

3. MOVING TOWARDS RESPONSIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE FINANCING

ANALYSIS

The current system used by the university for the obtaining and distribution of funds is flawed in many ways. It is harmful to the integrity of research and has disastrous effects for education. A large part of the problems of this system are issues of national politics and will have to be addressed there. DAG hopes to cooperate with the university policymakers to influence national decisions. Some problematic elements, however, may very well be addressed within university policy itself.

A large chunk of university funding comes from direct government funding. This funding is split between the different faculties through our own allocation model. This model has been unchanged for years and needs to be thoroughly and democratically reevaluated. However, the managers of the university have stated that they experienced an unwillingness to do things differently. They claim that there's good reasoning to use the current model and that a re-evaluation would only lead to a yearly discussion. At the same time, DAG feels that the lack of discussion about this topic is in itself a fundamental issue. Re-evaluation is necessary because the current system of allocation is unsustainable. It has no regard for the continuity of research and education. Financial gain plays the lead role in the curricular discussion, causing the smaller major programs to disappear due to their higher cost per student.

The national organization in charge of distributing funds for academic research in the Netherlands (NWO) has great responsibility in who gets what. NWO makes the calls on the portion of funding for research that we call 'indirect government funding'. This part of academic funding has been made the dominant division by national politics, taking over from funding as distributed by the university itself (or 'direct government funding'). In this new system, researchers have to compete for NWO attention. Ironically, this new system was designed to improve both freedom for researchers and the quality of research proposals in general.

Unfortunately, these changes have had the opposite effect. Researchers are not as free to choose their subject as, in practice, 'mainstream' research topics have a bigger chance of gaining NWO approval. The vast majority of research proposals is denied funding, hurting research diversity. As a result, the quality of education in the university diminishes. When it is difficult for certain traditions to get NWO funding, they start to disappear from students' curriculum as well. Valuable time is wasted in writing multitudes of proposals that will never be approved anyway. Thus, direct political allocation of research funding via 'top sector' policy hurts academic freedom.

Said policy has resulted in a university climate where researchers are evaluated on the basis of their research proposals, rather than the actual results of their research. In fact, researchers have to deal with a quota of 'direct government funding' that has to be 'pre-earned' in a certain time. As a result, many positions in the university are of a temporary nature. Job security is low. Indeed, current policy

does more for the financial security of those in management positions than the overall quality of research and education.

In addition to both varieties of government funding, there is 'research contract funding'. Here, one may find contributions from other governments or private organizations funding research of their choosing. The University of Groningen has recently appointed a Dean of Industry Relations to work on substantially increasing funding for the university from these private sectors. Shouldn't we be wondering whether this relentless search for economic growth can even coexist with the promotion of what should be the core values of a university? Independence in choosing subject matter of research and education is crucial to the role in a society that a university should have. With this in mind, we should be very concerned that the brand new 'Energy Academy Europe' at the Zernike campus is partnered exclusively with fossil-fuel industry firms.

In the end, it's the smaller academic disciplines that suffer under these policies. In humanities, it is almost impossible to meet valorization demands or the quotas for money to be 'pre-earned' because research in this field tends to be difficult to ascribe economic or quantitative value to. Small departments are hit hardest, having to group together or, in many cases, disappear altogether. The case of the recent plans for the restructuring of the faculty of Arts is a poignant example.

The current model is also hurting the academic diversity within the university. The amount of people graduating is directly linked to the amount of funding a major program is able to receive. In the past ten years, the number of university students in Groningen has increased by ten thousand. At the same time, the number of teachers has diminished. Despite this ostensible disparity, the ratio of students obtaining their bachelor's degrees inside the space of four years has increased, going up from forty-two to seventy-two percent. This change may be due in part to education losing some of its academic character, like specialized writing or presentation workshops as part of the curriculum. More fundamentally, one may conclude that it has simply become considerably easier to graduate. In the end, the current finance model works to increase the number of graduates, not the quality of their education.

OUR VISION

DAG aims to support the institution of a culture of trust among policymakers and researchers. Trust in the fact that the valued researchers in this university do important, high-quality work. A way to work toward this culture may be to judge scientists by the results of their research, rather than the amount of money that they've 'pre-earned'. An important aspect of institutionalizing this new culture is to reduce the ratio of temporary contracts, as they are a source of great discomfort and stress among university employees. Our university must take responsibility in working toward a better, more responsible finance model nationally, or risk losing a greater number of academic traditions. DAG will do anything in its power to promote structural financing of vulnerable disciplines and will work to advance the university climate beyond neoliberal, competition-based policies.