

DAG
Democratische Academie Groningen

DEMOCRATIC ACADEMY GRONINGEN

Our vision | 2017-2018



INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Academy Groningen represents a large group of students who worry about the current policy of the University of Groningen. The UG has become a commercial institution, and academic freedom and education suffer because of it. Therefore, DAG wants to start an open and critical debate about the fundamental values a university should adhere to. Most importantly, we want to focus on the realization of these values in policy. In this document, we want to explain these values as we see them along four different angles. Concrete objectives also play an important role, but the values themselves are the most vital.

According to us, there are several worrying developments at the UG that raise questions. Why is it that the university is starting to look like a corporation? Why is substantive academic education being replaced by schoolish practical skills-trainings? Why do we appoint a Dean of Industry Relations, who undermines the integrity and freedom of scientific research? Why does the Arts Faculty receive so many budget cuts? Why does the UG undertake such a megalomaniacal and fruitless project like the 'branch campus' in Yantai? Why have rankings become so important? Why are researchers evaluated on their pre-earned financing and not their scientific results? Why does the Energy Academy only collaborate with the fossil fuel industry? Why does the university not take responsibility for the housing of international students? Are there not too many students?

Managers have done a great job at pretending that these questions don't matter to students. With the lack of a say in the governance of the university, the very will to have one has all but disappeared as well. The Democratic Academy Groningen believes that if there was an active and democratic debate about policy, managers would learn that the quantitative criteria they employ are harmful to education and research. Because of this, we strive for a transparent university, where central and faculty boards are democratically elected by staff and students. In this way, we want to create an open and inclusive discussion, through which students, researchers, supporting staff and managers can shape the university together. Under the current circumstances, such cooperation on equal terms is not possible. Only a truly democratic institution gives us the conditions we need to concretely realize the new university.

THOROUGH DEMOCRATIZATION

From the outset, DAG wants to be the movement that helps students and staff get a real say in UG policy. When students ask for the right to have a voice, they are mocked: "what would you know about this?" Maybe managers are right about this: most students have no idea what Yantai, indirect government funding, or the formation of managerial clusters at the faculty of arts are about. It is time that this changes. We will do everything we can to inform students about the policy of the board of the university.

DAG wants to create a culture of asking questions and receiving answers. We want to show that the interest of students does not end at online lectures or toilet breaks during exams. It is very much a student concern to also voice their opinion about structural, fundamental issues. Not just for their own interests, but for that of the academic community as a whole. The university should be a communal knowledge project, not a degree factory. As such it has a great social responsibility. This responsibility is too important to be left in the hands of a handful of managers with 'targets' that are generally alien to the academic ideal.

DAG will use its seats in the university council to make sure these topics and values will be discussed seriously. Although DAG will also try to use the seats to enact change, the primary goal is to kick-start the debate about the university among students. By making the academic community aware of the issues and solutions, we want to ensure that everyone participates in the debate about the fundamental question: to what end does the university exist?

1. DEMOCRATIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION

ANALYSIS

There is a troubling democratic deficit within the University of Groningen. The UG is home to many different administrative bodies that supposedly allow students to make their voice heard. Examples are the faculty participatory boards, the education committees, the university council and the student assessors. Despite this broad variety of councils and meetings, we feel students cannot truly participate in the creation of policy. De facto, the UG only creates a pretense of participation.

Participatory councils don't get a say in policy papers until late in the process, when it is often already too late to propose an alternative. Moreover, the policy documents are marked 'confidential' far more often than necessary, preventing disagreement from becoming public and preventing negative publicity. We feel this state of affairs is harmful: it circumvents true participation and excludes media from monitoring and scrutinizing what should be a public institution.

Education committees formulate their evaluations on the basis of questionnaires that are filled out by students who often have no idea of how important their voice could be. This detached method of quantitative analysis loses sight of the truly important criteria. For example: rather than measuring graduation percentages, one could ask if a course gave a pluralistic overview of the material, or if the course was taught at an adequate academic level.

Student assessors currently have an advisory role in their respective faculty or central board. When they disagree with their board they are always outnumbered by the other board members. This is fair weather participation, and it poses the threat of the assessor becoming a lobbyist working for the board.

The sometimes praised democratic organization of our university must therefore be understood as just show. The real decisions are made by *top-down* management. Student participation is just an annoyance for managers that they try to marginalize. Instead, the student voice and opinion should be embraced wholeheartedly. Managers should treat students as equal participants in the communal knowledge project that is, at its core, what a university should be about.

OUR VISION

DAG supports radical democratization of the UG, to ensure that managers can be held accountable to the academic community at all times. Decentralization is just as important: important decisions should be made by the people who have to deal with the consequences of policy, where possible. An important condition for academic renewal is the breaking up of the current hierarchic and bureaucratic structure of our university. DAG strives for an open university that is managed by a layered democratic system, rather than by appointed managers.

This means that central and faculty board members should be elected by staff and students. The most important advantage of this proposal is that managers have to make their ideas, plans and motivations explicit before they are installed. As such, they will have a new responsibility and accountability towards the academic community.

Another advantage of elections is the openness: policy and its causes will be public knowledge. Currently, students often have no idea of what goes on at the university, or among the staff. Our vision of transparency will improve the engagement of students and will make it much easier to let staff and students participate in the decision-making process. In addition, this democratic system gives managers a lot more legitimacy, because they gained the trust of the community in advance, and explained their vision and ideas beforehand.

2. FROM A BUSINESS TO A COMMUNAL SCIENTIFIC PROJECT

ANALYSIS

The Democratic Academy Groningen observes that the 21st century university has turned into a commercial institute, rather than the emancipatory scientific project it is supposed to be. The university has become a business, her rector a top manager with concomitant salary, scientists are producers and students simply consumers. This development can be seen throughout the entire organizational structure within the university. The board is made up out of managers who mainly focus on keeping the budget in order and achieving a higher spot on largely meaningless international rankings. Scientists have to produce as many publications as possible, with many harmful consequences. The enormous pressure, competition for research financing and managerial measures have led to job insecurity, mental health issues and excesses such as research fraud.

Students, for their part, are treated as consumers who merely come to shop for a diploma. They have no real voice and are only there to be processed along the educational assembly line as soon as possible. Students are not taken seriously and are therefore not taught to take themselves seriously. The financial interest of selling as many diploma's as possible has destructive consequences. Contact hours decrease in order to house larger numbers of students. A rushed Anglicization of a lot of major programs is supposed to bring in more tuition-payers from outside the EU. The quality of education suffers from the translation issues and bigger lecture audiences, but that is taken for granted. A business always strives for maximization of profit, but a university should maintain quality. These two things are sometimes mutually exclusive and at the University of Groningen they definitely are. Research is increasingly evaluated based on economic utility, or her practical applicability on the short term. There is less and less room for the creation of a scientific framework for the long term, for qualitative social-scientific research, or for maintaining pluralism within the arts and humanities.

As a consequence of corporate management, all criticism is nipped in the bud. Real decisions are made long before participatory councils hear about them. Policy documents are confidential and criticism in the media is all but forbidden. Above all, the reputation of the university must be protected, carefully construed as it is with the help of expensive PR-agencies. Because God forbid that a consumer doesn't believe that the UG is the place where 'Born leaders reach for infinity'; they might buy their degree somewhere else. If the money that went into PR had gone to the English department, perhaps the grammatically incorrect slogan 'Think Bold' could have been prevented.

OUR VISION

DAG pleads for a university that is not organized like a business, but as a communal project with a social responsibility. A university should treat its students as critical thinkers who have something to say. A university should be a safe haven for the flourishing of scientific research. A beacon of knowledge for the common good. When a university is swayed by perverse financial incentives and empty management rhetoric, its purpose is undermined. Bigger is not always better. A larger scale is not always more efficient. That is why DAG believes that the purposes and goals of an academic community are fundamentally incompatible with businesslike organization and policies.

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.

4. MOVING FROM QUANTITATIVE POLICY TOWARD QUALITATIVE VALUES

ANALYSIS

DAG feels that university policy focuses on statistics rather than people. Undemocratic structures of management, consisting of managers that are out of touch with the work they preside over, have worked to create a system of quantitative evaluation. Even national government policy, through the institution of 'performance agreements', has contributed to the ubiquity of this phenomenon. This policy is partially driven by the current model of funding, but is also stems from a much more fundamental issue: a lack of vision concerning academic quality.

The valuation of the work done by a researcher is done by measuring their number of publications in premier scientific journals. This restrictive view is what the university terms 'research output'. This system of evaluation, unfortunately, has little regard for inherent differences between academic disciplines. In natural sciences, journal articles are a good vehicle for publishing academic findings. Using the same criteria for the humanities, however, is unnecessarily restrictive, debilitating many research projects in these fields. Furthermore, the emphasis on 'research output' discourages academics to publish for a wider or a Dutch audience. This narrow quantification of 'research output' hurts both the quality of the research done and, crucially, the mental (and thereby physical) health of university employees. At the same time, its only advantage lies in helping to obtain higher 'university rankings' that are, in truth, rather meaningless. To what benefit does the RUG allow this to continue? Let us get rid of this destructive, discriminating system, rather than subscribe to these inappropriate international institutions!

An obvious consequence of this quantitative framework is that management prefers a student that graduates quickly. Speed is more important than quality. There is decreasing opportunity for academic self-realization both inside and outside the university. DAG holds the opinion that education must be judged by assessment of qualitative criteria, inspiring students to take back their responsibilities and their freedom.

OUR VISION

Academic research must be based on a system of trust and integrity. In addition, it must look to create a long term framework of knowledge that may facilitate further development. We do not know what the questions of tomorrow will be and have to prepare ourselves for those new questions. Education should not primarily aim at the training of employees. Rather, it should strive to institute in its recipients the capacity for critical thought, social contribution, and self-realization. The university is an eminently suitable body to promote this principle and, as such, bears great responsibility. DAG desires to emphasize qualitative norms for research, rather than the quantitative measures that are currently employed. Let us get rid of these measures that restrict researchers and bankrupts university education.

CONCRETE GOALS OF THE DEMOCRATIC ACADEMY GRONINGEN

- **Democratically elected managers:** decisions concerning our university should be made by the academic community. Both students and employees should have a say in appointing its managers, both within faculties and the central board. A wholesome academic training requires students to be treated like adults, capable of criticism, all contributing to our common academic project, rather than passive and uninformed consumers.
- **Decentralized decision-making:** important decisions, like our educational organization and research should be made at a departmental or faculty level. This is our way of restoring academics' self-determination, about their own research and educational activities.
- **Complete transparency:** managers, as well as student representatives, should be as transparent as possible regarding their policies. University council meetings should always be open to the public, confidentiality only a last resort. Documents should never be made confidential out of damage control or fear of backlash. Managers should be clear about their opinions, considerations and responsibilities
- **Dramatically reforming the position of student assessor:** the role that a student assessor plays should explicitly pertain to representing students within different university councils, as opposed to simply being a supposedly neutral pawn tasked to objectively assess the institutions' course of action. A student assessor should generally never withhold information from participatory councils and academic society. If this reform turns out to be impossible, DAG will move to completely get rid of the function.
- **Consistent funding for vulnerable academic disciplines:** the role that a discipline has within a society pertains to more than simply its financial viability. Financial allocation should reflect that.
- **More permanent contracts for academics:** DAG demands more security for researchers whose contracts are increasingly part time or grant-based.
- **Removing the position of *Dean of Industry relations*:** Research shows that the integrity of research results is often in jeopardy when research is funded by corporate parties. Moreover, scientific research should never primarily serve commercial interests.
- **Reconsidering partnerships of the Energy Academy Europe:** While DAG agrees that there is a need for research towards building a 'green' society, we doubt that the EAE is currently contributing to that society. Why is everyone of their partnerships with a company straight out of the fossil fuel industry?
- **Moving to reform the national model of funding:** the RUG should take a stand against the perverse incentives within our model of financing our research. A good start would be a discussion about the equalization of direct to indirect government funding.
- **Internal reorganization of financial allocation:** DAG wants a sustainable allocation model which should aim to ensure the continuity of education and research. Major programs should not be threatened due to their cost per student, as is happening right now within the language programs.
- **Getting rid of oppressive quantitative evaluations regarding research and education:** the quality of research and education should be judged by a set of qualitative standards, not by quantity or financial viability. Things like *research output* aren't good measures to ensure a culture of advanced research. Fetishizing certain rankings or charts must also come to an end; quality above quantity.

- **Cutting down on practical 'skill courses':** one worrying development is the increase in infantile skill courses, employed as a perverse measure to increase graduation percentages. Courses in practical skills should never be taught at the cost of academic content. These courses would be best given outside of a university environment.
- **Critical evaluation of anglicization:** the current course of internationalization is a concealed form of anglicization, in order to increase student numbers. Making room for international students can be quite valuable, but not when done out of a financial motive. The world is larger than the Anglo-Saxon sphere, which is why we want researchers to feel confident in publicizing internationally, in whatever language they choose.
- **Thorough reform of excellence tracks:** The University of Groningen wants to offer an 'excellence' track by means of the Honours College. The very concept of 'excellence education' is problematic in principle, because qualitative and in-depth education should never be just for a privileged few. It would be fairer and more sensible to use these funds to improve education for all students.