

Election Programme 2020

DAG

Democratische Academie Groningen

The University Is Not A Business

The Democratic Academie Groningen (DAG) has consistently opposed the idea that universities should be run like a business. From economizing education in the classroom, producing degrees like a factory or incentivizing the number of publications over the quality of research, DAG continues to see academia's autonomy endangered by managerial thinking and profit-based growth.

This election programme is an application of those fundamental values for the academic year 2020/2021. Our vision has remained unchanged, as the way universities are run have remained the same, too.

The COVID-19 outbreak has driven the already precarious situation of students and temporary employed staff into even worse conditions: faculties are hesitant in signing contracts for teaching staff, researchers are expected to do the impossible and swiftly move education online while having to care for their family as well and students break under the expectation to continue as if nothing happened while their study debts continue to rise.

More than ever, it's time to democratize the university.

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Our Demands

A) Democracy

1. Introducing secret ballots to the councils: a fair vote is private by nature.

- A secret ballot is where a vote in the council is made confidentially: no one can see who voted in which manner. This stands in contrast to the current system, where votes are either cast by show of hands or by assuming consent, unless objections have been raised.
- For staff members, voting in a way that goes against the plans of the board can endanger their position at the RUG. They may thus feel coerced to vote in line with the board's proposals to not get into trouble with their supervisors. A private vote would circumvent that issue.
- For students, if they have ambitions within the faculty or academia generally, their vote could impact how their professors think of them. Another issue can be influence from outside. The WHW foresees that members of the co-governance organs should not be influenced by outside institutions. A private vote can safeguard this WHW rule more.

2. Democratic Culture.

- The university should not only focus on the small percentage of students that actively takes part in the institutionalised structure of democratic participation within the university. The board should see that the vast majority of students do not and cannot engage in the organisation of their own studies, faculties and university.
- We want that the university engages more with students by conducting periodical focus group interviews. We need qualitative engagement with e.g. students who struggle with their studies or students with learning disabilities, to have a full picture of the problems, rather than surveys that nobody participates in, anyways.
- To further improve this situation providing information is key; we want a general introduction for students in the first year on how the university is organised so at least everyone is introduced to the topic, and better functioning websites. The RUG's online environment is confusing: next to rug.nl, there are also the websites nestor.rug.nl and myuniversity.rug.nl. We want the websites to be clear in their purpose: rug.nl should contain non-study related information, also about the participatory bodies, such as the programme committees or faculty & university councils, listed clearly in one of the tabs. We want only educational information on the nestor site and for staff only work-related information on the myuniversity page.

3. More power to the councils!

- Currently the councils have a very limited amount of consent rights. For many topics, the councils are powerless. Their presence, however, can still be a legitimizing structure for the board, because they do not stop the plans of the board (but how would they without the power to do so?) That needs to be balanced more.
- We want to return from the so-called “MUB” (modernisation of universities’ governance) to a new version of the “WUB” (university administration law). The modernisation of university governance act (MUB) essentially added a layer of management to universities while removing power from the existing councils on faculty level (faculty councils) and central level (university council).
- By creating the so-called “supervisory board” and “executive board”, universities started to structurally resemble big companies, rather than public institutions such as municipal councils. University and faculty councils have less power under the MUB and deans and chairs of universities now hold the ultimate word in deciding the direction of the university. Under the older WUB, councils held true governance power.

B) Sustainability

1. A Post-Growth University.

- Overcoming a growth-based model for the university makes it possible for the RUG to stop many construction projects. The production of construction materials, such as cement, is one of the largest factors in increasing CO₂ emissions. By constantly growing its capacities, the RUG contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. This is not a sustainable practice.
- By not growing, and perhaps beginning to degrow, there will be less commute from outside the city of Groningen. A sustainable work environment for staff and students also becomes possible: by having smaller class sizes and a less clogged university library.

2. Cooperation with polluting industries.

- The RUG is cooperating with Shell, while people in the Groningen province suffer from the effects of the earthquakes caused by them. Gas extractors fund research at this university in order to “green-wash”, i.e. portray a sustainable image. They also fund research that legitimizes their activities, for example gas extractors funding research into the efficiency of gas.
- We want every euro that goes into research on gas as a “transition energy form” to go into alternative, greener forms. We don’t want this university to be part of the legitimization of gas extraction.

3. The RUG needs to be CO₂ neutral.

- The RUG shouldn't just be energy neutral, it also needs to be CO₂ neutral: that means that, for instance, construction projects, which emit tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere, have to either be compensated for or, preferably, the RUG stops growing, such that these construction projects can be stopped.
- Additionally, food itself needs to be accounted for in a CO₂ balance. Either the meat that is offered needs to be compensated somehow, or vegan options are promoted and preferred more. At the moment, catering, canteens, and vending machines are very ill-equipped for people who don't eat animal products. The options should be expanded in order to encourage more sustainable food consumption, since vegan food is much more sustainable than animal products.

4. Animal experiments.

- Animal experiments should be held to the absolute minimum and innovative ways of preventing the study on animals should be invested into.
- One example would be to move more research of, e.g. pharmaceutical sciences, to simulations with so-called supercomputers. This makes it unnecessary to make use of animal experiments.

C) Inclusion

1. Inclusive hiring policy.

- The RUG set its goal to have 27% female full-professors by 2020. This goal will be missed: 2018 the percentage was only 21%.
- We propose an intersectional approach in the hiring policy: job offers should be offered in such a way, that they are more attractive to more women, more people of color, queer people, people with disabilities, people from a working class background, etc., and especially to people at intersections of the demographics mentioned above.
- For instance, the Freie Universität Berlin states with each job offer explicitly that for instance people with disabilities are preferred when applicants have the same qualifications or that women and people of a migrant background are explicitly invited to apply.

2. Mandatory (neuro-)diversity and anti-racism training for university staff and students.

- Currently, HR offers mandatory anti-harassment training for staff only. However, a much more effective course, “bystander intervention,” is only voluntary. We want this training to be widely available and mandatory for teaching staff and students alike.

3. Curriculums should have more space for critical reflection of the course material itself.

- Ultimately, the university should have a feminist and decolonizing approach to its curriculum and actively seek to include more diverse and especially more non-western perspectives. At the moment, the majority of readings in many courses are written by white men from the global metropole.
- Program committees should attend (inter-)national courses or conferences, where they are taught about the current state of research in their field. This should allow for space to critique a course for, e.g., the lack of non-Western material or some views being over-represented in a course over others.
- Furthermore, meetings of program committees need to be long enough to give space for this critical reflection. Currently, there are too few, too short meeting that hinder the workings of the program committee.

4. Changing facilities to be more inclusive.

- For instance, “mindervaliden” toilet, or “disabled” bathrooms create an imbalanced idea of who is allowed to use these bathrooms and who isn’t. Some disabilities are invisible (for instance, people with cardiovascular syncope might faint when their body is under stress - they need access to an emergency button in the bathroom.) We propose to not only change the name to “accessible bathrooms / toegankelijke toilets” but also to change the mindset of what accessibility means.

5. Better help for those experiencing discrimination, mental health problems and sexual harassment.

- At the moment, the RUG has only one confidential advisor for over 25.000 students and 4.000 staff. The so-called Appeal and Advisory committee, where many harassment claims are handled, is over-worked. Student-psychologists and counsellors can sometimes offer a meeting only weeks in advance. Severe problems are forwarded to the police a lot, creating yet another hurdle. Students and staff sometimes feel on their own with their problems.
- There should be more information points for students and staff to consult for advice on how to (institutionally) deal with discrimination. They should advise according to the students' or staff's interest. They should also help with seeking help outside of the institution.

D) Education

1. De-growth: improving quality of education.

- Seminar groups should not be larger than 15 students. Large seminar groups are distracting and less helpful to students learning process. With smaller classes, teachers can focus more on the needs and interests of individual students. Teachers will grade less and be less overworked.

2. Stop “bulimic learning” and favor long term knowledge-retention based teaching and examination.

- Current examination models favor quick, seemingly aimless memorizing and less actual knowledge retention. This has the effect that students quickly forget what they learned in a course unit after their exam. As a result, a lot of education in academia is only about passing exams and not about actually educating students. The current examination model therefore deteriorates the quality of education at the RUG.
- “Tell me and I will forget, show me and I will remember, involve me and I’ll understand” - a high quality education allows students to think critically, to connect points and follow their own interests.

3. More autonomy to students.

- Some courses seem for students pointless because they either are not relevant for their research purposes or because the relevance is not evident to them at first glance. We advocate for a mixed model of education, where both the need-to-knows and want-to-knows are taught hand-in-hand. Combining genuine interest of students with the methodical curriculum of the necessary skills research their interest, increases motivation in the classroom and ultimately leads to better learning outcomes.

4. More (interdisciplinary) electives for bachelor programs.

- It should be possible to take courses even at other faculties and get them counted towards your degree programme. This way students are free to experiment in what direction they would like to develop. Interdisciplinarity increases and also other students benefit from new impulses from other faculties or areas of study.

5. Offer the possibility to watch the lectures online for all courses under all circumstances.

- While physical classes are very important to academic studying since you have to learn how to debate and defend your arguments for a group of people, that doesn't exclude that people that cannot be physically present (because they experience mental or physical constraints) should be able to enjoy education online.

6. Go back from 5 ECTS to 10 ECTS-like courses, as much as possible.

- 5 ECTS courses add to the previously discussed bulimia learning as they tend to be finished too soon to actually delve into it and properly learn. Furthermore, with these courses examinations are centralized too much which leads students having to always study for some upcoming exam. With longer, 10 ECTS courses there will be less examination and more space to study something in detail.

E) Financing

1. Less projects, more education.

- The financing models of the RUG currently favor projects that help specific faculties to grow, while disadvantaging other faculties. This should be stopped.
- An example is the contribution to a partnership with the “New Energy Coalition.” Besides DAG’s concerns with regards to autonomy of research and sustainability, this partnership only benefits the FSE in financial terms.
- For 2019 the RUG spent M 60€ in non-educational activities. Many of those projects have a more business-like orientation and less research or education related effects. This leads to the situation that the board can find funds for prestigious projects, but not for proper funding of the classroom.
- Finally, DAG opposes any implementation of the van Rijn recommendations at the RUG: the RUG is in no way obliged to follow the suggestions of the ministry. Implementing such suggestions would mean more structural funding for the already strong FSE but structural disadvantage to small faculties, like the theology or philosophy faculty.

Our Methods

DAG is a movement. As such, we don't want to stay confined to any institution solely. We do think that it's important to have the DAG vision represented in the faculty and university councils. At the same time, these councils can only achieve so much. In the past, DAG has also worked on the front of public opinion, Q&As to the minister and national petitions. We will continue to exercise our democratic rights through the channels available to us.

A) What do we need the councils for?

Within the University of Groningen there is some room for possibilities to co-shape the direction of the university. However, this is very limited. In the past, we have crossed the plans of the board by staging sit-ins and other demonstrations, putting pressure for change from outside the councils. Such interventions can be helpful but real change is frequently only achieved on national governance.

Nevertheless, in order to have a real, fully comprehensible view of what needs to change, DAG uses its seats in the councils to get information and insight into the decisions of the boards. We want to increase democracy and transparency at all times, so we request documents regularly and fight for their visibility to the public.

We believe that a big part of the problem with higher education policy from the Hague is that their distance to the actual student population makes them somewhat blind to the problems that we face in institutions: classrooms that are too full, lack of study spaces, lack of living spaces and mental health problems due to the pressure to finish your degree as quick as possible. We therefore use our position in the councils as being between the grassroots and national debates.

B) How do we lobby for change on the national level?

We use the information we gather from the councils to write letters to the minister, opinion pieces or simply bring to public attention the undemocratic decisions made by the top-managers of the university. Besides using informal routes, we also stay connected to national student lobbying groups.

There are several student lobbying groups in the Netherlands that regularly hold meetings with the ministry. For instance, the LSVb (the national student union) is regularly consulted by the ministry to gain insight into the opinion of students. We support the LSVb and their demonstrations, actions and protests and try to help with organizing similar actions in Groningen.

We also work together with actions by the WOinActie group. WOinActie is a group of academics in the Netherlands that call for a proper financing of higher education. Their symbol of solidarity, the red square, has been seen in the previous opening of the academic year at the RUG. DAG attended the 'real' opening this year in Leiden to protest against the van Rijn recommendations that, since implemented, result in real budget cuts to the humanities, social and medical sciences.

C) How can I get involved?

Since we work both inside as well as outside the councils, anyone can get involved with varying degrees of commitment. We hold weekly meetings either online or in person to discuss general matters. We will also begin shortly again with our different working groups: internationalization & housing, sustainability & inclusion, finance and finally democracy & education. Anyone interested in one or more topics can join the working groups. For that, send us an email to demokratischeacademie@gmail.com.