



Summary January 19th 2022

University Forum

Democratisation

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On January 19, 2022, just under seven years after the occupation of the Maagdenhuis, the University Forum returned to the themes that were at the top of the agenda at the time. Under the heading of ‘democratisation’, the University Forum discussed five propositions that largely correspond to points from the ten-point plan: the promise of the Executive Board in response to the Maagdenhuis occupation.

The meeting started with an introduction by Prof. Dr. Geerten Dam, President of the Executive Board. She indicates that it is not so much up to her to indicate whether what has been asked for has been achieved, but she does want to provide a few reflections. She believes there was a lot of value in the call for democratisation, especially the importance of employee participation; the collaboration with the participation bodies (‘medezeggenschap’), the role of public participation in a broad sense, also outside the formal participation councils. That could and should be done better. The large number of temporary contracts, the shortcuts to get out of permanent contracts and the overvaluation of research over education were also justified points.

In her view, the changes in the UvA’s governance model are modest on paper, but clearly visible in the culture. It has become much more common to involve employee representation or the wider academic community at an early stage in new policy making. There is more financial openness. Topics that concern the academy are now clearly part of the public debate, such as the appreciation of education in careers, the amount of temporary contracts and the preservation of the wide range of disciplines. The UvA has a decentralized model, which has major advantages when it comes to the quality of education and research. But you also need central management. For the benchmarks that everyone must adhere to, such as a code of conduct, monitoring the accessibility of the university as a whole for students, good employership. To keep responsibilities as low as possible in the organization, a culture of consultation, transparency, sharing, taking responsibility and counterforce is necessary. That requires something from the Executive Board, and from deans, but also from managers in the faculty. The key question is whether we are doing this interaction well enough, where it needs to be improved and what is needed for that.

Statements & (Sub-)questions

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Statement: if the interests of a certain group are not sufficiently served, it is because they have too little say within the university.

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Point 2 of the ten-point plan states: “Democratisation, by proposing crucial decisions and exploring new forms.”

Does the academic community currently have enough to say about those crucial decisions and the university’s long-term policy? Does the University Forum contribute to this?

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Point 3 of the ten-point plan states: “Decentralisation, by placing powers as low as possible.”

Is the UvA currently decentralised enough? If not, how can we become even more decentralised and is that important?

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Point 7 of the ten-point plan states: “Education linked to and valued as highly as research.” Has this goal been achieved? If not, what remains to be done?

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There are various groups that have a vulnerable position within the university. At the meeting of the University Forum, the group of temporary academic staff was looked at in particular. Temporality creates an unsafe feeling. You have to do everything right, but even then it's uncertain whether you can stay. Most temporary academic positions, be they teaching positions or postdoc positions, are used as 'steps' for a more permanent scientific job. There is only a mismatch between the amount of permanent places and the number of people aspiring to such a position, which creates intense competition. Some of the starting academics decide to leave university and look for work elsewhere, but not all scientific expertise is equally easy to translate into a non-academic environment. For example, doing a PhD can ultimately be a kind of trap; where some people can eventually find a permanent place, but others have to make the painful choice between eternal temporality or starting completely over in a different career. S

tarting scientists clearly have a lot to gain from different policy, why is that? It's hard to say to what extent that's due to their limited power, but there are definitely reasons to be concerned. First of all, a vulnerable employment position is a reason to be reluctant to criticize management. A good manager will not attach any bad consequences to criticism, but the uncertainty alone can be enough not to open your mouth during a department meeting. Another reason why it is difficult for budding academics to get involved in university policy is a lack of time. To maximize the chance of a permanent contract, starters try to do their job as well as possible. All the time that is left goes to searching for research grants and other positions. This leaves little or no time to participate in participation councils or other forms of political activity. Temporary staff are therefore underrepresented in works councils.

A third reason that was mentioned is the problem of the high turnover. Temporary lecturers, postdocs and the like are associated with the university for a short time. Knowledge of the organization is really necessary in order to be able to interfere effectively with policy, and you develop this by working at the university for a longer period of time. This problem also affects students. A year's study delay is quite a sacrifice for participation in student councils (especially for international students), so hardly anyone does more than one term. As a result, the institutional memory of student councils is very limited and the knowledge of council members is often only superficial. This is at the expense of the effectiveness of their efforts. As long as vulnerable groups remain vulnerable, it is important that the small number that do find their way to influential positions in employee participation and other bodies are facilitated and supported as much as possible. In this way we ensure that their voices are heard. Ultimately, however, the real solution lies in solving that vulnerability itself, so that people not only talk about temporary employees, but especially with these employees.

How did the Covid-pandemic impact university democracy?

The corona pandemic has clearly had an impact on university democracy along various lines. The disappearance of much of the informal spontaneous contact has made us realize how important these informal networks are for the functioning of 'formal' democracy. Public debate, the exchange of ideas and ultimately reaching administrators and co-determination with these voices is something that takes place largely in an informal way. Corona provides a tunnel vision for one's own primary tasks and is at the expense of joint university awareness, with one important exception: the corona policy itself. Debates about issues such as whether or not to use proctoring have nevertheless generated a certain political awareness. Unfortunately, because all other themes lag behind in terms of urgency compared to corona policy, there is often hardly any room to put new problems on the agenda and take real steps. Corona always comes first.

Decision-making in crisis situations is quickly less transparent and leaves less room for dialogue with the academic community. That is not necessarily a problem in the case of corona. In fact, there were regular calls for clear directions from the board. However, we must ensure that this is not at the expense of the positive democratizing cultural change that has gradually started since the occupation of the Maagdenhuis. In times of corona, groups quickly face each other, there is less room to listen to each other and less understanding. Let the corona pandemic be a reminder of how valuable it is to take the time to take all interests into account and take each other seriously.

As with the first sub-question, the position of new students and employees was also considered. They started at the UvA in times of corona and have therefore found it more difficult to get to know the organization well, something that is very important if they are to play a full role in university democracy. They often do not know the student and works councils or do not know exactly what they do. If they experience problems themselves or pick up on those of others, it is difficult to figure out at which table they can put this on the agenda.

When the physical and informal information provision disappears, the anonymous formal information such as newsletters and the website becomes more important. Unfortunately, the reach of that information is very limited.

An idea that has been suggested is to give lecturers a greater role as information disseminators during teaching contact hours, for example by sharing with students more often which relevant events are taking place at the faculty. Students are much harder to reach outside those contact hours.

**Point 2 of the ten-point plan states:
“Democratisation, by proposing
crucial decisions and exploring new
forms.”**

Does the academic community currently have enough to say about those crucial decisions and the university’s long-term policy? Does the University Forum contribute to this?

The UvA is a university with relatively strong participation bodies. Through these student and works councils, the academic community has a say in crucial decisions, but with limitations. The right of advice or consent is only applied at the end of a decision-making process, when it is often too late to make fundamental changes. A possible solution is to involve employee participation earlier, but in practice this sometimes leads to a weakening of the position of the relevant council at the end of the process. How do we ensure that the academic community has more say in the important decisions before they are completely boarded up?

Since the Maagdenhuis occupation, a culture change has started in which it is considered increasingly important that the academic community is involved in policy making. Examples of this are the process surrounding the new institutional plan, where extensive round tables were held with the academic community, the arrival of the University Forum and the ‘Denkmee’ platform.

Participation is playing an increasingly important role. There are some comments to be made about participation as a democratizing measure. With participation within the university, a diverse composition is often sought, in which all the different groups involved are represented by one participant. This ignores the many differences of opinion that exist between members of the same group. For example, a single student is often involved in working groups for the 'student perspective', but the student perspective does not exist. Students, as well as employees in all professional groups, will disagree with each other about the right course for the university, but there is often no room for that plurality in the way in which participation is currently structured at the UvA.

A consequence of avoiding that conflict dimension is that while there is a lot of talk about abstract visionary policy plans, the real hard choices are made elsewhere. Plans such as the institutional plan leave all options open, so that everyone can be kept satisfied, but in the end concrete choices will have to be made. And it is precisely those choices that have a much less extensive and transparent decision-making process, "because it was already included in the institutional plan".

Another risk associated with participation is that after an extensive participation process, there is little room left for a substantive dialogue with the participation bodies. That is not a problem if you only see the councils as a controller of the decision-making process, but if you want to see more proactive councils then it is problematic. Moreover, in the case of participation, it is optional for board members what they adopt and what not, while there are clear rules in the case of participation bodies that strengthen the position of those councils. If participation takes over too much from official 'medezeggenschap', this could also mean a transition from rights to non-commitment.

Finally, we must note that knowledge of the university and its policies among the academic community is very limited. If we want the community to have a greater role in making crucial decisions, then a greater general substantive involvement in university policy is important. As discussed in the first sub-question, by no means everyone has the space to delve into this. That is why it is extra important to provide maximum support and a strong position for the small number of students and staff who do have that time.

**Point 3 of the ten-point plan states:
“Decentralisation, by placing powers
as low as possible.”**

**Is the UvA currently decentralised
enough? If not, how can we become
even more decentralised and is that
important?**

From an administrative point of view, a decentralized organizational structure suits the university. Scientific work is difficult to steer from above, so in principle individual academics have a great deal of power to shape their work. That does not mean that coordination is not necessary. Central policy is sometimes extremely important, such as during crisis situations such as the corona pandemic, but also when changes have to be initiated that are difficult to start on their own, such as diversity policy. In addition, a decentralized implementation is sensible in order to leave room for differences in context and the desired pace. When it comes to distributing money, on the other hand, it can be nicer if certain choices are made remotely, to avoid conflict within teams.

When we talk about (de)centralization, the focus usually goes directly to the policy of the Executive Board in relation to faculty or department policy, but centralization also takes other forms. For example, we are seeing more and more standardization in education, largely driven by digitization. We could see this as a form of centralization. In addition to the administrative hierarchy within the university, there is also a very strong academic hierarchy. Professors still have a lot of power. Anyone who is not allowed to put a ‘prof’ in front of their own name is excluded from most important administrative positions in the university, even if the position has little to do with research and should therefore not require a successful research career. This dimension is often excluded from discussions about decentralization/centralization, because the focus is on the administrative hierarchy. Ultimately, it is especially important that there is clarity about how the responsibilities are divided vertically. If it is unclear who is in charge of what, it becomes difficult to interfere effectively. Clearly divided responsibilities and recognizable contact points are important for a well-functioning university democracy. A point that could be discussed further in the future is the way in which participation bodies can also limit the room for decentralisation, for example by addressing issues of inequality between different departments or faculties.

Point 7 of the ten-point plan states: “Education linked to and valued as highly as research.” Has this goal been achieved? If not, what remains to be done?

Linking and valuing education and research more equally is one of the UvA's goals, but we are a long way from there. Research enjoys a higher status and a successful research career is necessary for most tenured and managerial positions. Growing as an academic is still primarily based on research. Lecturer positions are deliberately kept temporary, as a stepping stone, but because the stairs taper, there is a lot of competition and uncertainty down the line. Growing within education is possible to a limited extent, from teacher-4 to teacher-3 or teacher-2, but you soon come across a ceiling that you cannot pass without successes in research. Is it wise to let so many people compete in uncertainty for so few places? Shouldn't we open up more opportunities for education-oriented full-fledged, permanent jobs with growth prospects?

That question is not so easy to answer, because in contrast to the desire to limit temporality as much as possible, there is a strong desire to link education and research. Ultimately, research is what distinguishes the university and, in many people's minds, a full-fledged academic career is a combination of both education and research. There is, however, a huge imbalance between the amount of research and teaching tasks, which means that a teaching gap must be constantly filled with temporary teachers without corresponding research time. There are reasons to keep those positions temporary. As more and more education is delivered by teachers who have been teaching for many years, but who are not active in research, education risks quickly becoming outdated and students cannot benefit from their teacher's research experience.

There was disagreement during the University Forum about the importance of this link between education and research. After all, the majority of education follows a fixed curriculum that is built around skills and the fairly stable canon of the field in question, while research is niche and innovative. Is it really so obvious to talk about research-intensive education? Can you hide behind that if you want to defend the temporality of teacher positions?

As long as this discussion is running in the background, it is also important to look at what could change in the shorter term. For example, more effort can be made to make temporary teachers really part of the team, by listening to them, involving them and taking them seriously.



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