Position paper

Advisory report Van Rijn Committee puts future-proof higher education under pressure

At the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) we attach great importance to the societal impact of our education and research. Personal training and social involvement are central to our institute. The VU is a broad university that attaches equal importance to all its disciplines and sees added value in an equal cooperation between those disciplines. The advisory report of the Van Rijn Committee is a first step towards a better funding system and has good points: a larger part of the government subsidy will become fixed and less variable; in addition, more money will be distributed to the universities directly from the first flow of funds. However, the integrated advice - as Van Rijn has emphasised to adopt - puts future-proof higher education under pressure. Broad universities will find themselves in an impossible balancing act - in which every choice leads to a systematic decline. The VU advocates the following points.

1) an interdisciplinary view of science, based on the independent interests of each discipline
2) not to further exacerbate the historical inequalities between universities
3) deferring impactful decisions until the proposed funding study is carried out

1) Maintain an interdisciplinary view of science, based on the independent interest of each discipline.

- Although more and more multidisciplinary research is being carried out within higher education, the advisory report takes a monodisciplinary view of science as its starting point. The VU certainly welcomes additional funding for science and technology, but not at the expense of other disciplines; this is only a shift in the bottlenecks.

- Multidisciplinarity is a core value of our broad campus university (with a large bèta domain and ~7000 students) because it is precisely through multidisciplinary research and education that we can address socially relevant issues. Following the advice of the Van Rijn commission within a broad university such as the VU increases the existing gap between alpha and gamma disciplines on the one hand and the bèta disciplines on the other, both with regard to the possibilities in the field of research, as well as in the field of education. A lack of a level playing field hampers the much-desired cooperation to advance science and society. The cooperation we are building with the University of Twente also aims to address social problems and becomes more difficult when there is no level playing field.

- According to any study, Van Rijn's choice is also not the right one for the labour market. There is also more demand than supply for graduates in disciplines such as data and AI, econometrics, medicine, dentistry and combined disciplines.
2) Do not further exacerbate the (historical) inequalities between universities

- The commission appears to be making a **methodological error** in the proposed way of implementing the recommendation, which runs counter to the commission's objective of achieving a better balance between variable and fixed funding. Earlier, it was suggested that the commission would also advise on the historical inequalities between universities in the form of fixed basic rates. The VU now observes that the method of transfer from variable to fixed has a **counterproductive effect**, because the method used exacerbates the imbalance between universities with low and high fixed basic rates. The fact is that the funds transferred end up in universities with a high fixed basic rate at the expense of universities with a relatively low fixed basic rate. The latter see their variable funding shrink and are not (sufficiently) compensated for this by the adjustment of their fixed basic rate. This is independent of the shift from resources to bèta technology and switchers. Universities with a low fixed basic rate seem to be cut disproportionately. We say "seem to be" because, despite requests to do so, data and methods are not released.

- We can clarify the methodical error on the basis of the following fictitious calculation example:

There are two universities: A and B. The total budget for the two universities is €200, each gets half. On average, 50% of this is allocated to universities on a fixed basis and 50% to universities on a variable basis. However, the universities differ: University A has €80 fixed and €20 variable and in the case of University B this is the other way around.

The government wants more fixed and less variable and decides to transfer €40 from variable to fixed. The average distribution fixed vs. variable therefore changes from 50/50 to 70/30. How does this work out for universities A and B?

The total fixed budget is now €140, the total variable budget €60

University A gets 80% of €140 and 20% of €60= 112 + 12 = €124

University B gets 20% of €140 and 80% of €60= 28+48= €76.

*NB: in practice, it is the universities of technology that have a high fixed basic rate. In this calculation example, they therefore fall under category 'A'.* 

- The effect of the proposals to ensure **access to university education** (external switch measures) is completely lost due to the redistributive effects resulting from the proposed model changes. On balance, no additional funds will be available for this purpose and we are disappointed about this, because we want to continue to make a case for accessibility.

3) Postpone impactful decisions until the proposed funding study is carried out

- For the vast majority of universities, the full implementation of their advice leads to a **significant increase in the number of internal redistributions** with negative consequences such as dismissals, more temporary contracts and an increase in the workload experience.
- It is estimated that in 2020 and 2021 we will have to ‘transfer’ around 50 people, and in 2022 we will even have to ‘transfer’ around 50 people. This leads to major and costly **reorganisations** while we would be doing this for the short term pending a funding study to gain a better understanding of the real costs. Because we do not have access to the underlying data, this is only an estimate.
The VU finds upcoming internal shifts with major effects, waiting for a funding study, an extremely irresponsible and premature choice that is based on short-term ambitions. **The VU will therefore not carry out the redistribution envisaged by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in 2020 with regard to** the internal distribution of resources among faculties. For the later years up to the year in which funding research forms the basis, we do not yet know how to get out of this impossible balancing act. It's a diabolical dilemma.

### Effects of redistribution government contribution to the VU

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<th>2020</th>
<th>2021</th>
<th>2022 and onwards</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Net effect FTE WP alpha/gamma</td>
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<td>-23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Net effect FTE WP medical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total shrinkage FTE WP alpha/gamma and medical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Net effect FTE WP beta/technical</td>
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