



ReThink UvA: Position Papers on Teaching and Research (English)

September 2015

ReThink UvA proposes an urgent and fundamental transformation of the current organization of teaching and research. The following two position papers identify major problems and suggest solutions. They are meant as a starting point to reflect on the current state of affairs regarding the academic profession and its future. We want to invite all individual members of the UvA but also its various bodies (research institutes, colleges, graduate schools, board of studies, departments, worker and student councils etc.) to participate in the discussion: Do you share the concerns described here? What issues are missing? Which steps could be taken (or are already implemented at one or the other place) to make teaching and research a productive and fulfilling enterprise? We welcome feedback and involvement in a critical dialogue. Please contact us via:

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1) Position Paper on Teaching

During the protests at the Maagdenhuis, teachers of the many institutes of the University of Amsterdam began to share their experiences about the way teaching is organized and valued at the university. What has since come up again and again is that the increasing streamlining and micromanagement of teaching – contrary to the intended effect – often results in a waste of resources. Instead of making teaching more efficient, implemented measures have demotivated some of our most successful students, have disconnected teaching from research, have alienated teachers from the job they love, and have actually sickened some students and teachers.

Across departments and faculties, staff and students are frustrated by similar developments – some of which directly result from UvA policy, while others result from national guidelines. As a result of our discussions, we have identified four main themes among the problems encountered:

1. The inefficiency of **output-rationality** (rendementsdenken): an extreme focus on output metrics estranges teaching from its core goals, whilst inconsistent measures to improve metrics often result in the opposite.
2. **Bureaucratization**, or the 'one-size-fits-all rules', have come to dominate and overwhelm our teaching. Centralization has led to heavily bureaucratized proce-

dures, adding to workload and needlessly reducing the autonomy of professionals.

3. **Work (over)load and the arbitrary calculation of hours:** The expansion of student numbers, the extension of the semester and administrative obligations have not been compensated by a higher budget, but only led to unpaid overwork.
4. **The distortion of the teaching-research balance:** Teaching overload takes away all the research time; in order to do research you have to buy yourself out of teaching. With this divorce between teaching and research, the university loses its strongest point.

1. The inefficiency of output-rationality (*rendementsdenken*)

An extreme focus on output metrics estranges teaching from its core goals, and inconsistent measures to improve metrics often result in the opposite.

The current focus on output metrics is evidently inefficient. It provokes the constant reorganization of our educational programs. Year after year, performance benchmarks (*prestatieafspraken*), achievement provisions (*studiesuccesmaatregelen* – including the increase of assignments, mentoring and tutoring systems), matching, and a forced drop-out system (*bindend studieadvies*) require annual restructuring of course-designs, even before the effects of the prior year's measures can be evaluated. This systematically refocuses the discussions inside departments away from content, to managing ways of dealing with new administrative requirements. This is reinforced by the requirement to streamline the teaching objectives (*leerdoelen*) according to transnational recipes (e.g. 'Dublin descriptors'), which is entirely disconnected from the rich profiles of individual disciplines. Output-rationality thereby does not only waste money, it also hampers the development and innovation of teaching.

Since output-rationality is directly connected to financial incentives, it proves itself detrimental to the quality of teaching and to a trust-based and productive teacher-student relationship. Departments (in some programs even individual teachers) get compensated on the basis of the number of diplomas produced. Here, the grading of student papers becomes mixed up with budget concerns. Conversations with students are no longer intellectual conversations; they become negotiations. Even the VSNU (the association of universities in the Netherlands) argues that the re-balancing of output-oriented management with a more careful preservation of the quality of content is now necessary.¹

Output-rationality reduces 'education' to 'learning', and 'learning' to 'quantifiable data'.² Teaching becomes a 'fact-feeding' and 'fact-checking' exercise that restricts rather than supports the student's acquisition of knowledge, learning skills and independent thinking.³ The subsequent standardization of teaching annihilates any flexibility, and denies the students a valuable independence to develop their own study paths and pursue specific interests. Particularly the more advanced, good students, who want to reach beyond the standard offerings and strive to follow a second program, are hindered by the rules of performance benchmarks. As soon as a student needs more than one extra year

¹ <http://www.vsnu.nl/nieuws/nieuwsbericht/189-reactie-van-de-vereniging-van-universiteiten-op-de-protesten-van-studenten-en-universitair-medewerkers.html>; In an open letter, the platform H.NU already criticized that the VSNU's reaction to the protests is somewhat complacent: <http://platform-hnu.nl/de-nieuwe-universiteit-is-anders/>

² On the "learnification" of academic education, see: Biesta, Gert. "Good Education in an Age of Measurement: On the Need to Reconnect with the Question of Purpose in Education." *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability (formerly: Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education)* 21.1 (2009): 33–46.

³ Lorenz, Chris. "The Metrification of 'Quality' and the Fall of the Academic Profession." *Oxford Magazine* Hilary Week, Trinity Term (2015): 7–11.

to pursue such ambitions, the concerned departments are no longer compensated for teaching. Weaker students who might need some more guidance and patience to develop the required academic skillset and approach are written off too early in this system. If students are forced to finish (or quit) their program in a hurry, they don't fulfill their potential for society: they might have a certificate, but they don't possess the competencies they would have gained if they were allowed to study one more semester or follow one more course.

Of course, we are all in favor of well-organized and transparent programs that enable the students to finish in time. However, the straightjacket resulting from performance benchmarks and output-rationality undermines any and all efforts to innovate in content and delivery, and reduces the teacher-student relationship to one of control and distrust. The extreme focus on quantitative metrics promotes the production of required numbers, instead of an improvement in quality.⁴

We strongly believe that the principal task of academic staff is to teach people to think and to develop their skills for critical reflection. We want to move from compliance to engagement, for both teachers and students. Many pedagogues have observed and proven that control and assessment does little to advance performance in creative, complex, or conceptual tasks.⁵ We believe that the UvA staff is dedicated to the goals of higher education, and that they are motivated to teach a challenging student body. Let them do it!

2. Bureaucratization: one-size-fits-all rules dominate teaching

Centralization has led to heavily bureaucratized procedures, adding to workload and needlessly reducing the autonomy of professionals.

Output-rationality has produced an almost Kafkaesque bureaucracy. Administration has become an ever bigger part of teachers' tasks: preparing course descriptions up to a full year before one actually teaches the course; preparing, organizing and reacting to standardized evaluations; putting grades and other data in several computer systems; filing exams; and adjusting teaching and assignments to ever-changing formal requirements (instead of for didactic considerations).

To comply with accountability imperatives and to monitor the quality of teaching, cumbersome procedures and applications are implemented and 'innovated' university-wide each year. Many of these systems⁶ are introduced, before they actually work. More importantly, the systems try to implement uniform solutions for complex issues, but are never attuned to individual departments or programs. Often they are inefficient because they tend to favor a managerial perspective and are geared towards the creation of comparable output metrics, more than to the educational purpose that once was the reason for implementing them. UvA Q, the new system for evaluating courses, was expressly introduced to make courses comparable across different departments and faculties. Neither teacher nor students, the boards of studies (OCs) nor program teams see any advantages in this system that would improve the quality of courses.

⁴ "We now live in age in which discussions about education are dominated by measurement and comparisons of educational outcomes and that these measurements as such seem to direct much of educational policy and, through this, also much of educational practice. The danger here is that we end up valuing what is measured, rather than that we engage in measurement of what we value." (Biesta, Gert. "Good Education in an Age of Measurement: On the Need to Reconnect with the Question of Purpose in Education." *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* (formerly: *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*) 21.1 (2009): 33-46, 42)

⁵ Pink, Daniel H. *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. London: Penguin, 2011.

⁶ For example, UvA Q for evaluations, Pontifex/Datanose for grading, SIS for student administration.

Rather than actually improving quality and helping staff to meet accountability requirements, such systems have become an additional burden. The specialists employed to manage the systems have formed a bureaucratic layer that prescribes processes far more complex than would seem required to solve the original problem. Often, the administration identifies a local problem and aims to tackle this problem by rolling out a cumbersome administrative measure to the entire university – even if most departments didn't have a problem in the first place. This creates an atmosphere in which more local units – programs or even individual teachers – react with formalization and rules, even if it was not immediately required. The increased formalization gives teachers the feeling that they are no longer trusted.

3. Work (over)load and the arbitrary calculation of hours

The expansion of student numbers, the extension of the semester and administrative obligations that are not compensated by a higher budget but lead to unpaid overwork.

For 20 years now, the Dutch government was eager to expand the student population, yet it did not compensate for increased numbers by providing larger budgets for the universities. On the contrary; the budget even shrank and an ever-increasing part is now spent on non-teaching jobs, on management tasks. As an unavoidable consequence, the workload of academic staff increased and has become unbearable, unworkable, over the past years. At the same time, the government has increased the number of obligatory contact hours, and the UvA extended the length of the overall teaching period with the introduction of the 8-8-4 semester structure. Internationally, Universities teach from 28 to 32 weeks per year; at the UvA it adds up to 40 weeks. Neither students nor teachers are granted any room to breathe - independent reading and writing, experimenting and curiosity are fenced into much too narrow time windows. As should be clear from the examples above, teaching has also become overburdened with 'invisible' requirements: adding to the administrative tasks already outlined, teachers are forced to increase the number of assignments, to increase the amount of contact hours, and to teach bigger groups; teachers are under pressure to participate in teacher 'professionalization' (BKO) and to devise constant re-organizations of entire programs and departments. Additionally, the bureaucratic labyrinth provokes ever more questions and emails from bewildered students and colleagues.

Most faculties apply a system of 'norm hours' that are used to determine how many hours a staff member gets for teaching a work group, coordinating a lecture series or supervising a thesis. While this could be a means to support a fair distribution of workload, it has since long become an arbitrary tool for assigning tasks without any realistic grounding. For example: the hours one gets for a task (e.g. supervising a master's thesis) have been reduced at many departments without the related obligations becoming any less. Next to that, the workload is constantly increased – e.g. through new requirements/tasks, but also through increasing the size of work groups – without any additional compensation.⁷ The perverse alignment of this system becomes perfectly clear when departments actually stopped giving people full time teaching positions: everyone knows, and realizes, that more than 0.7 fte would not fit in a work week.⁸

⁷ Research shows that "academics and teachers were more likely than any other occupational group to do unpaid overtime". (Bal, Ellen, Erella Grassiani, and Kate Kirk. "Neoliberal Individualism in Dutch Universities: Teaching and Learning Anthropology in an Insecure Environment." *Learning and Teaching* 7.3 (2014): 46–72, 53)

⁸ Additionally, an exemplary calculation of the worker's council of the Faculty of Humanities based on the new norm hours for 2015/16 showed that it would be impossible to teach the courses one needed to teach to fulfill a full-time teaching contract.

4. Lack of teaching-research balance

Teaching overload takes away all the research time; in order to do research you have to buy yourself out of teaching. With such a divorce between teaching and research, the university loses its strongest point.

The severe problems outlined above are exacerbated through the increasing gap between the two major components of all academic jobs: research and teaching. Since 2006, the UvA is a member of the League of European Research Universities (LERU) – a network of 22 research-oriented European universities that advocates the importance of fundamental research in Europe.⁹ This should imply that research is continuously translated into teaching and that teaching is based on the latest research. Instead, more and more jobs at the UvA, especially temporary contracts, don't include paid research time. Since teaching has become less attractive, and is experienced as less rewarding for one's career than research, there are more than enough good reasons for successful researchers to buy themselves out of it. This is supported by the re-allocation of research budgets from faculties / universities to external, project-oriented funding. In order to carry out research, academic staff is increasingly dependent on external financial sources (NWO, EU, etc.). Because there is not enough money to finance everybody, it all leads to a time-consuming rat race. Those who obtain external grants use part of that money to buy themselves out of teaching. This means they have more time to do research, which increases their amount of publications and this, in its turn, improves their chances for obtaining new grants. Those who do not succeed in obtaining external grants shoulder all the unpleasant and increasingly burdensome teaching and administrative tasks, and have even less time for research. Taken together, this leads to a growing divide amongst university staff, which leads to an impoverishment of university education. (see also the position paper on research)

Solutions

- The UvA and its faculties must doggedly defend the academic character of university programs against all efforts to constrain critical, innovative and creative thinking through bureaucratization and selective quantification.
- The organization of teaching and examination, the evaluation of courses has to be determined on the level of faculties, programs and their boards of studies (see also ReThinks position paper on democratization); evaluation through peers has been proven as a sufficient means of safeguarding quality. Departments and programs need to get more responsibilities for the content, the forms, and the organization of teaching. The UvA must stop rolling out cumbersome administrative procedures to all departments and programs as long as their advantage *for the programs* (and not for the managerial oversight) is not evident.
- We urge all departments and programs, all teachers and program directors to critically reflect on the usefulness of administrative procedures. In close conversation with the administrative staff, we will take the liberty to not contribute to self-surveillance and the quantification of teaching, if we don't see how this improves teaching and the student-teacher relationship.
- Government and universities must stop implementing a constant flow of new measures aimed at increasing the efficiency of teaching and intensifying the control of students and teachers. Particularly the cost-efficiency ratio of all measures needs to be compared to the possible alternative of putting the same

⁹ "De UvA is sinds 2006 lid van LERU, een netwerk van 22 onderzoeksintensieve Europese universiteiten dat pleit voor het belang van fundamenteel onderzoek in Europa".

money in basic teaching tasks: e.g. smaller groups of students, more preparation time for teacher etc.

- The length of the semester and the number of contact hours need to be reconsidered: there is no convincing proof that their extensions eventually help student to study in a more fruitful and motivated manner. The contrary has in fact been our experience. Different programs and faculties have to be granted the possibility to adapt the academic calendar to their needs, without constraining obligations. If and when longer semesters and more contact hours are considered necessary, the programs and teachers have to be compensated for the additional work.
- As a research university, the UvA must support the close interconnections between teaching and research, and stop the hardening of the two-tier system: every academic teacher needs to be endowed with a minimum amount of research time and every academic researcher should spend at least part of his time to teaching. All researchers and especially PhD students need to get the possibility to represent their research in appropriate courses in the BA and MA curriculum. Reward teaching by granting research time. Acknowledge that teaching is our primary form of 'valorization'.
- If the Netherlands aims to be a 'knowledge economy' and also aims at a high percentage of students entering academic education, the universities need more direct money (eerste geldstroom) to fulfill their basic teaching tasks. It is outrageous that national policy burdens the universities with more and more obligations (e.g. to offer at least 12 contact hours in the first year), without offering additional resources. It cannot be that the only way an academic can cope with the new specifications, is to work extra hours without getting paid.
- The UvA must stop covering up for this paradox by cheating with the calculation of hours: if a system of norm hours is used, it has to be based on the actual hours needed for a task and not be fitted to the managerial endeavor to fulfill all obligations with the available staff.
- We need to start a broad discussion on the objectives, contents and forms of academic teaching. To give this discussion, and its possible outcomes, a real and realistic chance, the points listed here need to be considered as basic requirements.

2) Position Paper on Research

The valorization of research through teaching is a unique and unifying principle of academic communities historically and worldwide. It also forms the bedrock of the UvA's most recent collaboration, the League of European Research Universities (LERU). The combination sets academic communities apart, on the one hand, from organizations solely dedicated to research and, on the other, from those focused entirely on pedagogy. A separation between research and teaching is both historically and ideologically anti-academic, and yet this is precisely what many of us are facing on a daily basis.

A second and related concern is that possibilities for independent research in many fields are disproportionately subordinated to economic and political interests and are financed and evaluated on the basis of either vague and/or narrow criteria, outside the scope of actual research practices. Jointly these processes impact our work environment negatively.

Problems

Work contracts increasingly institutionalize the division of labor between those who carry out research and those who shoulder the growing burden of teaching (see also Position Paper on Teaching). Disproportionate teaching loads force academic staff to apply for external funding in order to free up the time they need to actually conduct research. If successful, applications are rewarded with teaching dispensation, made possible by (temporary) staff on teaching-only contracts. Both groups thus get caught in self-perpetuating cycles: grant winners are in better positions to acquire more research funding; temporary teaching staff in contrast do not gain the research experience needed to acquire either structural research time or external funding. This way, the teaching/research division gives rise to career-determining trajectories, often early on in people's careers. Moreover, the division is not construed as egalitarian but rather as hierarchical, with research – thanks to its often external funding source – being depicted as more valuable to the academic community than teaching. This destructive dynamic perpetuates closed-ended and unsustainable career paths; segments groups, departments and faculties into separate entities; forms barriers to fruitful exchanges between research and teaching; and undermines collegiality.

As for research itself, another troubling development is the subordination of open and genuine curiosity to national- and university research agendas ("profiles") on the one hand, and to one-size-fits-all frameworks and competitions on the other. An increasing role of quantitative evaluation of "research output" (which ignores the classroom, of course) also results in the de facto outsourcing of career management by the university to national research institutes and/or (often private) publishers and their self-promoting citation indexes. This is a powerful example of how managerialism and relying on free-market-style competitions actually undermines the academic freedom that is so vital to countering methodologically flawed paradigms, and by the same token, the integrity of academic research.

Solutions

The UvA must strive, at all levels, to foster synergy between teaching and research, and offer all academic staff members real choices in how to develop their skills and career paths in a way that promotes precisely this balance. In doing so, it needs to act on several levels at the same time.

At the national level, it must:

- lobby for a massive increase in direct research funding to Dutch universities (eerste geldstroom), in addition to the resources that are distributed centrally and on the basis of individual competition (e.g. NWO's Veni, Vidi, Vici programs). In particular, it should demand that universities can resume the funding of PhD projects designed by candidates, rather than (increasingly and even exclusively) by senior researchers running large, externally funded projects;
- insist that remaining national competitions over research money should not be dictated by short-term economic and political interests (as consolidated by the government's topsectorenbeleid) and that decisions on what qualifies as valuable research should not be determined centrally (for instance, through a "national research agenda") but reflect the diversity of disciplines, specializations and interests practiced/pursued by national and local research groups; that national funding schemes become more flexible, both in terms of eligibility (with factors other than seniority/time since PhD determining what one can apply for) and size (the current distribution of funds favoring a "winner takes all" outcome, misaligning with researcher's wishes and perpetuating the division between teaching and research); that external funding bodies protect the limited research time of those applying for, and reviewing, applications by simplifying their procedures and making them more transparent.

At the local level, it should:

- guarantee a multi-level division of research money over diverse layers of the organization, with a substantial amount of money going to the most basic organizational units and individual scholars, ensuring that all academic staff have a minimum of paid research time in which they have full academic freedom;
- trust the ability and will of research groups (broadly defined) to identify public goods and social benefits that relate to their core interests, rather than to identify valorization at the individual level, in terms of immediate output, or as fulfilling a centrally defined agenda;
- return power over decision-making and research supervision and evaluation, from highly centralized entities subordinated to politically- and economically-biased priority areas, to the work environment itself: research groups, departments, research schools, etc.; allow those to develop their own tools for research assessment, quantitative and/or qualitative, based on what works best in a particular discipline, field or organizational entity, and to decide how to create and promote stimulating research environments;
- stimulate the publication of ('green') open access journals run by academics, allowing the latter to determine how to assess the quality of publications and enabling them to publish swiftly and disseminate findings collegially and without burdening already depleted library budgets;
- decouple academic status (UD, UHD, etc.) from the distribution of tasks between research, teaching and administration (including roles dictated by the *ius promovendi*) in order to create a more egalitarian and pluralistic work environment. Once academic status reflects the quality of one's work – in teaching, research and administration – rather than to define one's tasks or income, promotions will cease to be directly linked to the availability of funds.