this: universities, university colleges, higher professional education, secondary education, Strategic Research Centres (SOCs) and Strategic Innovation Platforms (SIPs), or corporate R&D units. Besides knowledge centres, governments and companies are also of great importance in this ecology (i.e. the triple helix). Depending on their position in this ecology, the dissemination, transfer, production and protection of knowledge all play a different yet interconnected role. For example, the university creates new knowledge but also passes on established insights. It trains knowledge workers for companies and governments but also employs these – both creative and productive – knowledge workers itself. However, for the university, the focus is obviously on the creation of new knowledge. In university education, Ghent University as a knowledge centre takes on many roles: as an educator of educators (teachers), as a trainer for governments and companies, as a partner for SRCs and SIPs), as a supporter of professional higher education at university colleges, and as a place where pupils from secondary education continue their training. The ecological view on knowledge is also translated into a consideration of the combination of roles in the knowledge economy: student-entrepreneurs are but one example of this.
7. Multiperspectivism is also reflected in the fact that Ghent University does not want to limit the development of its students and staff to professional and disciplinary skills, but also consider their roles as citizens, human beings, family members, consumers, or entrepreneurs. This stems from points 5 and 6 above. As far as these students are concerned, they must dare to surpass themselves, stand up for their own opinion and defend it; they should not be afraid of making mistakes, of trying things out, making new things, getting out of their comfort zone, networking, giving presentations, taking the initiative, establishing new relationships, or taking social responsibility.
8. University governance also integrates multiple perspectives. At the highest echelons (i.e. the Board of Directors and the Executive Board), Ghent University involves external stakeholders (i.e. representatives from socio-economic, political and cultural circles). All policy-making bodies, whether advisory or decision-making, are composed of members from all sections of the staff (i.e. professorial staff, assistant academic staff, administrative and technical staff, and students). When this rule is deviated from in advisory bodies that devise strategies, experts take over the place of staff members, who do participate in the higher echelons. Ghent University’s entire governance structure is a tool to combine and coordinate the perspectives of students, staff and representatives of society. In this structure, a major role is assigned to students. Bodies such as the student union, as well as the systematic participation of students at all administrative levels (ranging from study programme committees to Faculty Boards and central advisory and decision-making bodies) guarantee the

involvement of students – not just in education but in everything related to student facilities (e.g. housing, nutrition, student union activities, sports).

9. Ghent University strives to achieve a dynamic balance between decentralized and centralized perspectives in its policy, in its continuous search for optimal subsidiarity at the faculty level or in other bodies within the faculties. Central initiatives emerge when the coordination of the faculties is required. The concrete ways to achieve this coordination are discussed with the deans and directors of studies, who create the required support. Here, too, a coordination of perspectives exists.
10. Taking a perspective and changing your perspective are, as is known from cognitivist moral psychology, powerful tools to develop moral and normative skills. Ethical skills are largely based on what psychologists refer to as ‘social cognition’. Social cognition is the ability to perceive oneself through the eyes of another. Moral development is related to the way in which one positions oneself towards overarching perspectives. Decentralization of one’s own needs and interests can be achieved when people view themselves as members of a small group, a larger community, an entire society, and finally from the perspective of what a desirable social structure might be. Moral-educational studies show that the incentive to assume the perspective of the other or of a larger whole is a powerful moral learning tool. Asking yourself whether you would want certain events to happen to you and viewing situations through the eyes of the other – this is what allows you to identify with the desires and needs of another, fuelling a moral impulse. Incidentally, a change of perspective lies at the basis of the golden rule, which various religions have taken as an ethical starting point: “Treat others how you want to be treated yourself”. In other words, multiperspectivism is not limited to education, but it also involves values and norms, a sense of identifying with larger wholes, with principles that are supposed to shape this whole. In this respect, it is important for Ghent University that the principle of changing perspectives is a formal concept and does not impose any moral content. This requires a certain way of seeing, encourages neutrality in terms of decentralization and inspires people to not just look at matters from their own perspective. This way of seeing things is compatible with a wide range of ideological principles.

Link with Ghent University’s Mission Statement

Multiperspectivism as a philosophy of education corresponds with Ghent University’s official mission statement. This mission statement is the basis for the strategic policy plans and change processes at all levels. More specifically, it can also be applied to university education.

The full mission statement is included below:

Ghent University ...

- *distinguishes itself as a socially committed and pluralist university, which is open to all*

students regardless of their ideological, political, cultural and social background (see also its non-discrimination statement);

- *positions itself in a broad international perspective, all the while stressing its own individuality in terms of language and culture;*
- *aims to encourage its students to adopt a critical approach within a creative, development-oriented educational and research environment;*
- *offers a broad spectrum of high-quality research-based study programmes that are constantly being adapted to the most recent scholarly and scientific developments;*
- *aims to develop in a selective manner the advanced degree programmes, as well as postgraduate and permanent education;*
- *aims to situate its educational and research activities within the broader social context and to remain in continual dialogue with all parties concerned;*
- *aims to promote and further develop fundamental independent research in all faculties and to be a world player in the selected fields of endeavour;*
- *aims to be an enterprising university with a focus on the social and economic applications of its research findings;*
- *attaches particular importance to the social facilities made available for students;*
- *creates a stimulating environment for its staff and provides them with the fullest scope of opportunities to develop their potential;*
- *attaches particular importance to the participation of students, staff and community representatives in the formulation of policy;*
- *desires strong interaction with its alumni;*
- *opts for a decentralized, dynamic organization model.*

Multiperspectivism as an Educational Concept

Multiperspectivism is the core concept of a general mindset that demonstrates how Ghent University can shape its mission statement. This philosophy does not only involve education and research, but also stakeholder relations within the university (cooperation in diversity). Furthermore, it implies a concept of governance (i.e.

integration through participation), the functioning of administrations (i.e. integration through cooperation) and a vision on the relations between university and non-university stakeholders in higher education.

What does this multiperspectivism mean in terms of the educational concept? In an ideal learning situation, there is an obvious connection with cognitive-structuralist and related learning theories. Specifically, these approaches see learning as follows:

1. an active process: information is meaningless until it is compared with an implicit theory; an ideal education should therefore encourage students to actively construct knowledge themselves;
2. a process of integrating incongruous information; an ideal education should break students' expectations;
3. a process aimed at problem-solving: learning takes place thanks to failures that create a problem; ideal education needs to be focused on problem-solving;
4. a process of decentralization or distancing: learning means turning self-centeredness (self-centrism) into a objective approach (decentrism or multicentrism); ideal education needs to break expectations by encouraging students to take on alternative, but more appropriate perspectives;
5. a reflexive process: besides the further consolidation of the acquired background theories, learning entails the restructuring of these theories by reflecting on the conceptual frameworks; as a result, education is meant to promote reflection on these frameworks within which incongruous information is processed;
6. a cooperative process: first and foremost, one can distance oneself from one's own frameworks by cooperating with other people who have deviating viewpoints, thus necessitating the coordination of viewpoints; ideal education promotes collaboration between students with different perspectives.

According to this concept, students will learn more efficiently if they are allowed to discover more themselves and collaborate with their peers to solve problems. The role of the learning environment and the lecturer consists of offering challenges, providing information that can quickly be integrated, and encouraging reflection and synthesis. This is an ideal concept, which can be converted into a number of teaching techniques. The "creative knowledge development concept" of Ghent University translates this ideal concept into a more feasible one.

Creative Knowledge Development: Ghent University's Educational Concept

[Knowledge is the Basis of Creativity](#)

Ghent University educates its students to be creative knowledge workers. However, creativity should not be achieved at the expense of knowledge, but instead build on it. Taking knowledge and insight into key concepts, theories, frameworks and discipline-specific research methods as a starting point, Ghent University expects its students to critically assess the scientific value of new information and then put it to use. Meanwhile, students acquire a keen understanding of related and supporting fields and

independently use these insights in their search for (to them) new solutions to complex problems and research questions.

Developing Knowledge is a Skill

Activating teaching methods challenge students to assume an active, investigative role. Besides creatively applying existing scientific basic knowledge from their own field, students are encouraged to actively construct knowledge on the basis of common sources of knowledge in academic and professional contexts. Learning how to think creatively implies skills at three different levels: first to discover particular connections and new viewpoints, then to constructively and innovatively deal with standard methods to solve complex problems, and finally to contribute to a particular field by means of research.

Creativity Requires a Critical Attitude Towards One's (Own) Knowledge

Typical students who “dare to think” are able to independently and critically analyse complex theoretical and/or practical questions and rely on scientific basic knowledge while they do this. With its long tradition of independent and critical thinking, Ghent University is a knowledge and learning centre that mainly trains students to be capable of clever academic reasoning and critical judgement to create an informed opinion. This is crucial to translate this into appropriate solutions or scientifically sound conclusions.

The Unknown is a Challenge Rather than a Threat

In a continuously evolving scientific community characterized by specialized subdisciplines, it is vital for academics to be aware of the limitations and transitory nature of knowledge. Complex problem statements often require a multidisciplinary approach, which may generate some ambiguity between the different approaches. Graduates and students at Ghent University are expected to understand new, uncertain situations, make use of new methods and principles and dare to transcend the premises imposed by their environment. In this sense, Ghent University strives for an emancipatory contribution to the development and renewal of society.

Communication Generates Knowledge

Today, academics are assumed to be able to work with and for others and take on a leadership role. All of this requires excellent communication skills. By means of teaching methods such as group work, integration seminars, seminars, PGO-tutorials, projects and work placements within the study programmes, students acquire knowledge through communication and are able to apply and share this knowledge. These teaching methods encourage students to work together. Moreover, social interaction plays a major role in acquiring knowledge and skills. The targeted integration of ICT into a rich and varied mix of teaching methods allows teachers and students to exchange and discuss knowledge and ideas, even in large groups, regardless of place and time.

Creativity Presupposes a Lifelong Development of Knowledge

Since academics are expected to creatively deal with continuously evolving research and work situations at all times, they need to be extremely eager to learn and teach, be aware of a wide variety of learning strategies and have the right amount of self-organization to be motivated to engage in lifelong learning. From the start of the educational process, Ghent University strives to promote autonomy in learning and support independent thinking. In their study programmes, students are increasingly confronted with learning activities that challenge them to assume responsibility of their own learning process. Learning in authentic knowledge environments, such as during the work placements, is not just an efficient teaching method for rapidly evolving fields. It also offers students the opportunity to commit to lifelong learning, as the learning environment uses the same sources of knowledge as the research or professional environment in which students will work in later life. Students are taught to create (what is to them) new knowledge from complex data.

Diversity Promotes Creativity

Ghent University presents itself as an open, socially committed university with a pluralist stance and a broad international perspective. This social diversity is reflected in its staff, students, research and study programmes. Diversity should not only lead to an adequate reflection of the diversity in society and the international scientific community. Diversity also boosts creativity, in the way in which academic problems are solved and how these solutions are communicated, but also in the solutions themselves. In the end, what it boils down to is acknowledging, appreciating and taking advantage of diversity – and within the educational context of Ghent University, this is nothing less than a necessity.