



Vision Document **DAG**

Democratic Academy of Groningen

2019-2020



INTRODUCTION

We, the Democratic Academy Groningen (DAG) represent a large group of students who are concerned about the current state of academia in general and of the University of Groningen (UG) in particular. The UG has become a commercial institution. Academic freedom and education suffer because of it. Therefore, we continue the critical debate about the fundamental values a university should adhere to. Most importantly, we focus on the realization of these values in policy. In this document, we explain them along five different themes: (1) **democratization and decentralization**, (2) **from a business to a scientific community**, (3) **towards responsible and sustainable funding**, (4) **from quantitative policy to qualitative values** and (5) **internationalization**. Concrete objectives play an important role, but the values themselves are most vital.

There are several worrying developments at the UG that raise questions. Why is it that the university is being transformed into a corporation? Why is substantive academic education being replaced by schoolish practices? Why did the UG appoint a Dean of Industry Relations, who is helping businesses undermine the integrity and freedom of scientific research? Why do the Humanities receive so many budget cuts? Why did 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 on the quality of their research? Why does the university not take responsibility for the housing of international students? Why is a successful graduation defined as a fast graduation? Why are 79% of our professors male?

The university's management has 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. We believe that if there was an active and democratic debate about policy, policy-makers would realise that the quantitative criteria they employ are harmful to education and research. Because of this, we demand 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 the conditions needed to concretely realise a new university.**

RADICAL DEMOCRATIZATION

From the outset, we want to be the movement that helps students and staff get a real say in UG policy. When students have asked for the right to have a voice, they have been dismissed: "what would you know about this?" Maybe the management is right: most students have no idea how the university receives and allocates its funds, or what the managerial reorganization of the Faculty of Arts will entail. And what about work pressure, stress, the lack of guidance in courses, disappearing specialities, etc. Most students have urgent opinions about these topics, but they don't have a say on these either, do they? It is time to change this.

We as DAG want 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 societal responsibility. This is too important to be left in the hands of a management organ with 'targets' and interests that are generally alien and by times even opposed to the interests of the academic community at large.

We try to get these issues discussed by informing and organizing students. We already do so in our project and discussion groups, in the debates and events we organize and, when necessary, on the streets. We also have factions both in the University and the Faculty of Arts council that strive for change, but the seats we have will mostly serve to help fire the discussion among students wherever we can.

Our main goal is raising consciousness and informing students to help them fight for their fundamental interests and a university that serves society. Only a democratic university can safeguard the academic ideals that it should serve.



DEMOCRATIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION

ANALYSIS

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

1 In general, participatory councils do not have genuine democratic power, as there are very few topics on which they have the right of consent. **Councils do have advisory right, but this is not an enforceable power, which means that a board isn't obliged to adopt its advice.** Apart from that, councils often do not get a say in policy papers before late in the process, when it is often already too late to propose an alternative. And even if they do get to share their view on time, the board isn't always inclined to listen - and they don't have to. For instance, DAG and other student factions have pledged the Board to take the student housing shortage seriously for two years now. Instead of doing this, the year 2018-2019 was the worst one yet with hundreds of homeless students. Because the university did not solve the problem, we initiated a couchsurfing initiative. **the demands of the students were only responded to in conjunction with the occupation of the Academy Building.**

2 **Boards act as if their policies are based on a neutral, non-ideological points of view, denying the political nature of their positions.** This appeal to a technocratic justification of their actions is used to counter any ideologically-based critique on the way the university is governed. The main idea seems to be that those who do not agree with policies, simply do not understand "the way it works".

DEMOCRATIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION

- 3** The policy documents are marked 'confidential' far more often than necessary, preventing disagreement from becoming public to avoid negative publicity. A troublesome example was experienced during the critical evaluation of the Branch Campus plans from the UG. Despite many questions from the council, the board did not utter a word and left the academic community in disbelief. 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.
- 4** **Programme committees** formulate their evaluations on the basis of questionnaires that are filled out by students who often have no idea of the importance of their voice. **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.
- 5** **Student assessors** currently have an advisory role in their respective faculty or central board. **Whenever they disagree with their board, they lack any real power to influence the decisions.** <This shows that it is fair weather participation. In practice the assessor functions as a lobbyist for interests of the board and gives a false sense of democratic representation.

The democratic organization of our university must therefore be understood as a mere 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. **Students and staff should be equal participants in the communal knowledge project which is, at its core, what a university should be about.**



DEMOCRATIZATION AND DECENTRALIZATION

OUR VISION

The Democratic Academy Groningen supports **radical democratization of the UG**, to ensure that policy makers can be held accountable to the academic community at all times. Therefore, decentralization is important: decisions should be made by the people who have to deal with the consequences of policy. An important condition for academic renewal is the breaking up of the current hierarchical and bureaucratic structure of our university. We strive for an open university that is managed by a layered democratic system, rather than by appointed managers.

The fundamental point is that the interests of staff and students should govern policy, not the interest of efficiency-thinking bureaucrats or big business. Further decentralization will not be a magical cure, but will be a step in the right direction. Ultimately, managers should just be facilitators serving the needs of the staff and students, with whom the power ought to lie.



FROM A BUSINESS TO A SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

ANALYSIS

The Democratic Academy Groningen observes that the contemporary, neoliberal university and academia as an institution overall 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 a top salary; scientists have become producers, students simply consumers. This development can be seen throughout the entire organizational structure within the university. The board consist of managers who mainly focus on superficial rankings in order to compete with other universities, while these rankings in no way reflect the quality of education and research. 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 by the university, which leads to a lack of critical thinking. The financial interest of selling as many diplomas as possible has destructive consequences. Contact hours decrease in order to house larger numbers of students.

The current anglicization of major programs by the university is done to attract transnational students for instrumental purposes for the higher tuition money instead for enriching the education. A business always strives for maximization of profit - a university should not. Universities should foster critical thinking and research of a high quality. These two things are sometimes mutually exclusive and at the UG they definitely are. Research is increasingly evaluated on the basis of economic utility and practical applicability on the short term. There is less and less room for the creation of a scientific framework for the long term and for qualitative social-scientific research.

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', as was the slogan, 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.

FROM A BUSINESS TO A CIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

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 managerial rhetoric, its purpose is undermined. That is why DAG believes that the purposes and goals of an academic community are fundamentally incompatible with businesslike organization and policies.



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TOWARDS RESPONSIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

ANALYSIS

The current system used by the university for the acquisition 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.

- 1 A large chunk of university funding consists of direct government funding. This funding is split between the different faculties through the UG's own allocation model. The UG makes the explicit choice to copy the proposal of the government to allocate the money in relation to numbers of graduates, numbers of publications, numbers of 'produced' PhD's etc. 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 reevaluation 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.

TOWARDS RESPONSIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

ANALYSIS

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 because in practice, 'mainstream' research topics have a bigger chance of gaining NWO approval. Causing the 'unfashionable' research proposals to be denied funding, harming diversity in research. As a result, the quality of education in the university diminishes. When it is difficult for certain academic disciplines to get NWO funding, they start to disappear from students' curriculum as well. Valuable time is wasted on writing multitudes of proposals with only a small chance of getting accepted. Thus, it is a political directive of research funding that hurts the academic freedom.

2 Job security within academia is low. Firstly, NWO funding 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. Secondly, having a (temporary) position in academia is a lottery ticket in the first place: approval of research funding depends more on luck than on the quality of the research proposal. This determines at the beginning of a researcher's career their overall prospects in academia. Indeed, current policy does more for the financial security of those in management positions than the quality of research and education as a whole.

3 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. Therefore, the UG has appointed a Dean of Industry Relations to work on substantially increasing funding for the university from these private sectors. Predominantly, this Dean has been attracting money from large corporations which attach their own interests to their research grants, threatening academic independence. 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, for example, the 'Energy Academy Europe' at the Zernike campus is partnered exclusively with fossil-fuel industry firms.

TOWARDS RESPONSIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

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OUR VISION

DAG supports 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 have '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. The UG can take a great first step by refusing to copy the perverse incentives the government has laid down in their allocation of funding. DAG promotes structural financing of vulnerable disciplines and will work to advance the university climate beyond neoliberal, competition-based policies.



FROM QUANTITATIVE POLICY TO QUALITATIVE VALUES

ANALYSIS

DAG feels that university policy focuses on statistics rather than people. Undemocratic structures of management that are out of touch with the work they preside over 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 it also stems from a much more fundamental issue: a lack of vision concerning academic quality.

The evaluation 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 field.

Furthermore, the emphasis on 'research output' discourages academics to publish for a wider or a Dutch audience. In practice, this narrow quantification of 'research output' hurts the quality of the research done and the people doing it, since these constraining working conditions continue to fuel health issues.

The only advantage of this manner of doing research lies in helping to obtain higher 'university rankings' that look good on paper but in practice do not reflect the quality of education and research. To what cost does the UG allow this to continue? In fact, this focus on rankings harms the quality of the UGs education and research by fixating on quantitative numbers-based efficiency-thinking which causes earlier noted problems such as output-oriented policies, forcing students through their programmes, reallocating resources so that they trigger made-up quality parameters instead of letting the money go where it could make a genuine qualitative difference, etc.

FROM QUANTITATIVE POLICY TO QUALITATIVE VALUES

OUR VISION

The university has obligations to the broad interests of society and the inherent value of knowledge, not to the rhetoric of statistics such as output generation. Hence, academic research and education 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. Education should not primarily aim to meet the demands of the labour market. Rather, it should strive to instigate in its recipients the capacity for critical thought, one's contribution to society, and self-realization. The university is the designated place, if not the only suitable institution, to promote this principle and, as such, bears great responsibility. DAG desires to emphasize qualitative norms for research and education, rather than the quantitative measures that are currently employed. Let us get rid of these measures that restrict researchers and bankrupt university education.



RESPONSIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE INTERNATIONALISATION

ANALYSIS

The internationalization policy of the University of Groningen shows structural flaws that hinder students and staff from benefitting from a truly international university, as it is mainly seen as a business model. Especially in the case of attracting international students, this problem has its roots on a national level. Universities compete in attracting international students in order to get a bigger share of a fixed amount of money, and in effect, international students are not valued for their potential merits for the academic community, but for the money they bring in.

Most of the courses at the University of Groningen are taught in English: this surely is a big step forward in the direction of a more inclusive university. There are, however, courses and programs which are intrinsically meant to be taught in Dutch, or meant to use sources in languages such as German or French, and whose quality is therefore undermined by the choice of English as the language of teaching.

“International university” is a status that institutions all over the world like to boast about, and the UG is no exception. However, this denomination often stands for “globalised university”. The difference is not just in the wording: while “globalised” implies homogeneity, “internationalised” stresses and encourages diversity.

In this context, the risk of cultural homogenisation is high: an environment is created in which students are only exposed to one school of thought. All the while, researchers are forced to publish in international, English-language journals in order for their research to be appreciated. This eliminates the possibility of publication on other platforms, for example in national newspapers where they could reach other audiences.

Moreover, the UG, like other universities in the Netherlands, does not take enough responsibility for students from abroad. Within a saturated housing market, the UG declines to genuinely take responsibility by only providing a short-stay accommodation. This way, foreign students find themselves overpaying for temporary rooms which are available in a limited number only. International students are treated as if they were a business model, without regards for their basic human needs.

The distinction between foreign students and Dutch students, for example in the housing market, is a source of problems when it comes to inclusion. Instead of being seen by the university as an organic part of the academic community, international students and staff often experience being marginalised and inclusion is not properly achieved.

RESPONSIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE INTERNATIONALISATION

OUR VISION

DAG firmly believes that a truly international university is one where the intrinsic value of internationalisation is the main point of focus, and where it is not just a tool to climb higher in rankings or to maintain their 'market-share'. Openness to diversity and the attention to different cultures are important features of such an institution. Such features must be actively supported and carried out by the UG. For example, the language of instruction of each single course should be determined separately, bearing in mind the peculiarities of the subject being taught and its relation to the cultures of different countries.

The emphasis on the English language in academic publications is to be reduced, allowing scholars to write in whichever language best fits their topic of research. International journals and the elusive prestige associated to them should not be the focus of a researcher's career.

Finally, the UG should take more responsibility in the inclusion of foreign students. More and higher quality housing ought to be offered to students, regardless of their nationality. Participation of foreign students in the decision-making process should be made possible and encouraged. This will help puncture the separate bubbles in which Dutch students and international students currently find themselves, and will contribute to the creation of a more diverse and dynamic academic environment.

The UG doesn't need international competition but international collaboration; it shouldn't foster globalisation but promote inclusion in order to achieve a communal knowledge project.

CONCRETE GOALS OF THE DEMOCRATIC ACADEMY OF GRONINGEN

1
Radical democratization: decision-making power should lie with students and staff, not with managers. Electing the who makes the decisions for us is an important step in that process. A wholesome academic education requires students to be treated like adults, capable of criticism, all contributing to our common academic project, rather than passive and uninformed consumers.

2
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.

3
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.

4
Abolishment of the position of student assessor: the student assessor does not improve the decision making of students, it even obstructs real student participation. In practice the assessor functions as a lobbyist for interests of the board.

CONCRETE GOALS OF THE DEMOCRATIC ACADEMY OF GRONINGEN

F 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.

G Job security for academics: we demand more security for researchers whose contracts are increasingly part time or grant-based. Current circumstances cause many problems, not the least of which are serious mental health issues. Teacher working conditions are student learning conditions.

T Moving to reform the national model of funding: the UG 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.

S Internal reorganization of financial allocation: we want 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.

CONCRETE GOALS OF THE DEMOCRATIC ACADEMY OF GRONINGEN

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. • Removing the position of Dean of Entrepreneurship: we do not want the UG to be more entrepreneurial, like the stated goal of the Dean of Entrepreneurship. The preparation for the job market should not be a focus point for a public university: it is not a practical institution and should not focus on delivering workers. An academic study should have an ideal of *bildung*, it should enable critical thinking. Entrepreneurship should not be part of the curriculum and a special 'Dean' is therefore superfluous. • Reconsidering partnerships of the Energy Academy Europe: While we agree that there is a need for research towards building a 'green' society, but because of the interests of its fossil fuel partners, we doubt that the EAE is currently optimally contributing to that society. Why is every one of their partnerships with a company straight out of the fossil fuel industry?

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. Quantified research output is not a good measure 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 skill courses, employed as a perverse measure to increase graduation percentages for the sake of the percentages. Courses in practical skills should never be taught at the cost of academic content. These courses would be best given extra-curricular. However, by reducing the working pressure, lectures would for example again have time again to share tricks and tips to help individual students to develop their practical skills.

CONCRETE GOALS OF THE DEMOCRATIC ACADEMY OF GRONINGEN

Internationalization should not be a business model: the current course of 'internationalization' is a concealed form of anglicization, in order to increase student numbers. Making room for international students is extremely valuable, but not when done out of a financial motive. As for research, the world is larger than the Anglo-Saxon sphere, which is why we want researchers to be allowed to publish internationally, in whatever language they choose. • Dramatically reforming the '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, so that all students can enjoy excellence education.

As the university has a responsibility to set an example in implementing knowledge, whether it comes in hard scientific facts or in sharing values. Toward this latter goal, the UG should do more in terms of inclusiveness. We stand for an open and transparent university that is welcoming and willing to listen to people of all social backgrounds, nationalities, sexual orientations, gender identities and so on.