University Student Council
Policy Plan 2018 - 2019
English Summary
Preface

In front of you lays the policy plan of the University Student Council (USR) of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) for the upcoming academic year. This year the USR consists of eleven council members who will serve the interests of all students at the VU together. This policy plan aims to give an idea of how we will operate during the academic year.

We wish you a pleasant reading.

Signed:

Päivi Reckman
Joey Versteeg
Vincent Wesdorp
Sumeyye Dalkiran
Selma Boulmalf
Cécile Baartman
Merel Crezee
Rida Hamdi
Pim Kelders
Rosanne Molendijk
Kata Rakić
Introduction

The educational system experiences constant change. It is important that our university anticipates the developments that may occur within this system, within politics and within our society. This requires the university to be adaptable, which brings different complications and difficulties along. The student council primarily focuses on representing the interests and needs of the students, and, using this point of view, to consider and discuss the aforementioned developments and changes. This year, for the first time, the council consists of students who were chosen through a new electoral system, which grants every faculty a seat. All of us are passionate about improving the functioning and well-being of the university.

This policy plan describes the goals the USR has in mind and aims to grant insight regarding the subjects the student council will put effort in. Next year a variety of themes will ask the student council’s attention. A few examples for this are student welfare, sport and culture, diversity, internationalisation and the quality agreements. Furthermore, the VU should be a place where personal development is encouraged, a place where national and international students are given the opportunity to meet and a place that students are proud of and feel at home at. We hope to create a sustainable academic environment, where social involvement and awareness is shown and personal development is stimulated.

The USR operates through three committees: Education and Research (O&O), Organisation and Finance (O&F) and Communication. All three of them make use of several different portfolios, they focus on the quality of our education and the personal development of students. In this report you will consecutively find the committees together with a description of the important subjects. Every subject will contain a short introduction and will be concluded with their corresponding points of action. At the end of this publication you shall find an overview of all the council members with their contact information.

We shall do our best to make sure students are represented adequately and that the VU becomes an even better place.
Education and Research

The committee on Education and Research (O&O) will work on several different topics such as internationalisation, student well-being, quality of education and the personal development of students.

The main focus of the committee is to monitor the quality of education. However, the university is also a source of scientific research. The committee values the link between education and research. In the last few years the number of international students has increased and the studies and facilities have been adjusted to it. However, it is important to have a critical look at the implementation of this internationalisation.

Another point that will, again, be taken into account this year is the well-being of students. Due to the growing number of students the workload of the teachers has increased. In order to be able to help these students, it is very important that the proper support is provided. The last topic of the committee is the possibility for personal development within the courses of your studies and outside of it.

Student well-being
The financial and social pressure on students has increased over the last few years. Due to the increased pressure students need support, now more than ever. The stress that these students experience can lead to mental and/or physical pressure. In some cases even a burn-out. Furthermore, an increasing number of students feels lonely throughout their study. It is important that students and employees alike are aware of this problem. The USR wants to use multiple approaches to tackle this problem. One way of doing this is to get the play Time-Out to the VU, this play focuses on increasing the awareness on this topic. Furthermore, it is important for students to know where they can go when they are in need of support. This is not always clear for students.

Action points

- Create awareness for the increasing problems regarding student well-being.
- Improve the visibility of student counselling: students need to be able to easily and clearly see where to go with a problem they are experiencing.
Internationalisation
The number of international students at the VU is increasing every year. This group of students face several challenges, for example coming into contact with Dutch students, learning the Dutch language or being able to find a place to live. The VU can assist these students and explore what they can do for these students. We think it is of great importance that the international students feel at home at the VU and find a connection with the Dutch society.

Dutch students benefit from a good preparation for the increasing globalisation, however internationalisation might not always be the right answer. English is becoming increasingly prevalent on the VU, and this is easier for some than for others. This can lead to a decrease in quality of education. Besides the internationalisation goals of the VU, the consequences of internationalisation need to be considered also. A plan and a vision need to be developed to answer and solve all questions regarding internationalisation.

Action points

- Investigate how the VU can support and facilitate international students.
- Make it possible to follow an English course within the curriculum.
- Support teachers, who teach courses in English, to improve their language skills.

Selection and accessibility
Certain bachelors have a numerus fixus. This means that students are selected by decentralised selection. It is not clear whether the selection criteria test the desired competencies. Equal opportunities must always be guaranteed. That is why decentralised selection requires a critical view: are they indispensable, even if you take certain disadvantages into account?

Sometimes a premaster or a minor is the only requirement for a master. This is great for the accessibility of the master, however it can lead to differences in level. We want to investigate whether these level differences lead to a reduced quality of the masters and whether the premaster system is working optimally.

The USR has some notes and comments on the master selection. The required documents that must be handed in should be the same for all students. A motivation letter or reference should be handed in, also if the grades are sufficient for direct admission. We want to find out whether the master selection is a necessity.
Action points

- Take a close look at the bachelor and master selection process, whether it’s necessary and whether it grants everyone the same chances.
- Investigate if the premaster system is working well.

Self-development

We, as the USR, believe it is very important that students have the possibility to spend time on personal development. A few examples to develop yourself outside of your curriculum are to be active at associations and councils, working on the side, doing charity work and participating in sport and/or cultural events. The USR will mainly focus on stimulating and facilitating personal development of students within their education.

Firstly, making exams outside of your study is an administrative hassle. This process should be easier. Secondly, talented students can further develop themselves by taking part in the honours programme. The USR believes that steps can be taken to further improve this programme by stimulating interdepartmental collaboration and improving the information provision.

Action points

- Simplify the administrative process to take an exam at another study or faculty.
- Stimulate the collaboration within faculties and improve the information provision regarding the honours programme.
Organisation and Finance

The committee on Organisation and Finances (O&F) is predominantly working to ensure the preconditions of education and research are met. The yearly estimate falls within this commission, the USR has a right of consent for the yearly estimate. The committee will look into what the USR can do to help facilitate the faculty councils and education committees. The committee will look at the information provision towards the students and wants to find out how we can improve this information provision to make it as clear and useful as possible. Sustainability, a green campus and the interior of the new VU building are a few of the topics we will be working on this year. One major topic this year will be the Quality Agreements.

Your money: investments in education
This will be an important year for the student council because of the quality agreements and the advanced payments. Since the reform of the student financing system in 2018 a new flow of money became available. This flow, the so called advanced payments, should be spend on retaining and improving the quality of higher education. Because there were no clear agreements on what to spend this new flow of money on, a new sector accord was closed in April 2018. The investment of the advance payments are distributed through the so called quality agreements. You can read a short summary of the different themes of the quality agreements down below.

Quality agreements
There are a number of themes on which the advanced payments can be spent on by a university: Intensity of education: education that is more intense and on a smaller scale; Differentiation of education: Developing talent within and also outside your education; Quality of lecturers: professionalising lecturers; Fitting and good education facilities; More and better student support; Educational success, for example the possibility to continue with higher education, accessibility and equal opportunities.

Now that there is a clear framework for the advanced payments, it is up to the different participation councils to connect the different themes with education given on the VU. With the help of students, student associations, education committees and faculty student councils, but also by talking to deans and offices, the university student council will function as a gatekeeper to ensure the money will end up where it is most needed.

Action points

Inventory, through the use of students, where the money, deriving from the quality agreements, is best used and most needed.
Online information

The provision of information is one of the most important and largest facilities of the VU. A good supply of information will contribute to the educational quality and student support. In the current situation students often do not know where they can find certain information. Not being able to find facilities at the VU has the consequence that for example, study spots cannot be used in an optimal way. As the university student council, we think this is a waste and would like to improve this. As we speak, the online landscape of the VU is being changed through the project Future Online Landscape (TOLL). The university student council will monitor this process thoroughly and examine if the implemented changes will have the desired effect.

Action points

- Online information provision
  - To stay informed on the new VU website (TOLL) and investigating where the online provision of information can further improve.
  - Obtain an overview of the available study rooms and study spots.

Profiling fund

If a student experiences study delay, for example because of a handicap, chronic illness or by being in a board, there is a possibility to invoke the profiling fund. The VU will offer a financial compensation because the VU values supporting students in different situations. The processing time of a request to invoke the profiling fund is between ten and fifteen weeks. We think this is too long. Furthermore, the profiling fund is budgeted at one million euros every year. According to the annual report of 2017 the VU surpassed this budget of one million. Until now all students that had requested to invoke the profiling fund were provided with money from the fund. However, the numbers in the annual report show that the profiling fund needs to be expanded.

- To shorten the processing time of the application for the profiling fund.
- To expand the profiling fund, so that the students who are entitled to the profiling fund will not be turned down in the future due to a shortage of money.

Campus development

The VU has a big campus area. This opens up a lot of possibilities that are not being used optimally at this moment. As the university student council we are involved in the redesign of the campus. This has to become a place where students are not only enabled to develop themselves academically, but also socially outside their educational engagements. To create a lively campus you need to feel safe, be able to study and be able to unload yourself by having access to culture and sports.
There are a lot of study spots, but still for a lot of students it remains hard to find a place where they can study comfortably. We are happy that the VU is already looking into ways to enable more efficient usage of study spots and furthermore to make them more easily findable. However, the study spots also have to meet the requirements of this day and age. That means that a lot of spots have to be renovated. The focus should be on enough power sockets, comfortable furniture and inspiring surroundings. The latter can be achieved through the use of art and plants. Furthermore the campus has to be ready for the future and that means it has to be sustainable. This can be achieved by implementing alternatives for polluting materials, waste separation, more durable food and a lower and eventually CO2 neutral footprint. Despite the great efforts the VU is already making, for example in their the master plan for energy, we think it is not enough. Where sustainability is possible it should be the norm.

- A safer campus square by marking the cycle paths better and having more visible cycle paths.
- Study spots that meet the current demands about study spots.
- An integral sustainability agreement to prepare the VU for the future
Communication

The committee on communication is mostly involved with the ties of the council and the students. The committee tries to maintain and improve transparency towards the students, through the use of her portfolio Public Relation. But she also focuses on the needs and requirements of students by providing platforms, which grants a possibility for the students to give their input. The committee does this in a variety of ways; the portfolio on Internal Relations, for example, focuses on existing councils and associations, but the portfolio on Culture on the other hand, uses the means of art and diversity. Another platform is the Student Forum, on which the committee will work hard to ensure that it will realise its potential to become its own entity on the campus. Yet another platform is the Student Initiative Award, which encourages students to actualise their dreams. All in all, the committee on communication is a lively committee which tries to look after the interest of the students of the VU.

Bonding

The diversity that is to be found at this university is a characteristic quality of the VU. We celebrate our differences at the VU but do not unite them enough. As the USR, we want to focus on linking and uniting our differences through cultural, academic, interdisciplinary and social aspects. We want to make sure that the different ‘islands’ at the VU come in contact with each other and learn from each other.

There are various ways to bring this ideal to life. An example is stimulating different associations to work together and organise events, similar to the event ‘Bridging Success’ which took place during the last academic year (2017/2018). Furthermore we strive to maintain our constructive contact with the faculty councils of the VU. The USR values her partners within the faculty councils very much, because this cooperation makes sure that we can represent the students at the VU the best way possible.

We also see opportunities to unite through dialogue, art and sports at the VU. All three of them contain the power to connect, link and unite people with different perspectives, interests and backgrounds. Through dialogue the exchange of views and ideas is encouraged. By organising various art-related events, such as expositions, awareness regarding different themes can and will be stimulated. Lastly, the USR wants sports to play a more prominent role at the university. A key strength of sports is that it creates, and gives a platform for, interaction between different people. These are some of the reasons why we want to work on, and with, dialogue, arts and sports and thus give them the platform that encourages, stimulates and advocates union.
Action points

- Strengthening the bond of the university and faculty student councils through meetings and trainings.

- Stimulating the exchange of cultures and diversity by encouraging different parties (i.e. associations, councils etc.) to work together on projects and events.

- Organising dialogue-, art- and sport-related events to stimulate awareness and interaction between different groups within the VU.

Involvement
The USR wants to increase the involvement of students at the VU, and everything surrounding it. That is why we want to ask students for their input regarding VU related affairs through coffee mornings. Furthermore, the Studentforum, a place where students can join the discussion regarding the future of the VU and her campus, will be realised as an independent organ. Adding to that, we will also present the Studentninitiative prize next January (2019). With this prize, we want to make sure student initiatives are recognized and appreciated. The VU is located in a lively and dynamic city, and we should make use of that. The environment around the VU has a lot to offer regarding social and cultural affairs, however, the participation of the VU and her students at these kind of events is not optimal in our opinion. This is one of the reasons we want to focus on the involvement of the students, including their involvement in the world outside of the university. The USR wants to encourage students to play an active role in our society, both on a local as a global level. Lastly, we want to have close ties with and be involved with the Interstedelijk Studenten Overleg (Interurban Student Consultation, ISO) and the Landelijk Overleg Fracties (National Consultation Fractions, LOF). By being involved with these parties, we can bring national knowledge to our local university. This also applies to our European involvement through the Aurora network.

Action points

- Strengthening our bonds with other student councils throughout the country.

- Gathering input provided by students through the use of “Coffee Mornings” and the Student Forum.

- Encouraging students to realise or broaden their initiatives through the use of the Student Initiative Award.
Visibility
The USR represents all the students at the VU. That is why it is crucial for us to be clearly visible for and have strict ties with our constituency. Through the extensive use of social media, we want to inform the students of what keeps us busy and what we are working on. Another way to realise this is by creating a council portal on the website, where we can share important and relevant documents such as our notes, advice, and agreements. With this, we want to better the transparency between the USR and the students at the VU.

Action points

- Keep students up to date by the intensive use of social media platforms, like Facebook and Instagram.
- Improving visibility and transparency by creating a council portal on the website, which immediately gives you information regarding the various student councils.
- Increasing accessibility regarding relevant documents and files by improving the search function on the website and creating explanatory videos.
Epilogue

We, as the USR, look forward to actualise the aforementioned plans. Though not everything has been mentioned in this policy plan and its points of action. During the coming academic year new themes will arise and it will undoubtedly turn out that we that we have overlooked certain topics. To represent of our fellow students, it is necessary that we are up to date about current affairs. That is why we need the input of the faculty student councils, education committees, study associations, student associations and individual students.

We are the 20th student council of the VU. This long standing tradition has resulted in plenty of experience and knowledge, which we build on as a council. The foundation has been laid by our predecessors, who have worked hard every day for the past year; that is something to be proud of. We want to end the epilogue by showing our gratitude for all the previous councillors, especially to the councillors who prepared us for our year in the council: thank you to Marc Lamain, Liz ten Bergen, Koen Voors, Yassine Daia, Iris van Essen, Koen van Dijk and Margriet ten Broecke. We will follow in your footsteps and we will continue your work.
Council Members
University Student Council ’18-’19

Päivi Reckman
Chairwoman
p.reckman@studentenraadvu.nl

Joey Versteeg
Vice President
j.versteeg@studentenraadvu.nl

Vincent Wesdorp
Coordinator Education and Research
v.wesdorp@studentenraadvu.nl

Sumeyye Dalkiran
Coordinator Organisation and Finance
s.dalkiran@studentenraadvu.nl

Selma Boulmalf
Coordinator Communication
s.boulmalf@studentenraadvu.nl
Cécile Baartman
Treasurer
c.baartman@studentenraadvu.nl

Merel Crezee
General Councilor
m.crezee@studentenraadvu.nl

Rida Hamdi
General Councilor
r.hamdi@studentenraadvu.nl

Pim Kelders
General Councilor
p.kelders@studentenraadvu.nl

Rosanne Molendijk
General Counciler
r.molendijk@studentenraadvu.nl

Kata Rakić
General Counciler
k.rakic@studentenraadvu.nl
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Contact Details</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Room</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HG-0D12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Address</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Boelelaan 1105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1081 HV Amsterdam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Email</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="mailto:usr@vu.nl">usr@vu.nl</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phone</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+31 20 5989414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Website</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>studentenraadvu.nl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facebook</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>facebook.nl/studentenraadvu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instagram</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@usrvu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>