VOICES OF AUC 2019

REPORT

JULY 2019

Liberal Arts & Sciences
Beyond the Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Voices of AUC is a yearly recurring round-table discussion platform that invites all stakeholders in Amsterdam University College (AUC) to articulate their views about pertinent topics and issues relating to the institution. During the event, students, lecturers, faculty, staff members, management, alumni, and partners affiliated with AUC are all encouraged to exchange thoughts about opportunities and challenges for the socio-academic community that AUC fosters. The event is hosted by a core team of students, under the auspices of the AUC Student Council and in close consultation with the AUC (extended) Management Team, who aim to create an inclusive environment where attendees can engage with relevant questions and themes on an equal footing, in order to identify areas for improvement and contribute new ideas through thoughtful reflection.

The concept of Voices of AUC is grounded upon the participatory leadership paradigm, which posits that every member of the community should be involved in setting the course of the institution that they are part of. This report, which captures the most important points that were discussed during the event, champions participatory leadership, in that the report informs the policy agenda for the next academic year. The Student Council, as well as the Management Team, will integrate the feasible policy suggestions that emanated from the Voices discussions in their year plans. Hence, the input from the attendees indirectly yet surely bears fruit on an institutional level.

THIS YEARS' THEMES

The overarching theme for the fifth edition of Voices of AUC, prepared by the organizing team behind the event, was "LAS: Beyond the Classroom." This overarching theme was subdivided into three focused themes: (1) social responsibility of AUC, (2) experiential learning, and (3) wellbeing of the AUC community. The first theme addressed the role of an educational institution like AUC as a hub of knowledge that should facilitate respectful yet critical discourse on societal developments.

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The second theme explored the burgeoning dimension of AUC's curriculum that allows students to gain hands-on experience anchored in real-world contexts through internships, community projects, undergraduate research projects, excursions, etc. The third and last theme treated the way in which health, wellbeing, and excellence correlate.

Reflection on the proposed questions should not cease after reading this report. On the contrary, the reader is invited to keep thinking about the topics and issues that this report touches upon, in order to sustain continuous deliberation about these and other discussion themes on all layers of our institution.

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THEME 1

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF AUC

Taking responsibility and active engagement in our community, are core values of the Liberal Arts and Sciences program. In order to encourage student awareness of their surrounding environment and world-events, universities should foster an environment of curiosity and provide opportunities to engage with the events that occur outside of AUC. Fulfilling a community project or internship is not just necessary to fulfill one's graduation requirements, but also an innovative manner of ensuring student engagement outside the classroom. With regard to the first discussion theme of Voices 2019, i.e., "Social Responsibility of AUC", participants were invited to think about how students and staff could further develop and expand already existing platforms for respectful yet critical discussions with regards to societal issues.

The main topic of the social responsibility discussion was climate change. Both the students and teachers demonstrated concerns regarding the importance of this global challenge and additionally expressed their will to include climate change more in the curriculum. One idea was to put more emphasis on the problem in the Global Identity Experience, a mandatory first-year intensive course, in order to educate everyone about the implications of this global issue.

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The role of the lecturers was discussed in relation to how they could guide and challenge students in class discussions. They have a significant responsibility and some also mentioned that professors have the obligation to challenge students in order to make them think about and sometimes even reconsider their existing views. Moreover, it was discussed how AUC should deal with releasing statements in public, on political issues. On the one hand, it is believed that it is crucial to take a stance on certain issues by making a public statement. On the other hand, hosting open discussion events were seen as more effective and forward-thinking.

Proposals arising from the discussions are as follows:
- Include the issue of climate change in the Global Identity Experience course or alternatively try to find a place for it in the Big Questions courses.
- Have more discussions on controversial, societal topics involving both students and staff in order to gain a deeper understanding of complex social processes and to be exposed to differing, potentially opposing views.
- Seek opportunities to further reduce the carbon footprint of not just the academic building but also the student by, for example, looking into the possibility of having a special offer from Flixbus for AUC students and staff to avoid travelling by plane when possible.
- More active engagement between students and lecturers to create a better working relationship and to create an environment in class where everyone feels safe to freely express his or her opinion.

THEME 2

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is commonly thought of as learning by doing and is an integral part of the philosophy behind our curriculum. Students are encouraged to complete internships, commit to community projects and take lab courses. While doing so, a key element is to also reflect on what has been done - students do this by writing follow-up reports. Because we have built in several experiential components in our curriculum, we need to continuously rethink and tweak our conception of experiential learning. This sets the ground for the second theme of Voices 2019: Experiential Learning at AUC.

While some courses, curriculum aspects and social life opportunities might fulfill our expectations of experiential learning, there is room for improvement. For this reason, staff, students and lecturers conversed about the actual, the ideal, and the potential experiential learning elements that are and can be embedded within our curriculum. What stands out from these discussions is that there is no clear definition set out in the Academic Standards & Procedures, meaning that, on an institutional level, there is no set guideline as to what qualifies as "experiential learning". Hence, it was suggested to define experiential learning and its scope.

Some success stories include class excursions, team projects and (AUCSA) committee involvement. Through hands-on experiences in collaboration with theories discussed in class students are able to put their knowledge to the test and develop their hard and soft skills. These are desired by Master programs and employers and should thus be encouraged at AUC.

Additionally, a variety of proposals were suggested:

- Experiential learning should be included in each course and shown in the learning objectives. Ways to achieve this include the use of case studies in a course, to blend academic theory with everyday practice, inviting guest lecturers, etc.
- Often a problem that occurs is that teachers who are unfamiliar with AUC and its idea of experiential learning do not actively engage their students. Hence, it was suggested that they should be familiarized with AUC's conceptual identity, in order to take advantage of the small class size.
- Students desire an increase in lab courses, as these are often essential for Master programs and/or future employment. It was suggested that the quality agreement funding should be used to rent out labs for AUC courses, or build an overview of off-campus lab courses.
- In order to acquire outside-the-classroom knowledge, an investment into Community Projects / Internships (CPI) should be made. There is a desire for more partner organisations and the creation of a CPI database, to facilitate the search for a CPI opportunity.

THEME 3

WELLBEING OF THE AUC COMMUNITY

The intense nature of the AUC LAS honours degree can interfere with the wellbeing of students, as they strive for academic excellence. Apart from the demanding curriculum, campus life can take its toll on one's mental health. AUC has facilities in place to help students with these issues, like the AUC Wellbeing Team and the tutor system.

One of the individuals to whom students can seek out help within AUC is their tutor. However, both students and tutors are not completely satisfied with the tutor system as it is in place now, in that they would like to have a more clear consensus on the role of a tutor and would like to see the role of a tutor to consist of more than just emergency handling. Another issue that was brought up by students is the influence that living in the dorms has on their mental health. Certain students that live in single rooms have expressed that they often feel lonely, whereas certain students who live in shared rooms felt like they experienced a lack of privacy and time alone. Some students have also expressed a feeling of being trapped in the dorms.

The final point that was discussed was that some students feel that the content of certain courses have an impact on their mental health, but that this is something that is not currently being talked about.

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Students have mentioned the term "climate depression" as a manner to describe the feeling of despair within courses that talk about climate issues. Other topics that are often discussed in courses and that students felt impact their mental health are discrimination and genocide.

Although the discussions that took place were generally quite abstract, the discussion about the tutor system brought about some valuable concrete proposals:

- The role of tutor should be more clearly defined in the tutor handbook. This role should consist of more than just emergency handling.
- Some tutors should receive specialized training in order to fulfill the role of tutor better. These tutors should not only be available to their own tutees, but should also receive hours allocated for helping out other students who feel like their own tutor is not able to help them out with the issues they are facing or who feel uncomfortable sharing their issues with their own tutor.
- There should be a personal tutor evaluation once or twice each academic year to give tutors feedback to work with and ensure the quality of the tutor system.
- Another concrete proposal with regards to the absence policy, no resit policy, and course load reduction was as follows: It should be made clear in the AS&P how students must prove their need for an exemption from the absence or no resit policy or a course load reduction because of (mental) health problems. The procedure for this should keep into account the legal limitations of practitioners with regards to sharing patient information.

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CONCLUSION

Voices of AUC is the pinnacle of participatory governance at AUC. The event fosters critical engagement with our socio-academic environment on an equal footing and makes every voice count equally. Voices 2019 demonstrated once again that students, faculty and staff members, alumni, the Management Team, external partners, etc., are intimately involved in AUC's academic and social atmosphere. It cannot be overstated that this active and extensive engagement of various stakeholders is one of the driving forces behind Amsterdam University College.

The Voices of AUC core organizing team of 2019 is delighted by the success of the fifth edition of the event, which identified areas for improvement and harvested several creative ideas to exploit these opportunities. For each of the three discussion themes, uncharted territory was waded, new waters were ventured, and mountains were braved. The discussions were fruitful, in that they yielded outcomes in the form of raw ideas and suggestions, which the core team translated into feasible policy proposals for the coming year(s). For the first theme, the social responsibility of AUC, the way climate change could be integrated in academic core courses like GIE and Big Questions courses was discussed. In addition, ways in which tolerant and respectful debates about controversial topics could be facilitated were explored.

From the discussions about the second theme, experiential learning, the participants concluded that AUC should formulate an institutional definition of the concept that demarcates the scope of and informs all practices in regards to experiential learning. The Academic Standards and Procedures might be the appropriate locus for this definition. The idea to incorporate experiential learning components in every AUC course (in the form of excursions, in-class activities, guest lectures, etc.) was also discussed. Lastly, investments in the CP/I dimension of the academic programme were advocated.

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As for the last theme, the wellbeing of the AUC community, the tutor-tutee relation was held against the light, and what they can mean for each other in the context of health issues. Furthermore, suggestions were raised about the way in which the AS&P should accommodate students that are experiencing (mental) health problems. In extenuating circumstances, the AS&P must be a handhold for students, not a brick wall.

The core team behind Voices of AUC 2019 would like to thank all participants for attending the fifth edition of the event on Tuesday 7 May, extend its sincere gratitude to the people of Zeeburgia for hosting the event, and encourage the reader of this report to attend the next editions of Voices of AUC, in order to contribute to the holistic development of our institution. We also implore the Management Team of AUC, the Student Council, and all other relevant participatory governance bodies and parties to take the proposals and conclusions presented in this report into due consideration.

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