



# From learning towards living

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*'Mother, why do we live?'*

A penetrating question, which may sound familiar to the Flemish among you. This phrase is the title of a Flemish television drama, based on the novel of the same title from 1932, written by Lode Zielens. The book describes the time's social upheavals from the perspective of the regular man and is a socially critical manifesto steeped in existential impotence. Trying to answer this question is an impossible task, so I am permitting myself to reformulate the question to *'Mother, why do we learn?'*. During this lecture I will try to formulate an answer to this question based on knowledge gained from Lifespan Psychology, which is, after all, my discipline.

Within the section of Lifespan Psychology we are at this moment carrying out research among adolescents in secondary education, and when I ask them the question: 'Why do you learn?', the most common answer is: 'Because we have to'. But consider how different the answer is when we look at the motivation of adults who study, such as our students at the Open University of the Netherlands who even combine their academic study with family and a job.

**Table 1 Results/motivation of students at the Open University of the Netherlands**

Adapted copy from Schlusmans, K. & Van den Munckhof, R. (2017). *Results of alumni-research (bachelor)*, Open University of the Netherlands, Heerlen ECOP series of reports.

to develop myself
to acquire more knowledge
to have pleasure from
to perform my current duties better
to increase my chances of acquiring a (new) job
to perform better in a managerial or social sense
to obtain a higher position
to become more highly valued by colleagues, managers and surroundings (family/friends/acquaintances)
to improve my financial situation

Personal development is frequently quoted by these students as the main motive to study. But what is that exactly, development, and what is the role of learning, of studying at the Open University of the Netherlands, in this process?

Within Lifespan Psychology, development is seen as a *lifelong process*. Development occurs throughout the entire human lifespan, from conception until death. Not any period within the lifespan is all-important or dominant regarding the impact on further development. *Lifelong Learning* contributes to a continuous development. Naturally the form of learning should be adapted to the current phase of life of the student. The Open University of the Netherlands stands by open, flexible and online education and by continuing to promote the concept of lifelong learning as a core value, the Open University of the Netherlands contributes meaningfully to the 'lifelong learning' of its adult students.

Human development is *shapable*, directed towards a continuous interactive adjustment to the environment. Humans are not pre-programmed, and although they may have preferred patterns, they are able to adapt in various ways to new environments or situations. In doing so, humans have the capacity to learn new skills and acquire new knowledge.

The Netherlands is a Knowledge Society. People are expected not only to bring their knowledge and skills up to standard, but also to maintain this knowledge and these skills. Motivated by the need for up-to-date scientific knowledge and 21st century skills, students come to the Open University of the Netherlands. Through their studies they obtain the tools to constructively deal with changes in society, in their work environments and/or in family situations.

Furthermore, development is *multidimensional*. Human development takes place in several fields such as the biological, the cognitive, the social and the emotional. The developments within these domains are also related to and influenced by each other.

The Open University of the Netherlands is a non-conventional, public, academic institution which mainly addresses the cognition of its students and thus steering the intellectual capacity as the engine of development. The appreciation which the scientific studies of the Open University of the Netherlands receive from students and experts, for example in the annual National Students Survey and selection guides for higher education information, demonstrate the university's success in achieving this.

Human development is also *multidirectional*. Through the attention for the entire lifespan, it has become clear that human development cannot be reduced to a uniform or unilinear pattern. Individuals develop in different directions, and their final directions of development can only be predicted within very broad boundaries based on early development. Changes in direction are always possible. New knowledge and skills, traditionally certified by a diploma, enable continuous development in the field that someone is already active in. But they also enable more radical changes in direction, such as a transition into a different professional field.

In short, learning contributes to personal development and the Open University of the Netherlands can be a unique partner in this endeavour.

But what is the goal of development? What do we develop towards?

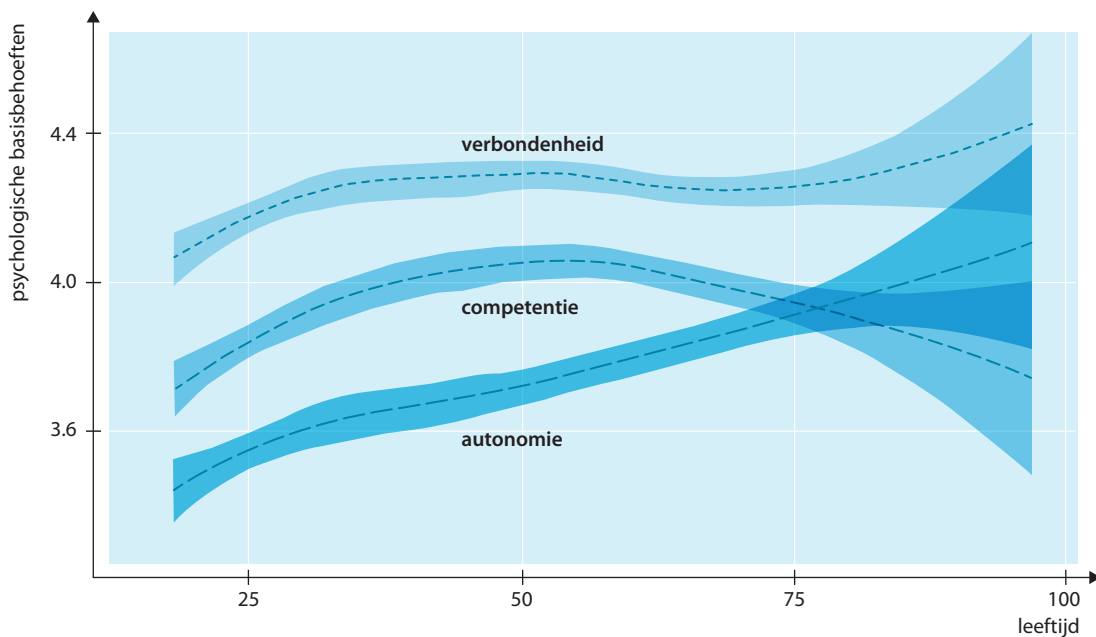
Considering our students once more: what do they want to achieve by following an academic study?

They want to blossom, they want to make better use of their capacities, they want to function optimally, or expressed in psychological jargon: they want to flourish. Individuals who flourish have 'the ability to adapt and self-manage in the face of social, physical, and emotional challenges in life'. They are characterised by a high level of emotional, psychological and social well-being.

It is a great human aspiration and a great ambition, to attain this well-being through studying, by means of a study. Unfortunately this ambition sometimes hits a wall of circumstances, such as taking care of children and/or parents or other life events. This can lead to a decline in motivation or even a total loss thereof. Not every student of the Open University of the Netherlands completes what he or she has started, or can keep up with his or her own desired learning pace.

The inherently human aspiration to develop, to experience well-being, is not sufficient to keep up the motivation. The extent to which the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness are met also plays a crucial role. These three basic psychological needs are essential for a person's motivation.

Recent research by department colleagues Lataster and Reijnders in a group of over 1,700 individuals demonstrates that the extent to which these basic psychological needs are met fluctuates throughout the lifespan.



**Figure 1 The relationship between the basic psychological needs and age**

Copied from Reijnders J., Jacobs N., Janssens M., Simons M., Peeters S., Lataster J. (in preparation). *Basic psychological need satisfaction and well-being across the lifespan: Results from a cross-sectional general population study among 1,709 Dutch speaking adults.*

Autonomy, or the need to be causal agents of one's own life and act in harmony with one's values, increases with age and is not dependent on demographic factors like gender, work, income, relationship and children.

Competence, or the need to control the outcome and experience mastery, has an inverted U-shaped relationship with age, with a peak in middle adulthood. This relationship is, however, fully determined by demographic factors, and most explicitly having a job, and having a stable relationship.

Relatedness, or the need to interact, to be connected to, and experience caring for others, rises through young adulthood, stabilizes around 40-50 years old, dips slightly around 60-65 years old and subsequently rises a little bit again.

If we want to support people in their aspiration to develop, then we must create a context which meets their basic psychological needs, as they are relevant in that moment in their lives. What does this mean for the Open University of the Netherlands, that through its offerings of scientific studies wants to support its students in their growth, in their aspiration for more well-being?

Give students *autonomy*. Especially in the phase of life in which they study at the Open University of the Netherlands, during young and middle adulthood, this basic psychological need is strongly present. Give them the space and responsibility to make their own choices, such as regarding the composition of their curriculum but also regarding the pace of their study process.

Let students feel *competent*. Let them become experts in the things they find important, and let them complete these matters with visible success. Every completed module is a sign of an acquired competence.

Ensure *relatedness* in many ways – students amongst themselves, as well as between students, teachers, support staff and administrators. After all we belong to one community, to one team, united by one goal, namely: to optimally enhance the learning process of the student, adapted to his or her individual psychological needs and phase of lifespan.

*'Mother, why do we learn?'*

*'Child, we learn in order to develop ourselves, and maybe consequently also to live happily.'*

## Resources

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