



Looking further ... towards a better VU

The Workers' Council's Priorities

The occupations by students and teachers at the University of Amsterdam have unleashed much debate about the future of Dutch universities. The Vrije Universiteit's Workers' Council (*Ondernemingsraad*) believes that efficiency-based thinking and management culture at the university have gone too far. It was because of this that the Workers' Council signed the petition 'Towards a Different University' (*Naar een andere universiteit*) last year. In addition to this, the Workers' Council has developed proposals both internally and in our contacts with the Executive Board (*College van Bestuur*) to further transparent governance and to promote the participatory bodies' (*medezeggenschap*) chances at having true influence on decision-making processes. After much talking and listening, very little was actually done by the university to implement these proposals.

We feel it is imperative to contribute to the broad, substantive debate that is currently taking place. In order to focus on the real issues and to avoid getting bogged down in details that are symptoms of structural matters, the Workers' Council has decided on a limited number of priorities. We are aiming for concrete results that can make the VU a true academic community once again, where teachers, researchers and supporting staff have autonomy in - and control over - their own work.

These priorities are as follows:

1. Democratisation and decentralisation of the university including an elected *rector magnificus*

The VU has a large democratic deficit and decisions are increasingly made in a top-down fashion. Many competences are centralised and have been taken away from the professionals on the work floor, who are increasingly straightjacketed by top-down decisions that undermine autonomy, motivation and quality. Although the work floor is 'heard', little to nothing is done with this input. Signs of this are visible in the way in which the Executive Board deals with advice from the Workers' Council on reorganisations: there is much discussion and listening but, in the end, the Executive Board continues on the course it wants to take.

The democratic deficit and over-centralisation would have only be exacerbated by a unitary faculty board (comprising only the dean) that is not structurally obliged to take the voices - or votes - of anyone else into account. According to the participatory bodies at the University of Amsterdam, the situation getting out of control there was partially due to this type of governance model, which weakened contacts between board and employees. At crucial moments, it appeared that there was insufficient support for important decisions.

The Worker's Council supports the call to democratise the university by introducing an elected *rector magnificus*. An elected rector will strengthen the link between faculty and staff on the one

hand, and the board on the other hand. Further, in addition to the two appointed members of the Executive Board, an elected *rector magnificus* will lead to more balance in the Board. This type of democratisation is possible under the current law (article 9.3(4) of the Higher Education Law) and works satisfactorily in a number of universities abroad, including KU Leuven. In addition, the Workers' Council must also have the ability to pass a motion of no confidence against the *rector magnificus* if he/she fails to function properly.

The Workers' Council calls on the Executive Board to democratise the current governance model of the university! Give employees and students more control by giving them the right to decide on the direction of the university, the organisation of their work and studies, and the allocation of resources. It is of great importance in this regard that employees and students have the right to decide who governs the university and the faculty. Why should only the participatory bodies be democratically legitimate and not the governing bodies themselves?

Invest in and strengthen the participatory bodies and concentrate on the democratisation of the university by allowing these bodies substantial influence early on in the process of making crucial decisions.

*The Workers' Council is in favour of an elected *rector magnificus*. As of the 1st of September, the position of *rector magnificus* at the VU is vacant. The recently started procedure for an appointed *rector* should be stopped and a procedure for an elected *rector* should be started.*

2. Liberation from the tyranny of management processes

The Vrije Universiteit's teachers, supporting staff and students are forced to work and study according to norms imposed upon them by an out-of-control managerialism. Instead of management processes that serve the needs and wishes of employees and students, the VU is characterised by straightjackets of bureaucracy.

It is unacceptable that facilities and technology are used in ways that limit students' and employees' possibilities, instead of facilitating their activities. The inaccessible sections of the university that are part of the concept *Smart@Work* hinder contact between students and employees, contact that is a necessary part of the academic environment. Teachers, researchers and support staff can no longer organise their workspace in ways that best serve their activities.

The reorganisation and centralisation of the supporting services at the VU has failed. On a daily basis, students and employees experience problems caused by these reorganisations, especially in areas of communication, internationalisation, finances and human resources. Experienced employees in these areas have been fired or stationed far away from the faculties. This has hit the university in its heart. The reorganisation of student-support and the extra responsibilities that this reorganisation puts upon teachers will mean that teachers will not have enough time left for their real job: teaching. Despite the valiant efforts by the employees who are left, these reorganisations have had disastrous effects on the quality of research and teaching.

The primary process - and not management - must regain its central position at the VU. The university's facilities must be at the service of this primary process and not the other way around. Employees and students must no longer be forced to work according to stiff, non-workable systems. Give employees and students control back over their activities. Employees and students are sick of having to conform to the imposed logics of this management model.

3. From output financing to substantive evaluation

At this moment, the VUSAM-model only has *output-criteria*, such as the number of ECs, diplomas and PhDs. This is a logical consequence of too much efficiency-based thinking. A system that only has direct output-financing provides for perverse incentives. Along with many others, we are of the opinion that substantive discussions on the future university can only have a chance if *input-criteria* also get a role in an updated VUSAM, for which substantive discussions on teaching and research programs within and between faculties are necessary. This is crucial if we want a university in which quality is truly valued over quantity and in which students receive the education they have a right to. Only then can mass lectures, the student-as-a-number and diploma inflation be pushed back.

The Workers' Council demands a system with more emphasis on a substantive evaluation of education, research and governance by experts in these respective areas. This means a quality-driven financing system is necessary.

4. Real participation and real influence

As it is now, the participatory bodies often receive a nearly-finished proposal to advise on, and must respond within six weeks. Even in the case of the Strategic Plan there was no prior discussion with the Workers' Council on the starting principles *before* preparations on the Strategic Plan began. Such an approach does not allow for dealing with fundamental objections the Workers' Council might have and does not provide sufficient space or time for developing real alternatives. The existing procedures function as a politics of *faits accomplis*. In such a model, the Workers' Council can only react and cannot function proactively.

The Workers' Council wants to change this. The Workers' Council must be involved at the beginning of the decision-making process, during the drafting stages. It must be provided with adequate information and must actually get the ability to actively influence the decision-making process. This requires that managers, deans, the Executive Board and all university administrators adopt a different way of working. Moreover, it is crucial that the participatory bodies at all levels (thus also within faculties and services) receive sufficient support staff.

As of 2015 university participatory bodies will have right of approval for the university budget. The Workers' Council is putting heavy pressure on the Executive Board to interpret this right fully in the spirit of the law. The Workers' Council is demanding a right of approval for the allocation model but also for the framework budget document as well as the final budget of the university as well as of the services and faculties. The Workers' Council is convinced that these components form an integral part of the right of approval of the budget.

The VUSAM allocation model determines 80% of the amount of money that is available for each faculty and thus the right of approval must also apply to this model. Although VUSAM has already been set for 2015, we will demand right of approval on this model the next time it is up for evaluation.

The Workers' Council demands that the Executive Board organises decision-making processes so that the participatory bodies can truly fulfill their function. The right of approval of the budget gives this more importance than ever. The Workers' Council sees approval of the allocation model, the framework budget document and the final budget - on the university level as well as the level of services and faculties - as an integral part of the right of approval of the budget.

Before the summer, the Workers' Council aims to agree on new procedures with the Executive

Board so as to ensure the Workers' Council is informed in advance of initiatives and changes so that actual influence can be exercised on these developments. The Workers' Council must be involved in the necessary moments in the planning from draft to final decision.

5. Greatly reduce flexible contracts: from 60% to 20%

At all Dutch universities over the past ten years, the number of flexible contracts has gotten out of control. When a contract is given for structural work; a decent, permanent contract must be given, for both academics and support staff. In the new collective labor agreement (CAO), universities agreed to reduce the number of flexible contracts to 22%. What is important, however, is not just a percentage but also the principled commitment to giving permanent contracts when permanent duties are at stake. An important part of such a commitment is the integration of temporary employees and the guarantee that legal loopholes will not be abused to get out of offering permanent contracts (for example by way of payrolling, zero-hour contracts etc.). The Workers' Council must be given insight into the use of flexible contracts so it can hold the VU accountable to its commitment.

The VU should lead the move to halving the number of flexible contracts at universities. By the end of the current Strategic Plan, 80% of the VU's contracts should be permanent, for both academics as supporting staff. Permanent contracts must be given for structural work. This is not only for the benefit of the employees - but also for the benefit of the students and the organisation as a whole. By replacing short-sighted reactionaryism with long-term thinking, the university will be able to once again fully contribute to society.

These five points are the Workers' Council's contribution to the current discussions about the future of the VU. We look forward to these discussions, with groups inside and outside the VU, as well as with the Executive Board. The Workers' Council will aim for concrete, true change in the governance of the VU. That is what we, as an academic community, are worth.