

Commissie Democratisering & Decentralisering UvA

Foreword

Just recently, the Executive Board approved the budget of the Democratisation and Decentralisation Commission (D&D) and thereby the formation of our Commission was finalised. This was an extensive process, but in the meantime we had already started working.

Orienting meetings were held with the university's faculties and services, papers and documents were read and both in-house and outdoor seminars attended. Furthermore, we formed our own organisation and designed the website. Therefore, a first progress report can now be presented.



We are aware of the extent of the task that lies ahead of us: the development of proposals that address the broadly recognised issues and, in turn, will make the UvA a better institution. The aim is to do this through extensive consultation in which the entire university community can participate in dialogue, accumulating in a written vote where everyone can express their final judgement. The central task of the commission is to facilitate and stimulate discussion that will lead to proposals and options on which everyone can have a voice and that promote democratisation and decentralisation at the UvA.

This report is a first account of our activities and our progress. It describes, in a nutshell, what actions we have realised and which themes have been discussed.

In the following weeks we will – in accordance with our [working plan](#) - define central themes and present a frame of reference for further discussion. Not only to those with whom we have spoken, but to everyone who wants to exchange thoughts with us. That is possible through our website, but also by making an appointment with us. We call upon all of those involved with the UvA to share their ideas, doubts, questions and any other heartfelt input with us!

Lisa Westerveld

Commission members



Herman van den Bosch is professor in Management Studies at the Open University. His academic interest is focused on social innovation and especially the relation between quality and organisation of education. He was involved in establishing the School of Management at Radboud University. Until about two years ago, he was Dean School of Management of Open University.

Eva Groen-Reijman is a PhD-candidate and teacher in Political Philosophy at the UvA. She studied at the UvA and was active in student politics, among others in education committees, the Faculty Student Council and the Central Student Council. At the moment, she teaches Practical Philosophy and she writes on democratisation theory and modern political campaigns.



Rob Hagendijk has been associated with the UvA since 1970. Since then, his research and education focused on the diverse relations between science development and societal change. Furthermore, since 1969, he has gained extensive management experience in a plurality of positions, both at the UvA and internationally. He retired in 2014, but his research into rare diseases and new medicines is continued in collaboration with, among others, specialists of the AMC.

Pieter Pekelharing has taught ethics and social and political philosophy at the UvA for many years. He won the education prize of best teacher at the UvA in 2007. Since then, he has functioned in various commissions aimed at improving and innovating education. Pekelharing has retired for some time now.



Kyah Smaal is a Logic Master's student at the FNWI. During her Beta-Gamma Bachelor's, she was a member of both the Faculty and the Central Student Council. During her time as a student council member, she was involved in the dossier on the merging of the Beta faculties of the UvA and the VU. Currently, she is a board member of the ASVA student union.

Mathieu Weggeman is professor in Organisation Sciences at the Technical University Eindhoven. He is an expert on organisational design, innovation management and processes in knowledge intensive organisations. He was a member of the editorial board of Organization Studies and is a published author in scientific journals such as R&D Management, Journal of Product Innovation Management, Human Relations and many others. Weggeman is commissioner at Brainport Development and is a member of the Dutch Council for Culture (Raad voor Cultuur).





Gloria Wekker is Cultural Anthropologist (UvA, 1981) and professor emeritus of Gender Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University. Moreover, she was Director of Expertise Centre GEM - Gender, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism in higher Education - of the same faculty. She has fulfilled advisory positions for the Dutch government in the areas of minority, healthcare and emancipation policy. Her main focus in the D&D Commission is diversity.

Lisa Westerveld was active in the student movement and representative advisory board of the Radboud University for many years. She was, among other things, president of the University Student Council. Between 2007 and 2009, she was president of the Dutch National Student's Union (LSVb). Moreover, she was involved in more than 40 programme visitations as a panel member. Currently, she works as a press officer and lobbyist for the General Education Union (Algemene Onderwijsbond) and therefore knows the Dutch Parliament's education spokespersons. She is also co-author of the manual 'WHWatisdat!?' that explains relevant passages on the Dutch higher education law to representative advisory boards.



Formation of the commission

On February 13th, 2015, angry students and staff of the University of Amsterdam occupied the *Bunghuis*. The occupation of the *Maagdenhuis*, on February 25th, followed after the eviction from the *Bunghuis*. This second occupation was accompanied by widespread publicity, stirring both proponents and opponents. This was the eleventh time in history that the *Maagdenhuis* was occupied, and it was also the longest occupation: 46 days in total. It resulted in a revival of broad public debate on current issues within the university and the role of the university in society.

After weeks of negotiations, the University Executive Board (CvB), the action groups (DNU, Rethink, Humanities Rally), the unions, the Central Student Council (CSR) and the Central Works Council (COR) agreed on the creation of two commissions: the Democratisation and Decentralisation Commission (D&D) and the Finance and Housing Commission (COFH). A subcommission on diversity would be 'attached' under the D&D Commission.

The action groups and representative advisory boards formed a commission (the 'pre commission' or 'precom') to help form the commissions mentioned above and to formulate their mandate. The University Board confined itself to facilitating the commissions, to guarantee independence.

The tasks of the D&D Commission are formulated in the mandate¹. The commission has to: (a) identify the key problems and their causes at the UvA and the UvA Holding with regards to governance, participation, ownership, diversity and academic climate; (b) develop multiple proposals for other organisational, governance, participatory and financing models that resolve the identified problems; (c) involve the academic community in developing and evaluating these proposals; (d) report the findings of the investigations to the academic community.

¹ http://commissiedd.nl/?media_dl=85

Important also is the agreement that every member of the academic community is provided the opportunity to give their judgement about the proposals through a written vote. When a majority is in favour of the proposals, the University Board will effectively implement them².

After several months of appointment procedures, the by then selected candidates came together to begin drafting a work plan. Meanwhile, the pre commission selected more potential commission candidates, resulting in a commission of nine members. On November 19th, these commission members and the work plan³ were presented to the academic community at a public meeting. On November 23rd, the pre commission officially approved the commission members' nomination and the working plan⁴.

On December 14th, commission member Loe Sprengers withdrew his nomination because of the suggestion of a possible conflict of interest. His law firm assists staff and Works Councils when in conflict with the University.

The D&D Commission has proposed a budget for the implementation of the approved working plan to the University Board on December 18th. After a positive recommendation of the joint assembly of the participatory councils, the University Board approved the budget on February 11th, 2016.

During the budgetary approval process it was decided that the relatively independent position of the diversity subcommission (that had some initial problems) would be retained, including budgetary independence. Coordination between the two commissions is arranged with the dual appointment of Gloria Wekker in both the Commission D&D and the subcommission Diversity. Previously, coordination agreements were also made with the Finance and Housing Commission (COFH).

And with that, the installation process of the commission was completed.

Working method

Between October 2015 and February 2016, the commission spent much time on the establishment of its own organisation, on the drafting and discussing of the working plan with the pre commission and on the drafting of the budget. After installation of the commission and the approval of the working plan, the commission immediately started with the first step of the working plan: establishing contacts, having orientation meetings with faculties and central services, collecting and reading of documents, discussing the commissions' approach and the development of an interactive website.

While drafting the working plan in October, beginning of November, we intended to finalize the first familiarising meetings with the faculties at the end of February. This aspiration will succeed by and large. Already organised faculty debates (FGW and FNWI) were attended, as well as other meetings (Maagdenhuis debates, VSNU Café, meetings on democratisation and new legislation at the Vrije Universiteit, or VU University, and in Dutch Parliament).

Moreover, consultation was initiated with Works Councils, Student Councils and deans and other individuals involved, such as heads of departments, staff and students.

² Added to the mandate is: "A proposal can only be binding when it is in correspondence with existing legislation. However, this does not affect the commission's ability to propose a legislative amendment, meaning that proposals will be binding after this potential legislative change."

³ http://commissiedd.nl/?media_dl=86

⁴ The Central Works Council approved the nomination and working plan on November 27th, 2015.

Representatives of the HvA participatory council were consulted twice. It was agreed upon that open communication on the commission's findings will continue, allowing the HvA, where appropriate and useful, to benefit from these findings. Likewise, contact was initiated with the participatory council of the VU University, where a similar trajectory has started.

The commission is finishing up this first round of consultations, after which a smooth transition to a second round of faculty meetings will be made.

First observations

Although we still are engaged in preliminary discussions, we would like to share some first impressions. These impressions are based on consultations with students, staff and management from all faculties and members of the Works Council (OR) for the common support services and the many reports and other documents that the commission has studied.

- All the responses on our interview requests have been positive. There is a lot of willingness in the various parts of the organization and people to talk with the commission and to provide us with information. The atmosphere during these talks has been pleasant, although many are sceptical with regards to the possibilities for change, especially regarding administrative organisation and management culture.
- In almost all interviews the need for more time to guarantee good education and research is emphasized. The workload is high. In addition, there is an awareness of the The Hague cutbacks affecting higher education. There are a lot of personnel problems, including problems pertaining to so-called flex workers; these problems are expressed by both the flex workers themselves and by those with a permanent contract who see their work change by the large quantity of flexible contracts. Furthermore, there are concerns about declining student numbers. And external pressure (such as the pressure to publish) often leads to compromises on teaching.
- The commission sees worlds of difference between but certainly also within faculties. Those differences are expressed in the expectations that students have of their study, in the nature of the education, in the organisation of the research and in the desires that one has regarding management. Centralised guidelines may leave some room for variation, but at the same time they exercise great administrative pressure and are for many a reason of irritation. An almost unanimously mentioned example is the 8-8-4 education system. Although the implementation is diverse, the increased workload around Christmas, both for students and teachers, is an important problem. Additionally, the lack of depth of the short courses is a commonly heard complaint.
- Scepticism is widespread with regards to the perceived possibilities to exercise influence under the current format of participatory counselling. Students and staff indicate that change through the participatory councils is needlessly complicated. Long and complicated procedures are partly to blame, but the fact that the councils are only involved in the final stages of the decision making process is not helpful either. Because of this, input is hardly taken into consideration. Advisory rights do not produce much effect; advice that is not in line with policy proposed is not taken up and regularly it is unclear what is done with substantive input. Chosen representatives state that management reduces them to their formal role and does not utilize them as sparring partners or as experts.

It is difficult to maintain contact with the councils' constituents and to interest them in subjects that are raised by the councils. Moreover, a tension is felt between the substantive concerns and complaints and the structure of decision making and counselling; some subjects fall outside of the influence of participatory councils, because they are not discussed and decided on at faculty level.

- Staff in particular indicates that they want more ownership with regards to education and research without having to deal with regulatory barriers, unilateral measures of output and excessive deliberations. Many state that the university has become a 'study factory' in which more and more students are rushed through their education with dwindling resources. They argue that this has a negative effect on the academic quality of the university. If one wants a university that is more concerned with quality than with quantity, then it will have to be organised differently. Whichever way one looks at it, painful decisions will have to be made.

- For some students there is a tension between the academic ideal of the university and the rules and administrative choices that they encounter in practice. They feel that their curiosity and thirst for knowledge is punished instead of rewarded by the university. When students enroll in extra courses or do a second degree, they encounter many barriers and little support. Those who want to broaden and deepen their studies have become liabilities. Their ambition could delay their studies and lead to a loss of departmental efficiency. For other students the opposite applies. They are content with the fixed study tracks and praise the clarity and uniformity of university. The more "do-able" the study is, the better. Here also, choices made will lead to different kinds of 'winners' and 'losers'.

Taking note of the work that has been done thus far, a number of issues has not been raised. Such as: (a) the appointment or election of the University Board (appointment of deans has been discussed); (b) the shaping of university management and Participatory Councils; (c) relations between supporting services and faculties (and the position of UvA Holding); (d) the dependence on external funds for almost all of the research and the indirect effects on education; (e) structural problems in personnel policy and management of the university as a whole.

Meanwhile in The Hague

Of course, the commission and the UvA need to take into account the broader developments that affect the possibilities to change UvA policies and influence the democratisation process.

In the preliminary phase of the Parliamentary discussions, contact between members of the commission and education spokespersons of the different political parties was established. In the Work Plan, we foresaw that the review process of the 'Strengthening administrative capacity educational institutions'-law would be completed before the D&D Commission was finalised. Minister Bussemaker's legislative proposal was put to the vote, but critical parliamentarians presented a significant number of amendments. They viewed the law as insufficient in scope. During the discussion, parliamentarians referred to the possibility to, as an experiment, deviate from the (new) law. The Minister reacted positively, perhaps in part to avert more amendments to the legislative proposal, and in part with explicit reference to the discussions in Amsterdam and to the work of our commission.

Only a small amount of the amendments has been adopted. The public reactions on the end result in Parliament are mixed. In newspapers, it was broadly emphasized that university students and staff get appreciably more rights, among them the right of approval and thus opportunities to influence policy. Others – like the ASVA student union – are more critical. And those who advocated for autonomy and for changing the existing model will probably be disappointed. The existing model of participatory councils that need to put up opposition to top-down appointed boards and management persists.

In any case, this means that the UvA has to study and consider the possible implications of the new law. On the one hand: What will change and what does this mean with regards to rights and responsibilities of students and staff, for the improvement of participatory input and for democratic and effective functioning of the organisation? On the other hand: What are the actual options for deviating, as an experiment, from the law? Does the academic community of Amsterdam consider this option? In other words: Is more radical change to an elected board and more democracy an option for the UvA? Or should we focus on improving the existing participatory system? And to tackle which policy issues does the new law (or an experiment) offer the best possibilities?

To answer these kinds of questions, and to make choices as an university community, we have to discuss and assess both these new possibilities and existing practices.

The next steps

Central to the work of the commission in the months to come is the identification of important policy issues and defining the framework of reference in which conceptions of democratisation and decentralisation can be placed (Working Plan steps 2 and 3). In the second round of faculty meetings, the commission shall feed back its preliminary findings to all who work at the faculties and supporting services. Online discussions will be initiated through the new website and meetings will be organised. Furthermore, consultations will be organised with groups of staff, students and organisational units that were not covered in the first round.

Besides consultations at the UvA, the commission will also talk with Parliamentarians and get in contact with the Minister of Education and several interest groups. We will furthermore start subprojects in which we will explore if, and if so how the system of participatory counselling can be improved. Additionally, various governance and management models will be compared.

We will do this, of course, in constant dialogue with students and staff of the UvA. A number of people already contacted us with questions, suggestions and propositions, and we would like to emphasize that all input is welcome. Providing input is possible through our website, but also by contacting one of the members of the commission.

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