



Summary 18th of January 2021 @Zoom

# University Forum

*The University Forum as a deliberative body*

# The Forum as a deliberative body

On January 18th, a different kind of meeting than usual took place. There has been no deliberation on a theme that is related to future UvA policy. Instead, the Forum has reflected on the internal working method. The University Forum was founded on the ideals of deliberative democracy: the idea that there should be a place where not the power of the majority is central, but the power of the good argument. However, this starting point leaves several questions open, such as whether or not deliberation should end in a consensus.

These and more questions were addressed in break-out sessions after a few practical points had to be dealt with first. New Internal Regulations (HR) have been discussed and agreement has been reached on the procedure for choosing a chairman. Central to this procedure is the Appointments Advisory Committee (BAC), consisting of the following members:

- Hege Kjos
- Alex Moret
- Henk Bas

The following statements and sub-questions were discussed in the break-out sessions:

1

Our discussions should not be aimed at reaching consensus. If so, on what?

2

The break-out sessions should be more structured. If so, in what way?

3

Hierarchy does not play a role in the deliberation in the University Forum. If it does, how could it be otherwise?

4

How do we make sure everyone feels safe to give his or her honest perspective?

5

The UF should not focus on advising administrators, but on stimulating and enriching important conversations in the broader academic community.

# Deliberative Democracy

The chair of the University Forum, Eva Groen-Reijman, gave a brief introduction in deliberative democracy. The idea behind deliberative democracy, as introduced by Jürgen Habermas in the nineties, is that not power, but the right argument should be the deciding factor in democratic decision-making. Citizens should exchange information and arguments together on an equal footing in order to reach a consensus on the common good. The idea of introducing a deliberative forum within the UvA is inspired by this philosophy. However, Habermas' ideas still leave many questions unanswered. The most important questions tie in well with the questions that the University Forum also encounters in practice.

## Consensus?

Deliberative democracy focuses on consensus, but time and attention are always limited. What is the value of deliberation if consensus cannot be reached?

## Exchange?

Deliberation should be more than exchange. How do you ensure that participants actively reflect and critically question each other's contributions?

## Equality?

The appeal of deliberative democracy is the premise of equality, but it is naive to say that power relations play no role in a deliberative forum. How can we keep their role as small as possible?

## Common good?

Our deliberations focus on the common good, but we can only really get to know it if there is also a focus on the interests of minorities. How do we achieve that focus?

## And then?

What do you do with the conclusions of the deliberation? There are two models in the literature; a focus on decision-making and advice or a focus on the wider community in an attempt to make the entire university more deliberative. Where should we go?

# 1

## **Our discussions should not be aimed at reaching consensus. If so, on what?**

The forum is a deliberative body, so the focus should always be on high-quality deliberation. It is nice if this deliberation results in a consensus, but that is not necessary. The forum strives to be representative, but this representativeness is of course never perfect. That is an additional reason to leave room for different positions and not to force a consensus. Forcing a consensus can also be at the expense of the quality of the discussion. Instead, members should try their best to agree on which arguments are strong and relevant or which normative questions precede something, but don't need to make a decision. This ambiguous conclusion can serve as a basis for further elaboration and decision-making in other bodies. This therefore entails a responsibility not only to make the conclusions (and arguments) public, but also to actively transfer them to the policymakers who are relevant to the theme in question.

- ▶ **The quality of the discussion is central.**
- ▶ **It is nice if we reach consensus, but we should not force it.**
- ▶ **Pluriform conclusions can also be very useful if we communicate them in the right way.**

## The break-out sessions should be more structured. If so, in what way?

In order to arrive at a useful and multiform conclusion in an inclusive way, it pays to introduce more structure in the way we deliberate with each other. Most of the deliberation takes place in break-out rooms. Its informality has advantages, but it also has risks. It allows members to stray from the central question and get stuck with time. In addition, visible and less visible hierarchical relationships may unintentionally get in the way. The next break-out group dived into that challenge. It would help for all these challenges if we expand the role of moderator and work with a more detailed agenda (including times), which the moderator can then pay close attention to. Steps can also be taken in the preparation of these sessions. The members often lose time interpreting the thesis, because the underlying dilemma is sometimes not immediately clear. This can be prevented with a sharper formulation, but possibly also by dwelling a little longer on the proposition in the plenary session. In terms of the size of the break-out sessions, 4-6 people works best, so we will keep this number from now on.

- ▶ More structure in the break-out sessions can be achieved with a greater role for the moderator.
- ▶ A more detailed agenda can help the moderator.
- ▶ Clearer statements save time.
- ▶ Structure can help, among other things, to reduce the role of hierarchy, but also to improve the quality of the discussion.

## Hierarchy does not play a role in the deliberation in the University Forum. If it does, how could it be otherwise?

Since the value of the University Forum stems in part from its representative and inclusive nature, it is very important to be vigilant about the role that hierarchy plays. In principle, everyone is equal in a deliberative setting, but it is not always easy to set aside the power relations that play outside the forum in the break-out sessions. The role that administrators play is the most transparent in this regard. More difficult are the academic hierarchical relationships and certainly the more subtle relationships in areas such as gender or age.

A reflexive attitude and alertness is important for all members, but there are also more concrete steps that we can take to minimize the role of hierarchical relationships in the break-out sessions. Those solutions tie in well with the previous group. It is important in advance that the statements are as clear as possible and above all accessible. The focus should be on the normative aspect, less the technical. Furthermore, more structure would help; ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute. Consider letting the managers speak a little later than the other members. It also helps to no longer feel the pressure that a consensus must be reached, it is much more important that people agree with each other on what counts as a good point, which perspectives are relevant and which dilemmas lie hidden behind something. A conversation whose outcome is thus more “open” may reduce the role of hierarchy.

- ▶ It is important to the value of the Forum to keep hierarchical relationships within the university outside the forum as much as possible, so we need to work on this.
- ▶ More structure in the break-out sessions can prevent certain members from taking too much of a role in the conversation.
- ▶ Letting go of the pursuit of consensus can ease some of the pressure on the discussion.
- ▶ The discussed topics must remain accessible, so that members without much experience can easily participate.

## How do we make sure everyone feels safe to give his or her honest perspective?

Everything must be negotiable within the University Forum. One subject is more sensitive than the other. The added value of the forum lies in the fact that we enter into an open dialogue with each other with an extremely mixed and representative group. Depending on the theme, that open conversation is not always easy to realize. Especially with a mixed company, there are great differences in experience and expertise, but also more subtle forms of skewed power relations. In principle, it shouldn't matter what your expertise is; every UvA member must be able to participate. We have to take this into account when designing a program. Continuous reflection on everyone's role in the internal discussions is also crucial. Try to understand each other before you judge. The forum's meetings are public, but it would be wise to maintain some confidentiality regarding the breakout sessions. The members determine together what is or is not included in the notes. This is extra important to give the managers present the opportunity to think out loud, without the risk of it being held against them in a later stage.

- ▶ **Listening carefully to each other is the basis of a fruitful discussion. We ensure that there is room for this in our working methods.**
- ▶ **Every UvA member must be able to participate, regardless of expertise and experience.**
- ▶ **We deal confidentially with what is said in the break-out sessions. The participants themselves determine whether or not something is included in the report.**

## The UF should not focus on advising administrators, but on stimulating and enriching important conversations in the broader academic community.

The forum should primarily focus on advising the UvA board. Enriching the public debate within the university is something that can be achieved by presenting the themes of the deliberative sessions as clearly as possible to the rest of the university. However, the discussions themselves should not be structured with this end goal in mind. Instead, the structure must contribute to useful, not necessarily unambiguous, advice to UvA policymakers. The role of the chairman can be used even further in this. Even if the chairman is not technically a member, he or she could propagate the forum's ideas to the public in a neutral manner as a kind of "ambassador" on behalf of the University Forum.

- ▶ The University Forum should primarily focus on advising the board of the UvA.
- ▶ By clearly communicating the ideas and themes discussed in the Forum to the rest of the organization, enriching a wider discussion can be an added benefit. However, it should not be an end in itself.
- ▶ The chairman should publicly disseminate the Forum's (possibly multiform) conclusions.



Questions? Feel free to contact the secretary  
of the Forum: Roeland Voorbergen  
[universiteitsforum-bb@uva.nl](mailto:universiteitsforum-bb@uva.nl)