

RUTGER CLAASSEN & MARCUS DÜWELL

THE TRIPLE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT IN UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

Krisis 2015, Issue 2: Perspectives for the New University  
[www.krisis.eu](http://www.krisis.eu)

The recent student and staff protests in Amsterdam and at other Dutch universities have brought to light fundamental disagreements about the future of the Dutch university. Many students and staff members of Dutch universities have argued that the level of democratic decision-making about central policy issues in universities should be increased. But what can democracy mean in the context of the contemporary university system? In this contribution we will first briefly sketch the public role of the university. Then we will put forward our main claim, that the Dutch university currently suffers from a *triple democratic deficit*: in the relation between society and the university, in the relation between university administration and the academic community, and in the relation between the academic community and society. We can only make progress by considering these three problems of democratic legitimation in their mutual relations.

## 1. The role of the university in the public realm

The role of the university, and its public financing through the state, is often legitimized by pointing at the enormously important results of science and technology. The development of the modern economy and its technological basis would have been inconceivable without science. The

social and economic pay-offs are impressive on all counts. However, these science-induced developments have also brought new challenges, dark sides and risks. Climate change and other environmental risks are only one prominent example.

Hence, given that these scientific achievements are not unequivocally beneficial for society, we propose to take one step back and conceive of the legitimation of the university in a more fundamental way. The university is both important in generating new knowledge and in understanding the darker sides of having such new knowledge and techniques. It is important for its role in driving economic and technological changes, but also for understanding ourselves in this changed world. It is important for its contributions to citizens *living together reflexively*. A democratic society is a society which enables its citizens to live a free life and contribute to processes of social decision-making. In this way, a democratic society encourages, even requires, a citizenry that actively reflects upon the course of social developments. Such a society needs a university.

First, a democratic system presupposes for its functioning a high level of accessible information for the population to be able to participate in political decision-making. The university, by studying political, social, ecological, medical, historical and other aspects of development, is indispensable – next to other institutions such as a well-functioning media – in furnishing this information.

Second, democracy is only a meaningful political mechanism when citizens have developed convictions of their own, i.e. a reflexive understanding of their own and other people's interests. If citizens would not be able to develop political convictions, it would not make much sense to have elections in which these convictions are articulated in the formation of a parliament that is legitimizing political power. Here the university comes in as well. For forming well-founded political convictions under the conditions of modern life presupposes a high level of education.

Third, besides these democracy-related considerations, we would hold that it is important for people to be able to understand themselves and to be able to reflect on all aspects of their life – it is a central element of the

*conditio humana*. Universities are important not only in solving the most urgent challenges of our life and enabling us to function in a democratic political system. They can also help us to understand who we are in all its facets: e.g. why we react as we do, where our species came from and where we may travel in the distant future, what the moral condition of our existence is, but also to understand the nature of the world we live in etc.

Thus, there is a need for universities arising from these three comprehensive functions. All of these are functions, however, with a *public* character. The academic system is meant to provide important public benefits. Universities can only fulfill these functions if they can follow the internal logic of research and education. Research outcomes often cannot be predicted, and new questions arise from the research process itself that are often inconceivable to outsiders. Education is an experience in which students and teachers need to have flexibility to mutually adjust to the learning process. Acknowledging this internal dynamic does not mean that we should understand the university as an ivory tower. For academia is responding to developments in nature, society, culture and politics. But in order to fulfill their public mission academic institutions need room to reflect on these external developments with their own academic instruments, formulate research questions against the background of their own theories in order to produce insights and analyses. Only when universities have such a free space of reflection, can they offer something relevant to society. Such a freedom and critical distance towards society is not only important for research but for teaching as well, where students are educated to become professionals and citizens capable of critical and self-critical reflection.

If this is the role of universities, then what can democracy under these conditions mean? Our diagnosis is that there is a *triple democratic deficit* that forms the central problem of the current university system. Neither the political community nor the academic community has sufficient influence on the research processes. This makes current governance processes insufficiently effective to meet the targets of the university.



TABLE: THE TRIPLE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

## 2. The academic needs of a democratic society

There is a continuous external dimension to university life. The extent to which universities can fulfill their public functions depend on the forms of communication between academia and societal and political players that are available to them. This communication is necessary so that universities can pick up questions and problems of modern life and so that the results of research find their way back to society.

To make these links between academic research and education and society fruitful, a variety of conditions needs to be in place. For example, the *time horizon* of research is very different from the time horizon of political decision-making. These differences need to be respected and mediated through effective communication channels. Similarly, academic research is characterized by a high level of disciplinary *specialization* in the develop-

ment of knowledge. Sophisticated theories and specialized terminology are part of the modern knowledge system. Research is characterized by *methodologically* controlled procedures etc. If these conditions are not respected, academic institutions cannot fulfill their tasks. These necessary presuppositions for effective research are at the same time obstacles for an effective communication with politics and societal players. This therefore requires specific mechanisms that support a fruitful communication.

At this moment these mechanisms mainly depend on contingent, incidental contacts between different actors in policy, industry or culture with researchers in the university. We mention only one example. Research is increasingly oriented towards the perspective of industry, either by direct funding from industry, by co-financing (e.g. the NWO program on Responsible Innovation) or by ensuring that a high percentage of NWO- and EU-funded research is related to the needs of industry. However, through these channels universities can only have research funding that is related to the relatively short-time goals of specific societal players. Within these models research activities need to be directly related to relatively concrete interests of societal partners. This supports research that helps to develop specific technologies, helps to apply them or addresses questions such as whether the introduction of specific technologies is accompanied by specific risks and moral challenges. Societal partners have a relatively strong influence on the kind of research that is done.

The deficit of these forms of research finance is that the whole format facilitates only specific kinds of collaboration between researchers and societal actors. Only concrete innovations can be central, and not more fundamental but uncertain research questions. Only short-term questions can be raised, to the detriment of long-term perspectives. Fundamental problems that contemporary societies are facing can hardly be addressed in those formats. Because of these developments, democratic society as a whole is increasingly *not* getting what it asked for. One need only consider that society is not a homogeneous group. There are different groups, who would benefit from different emphases in the research agenda. Where more commercially viable and politically powerful interests dominate the research agenda, to what extent can we speak of a university serving the democratic process as a whole? That would require universities serving

marginalized interests as much as currently well-organized ones, for these interests deserve as much research efforts as any other ones.

It would therefore be much more fruitful to institutionalize discourses between a broad range of societal players, politics and researchers that help to identify bigger problems of the future, e.g. in the form of the big *societal challenges* (as it is called in the European jargon). These would have to leave room for academia to translate these challenges in research activities, relate them to more fundamental academic debates, build up the necessary interdisciplinary cooperation and to develop mechanisms as to how this research can be translated back into societal debates. The translation of societal problems into research requires a process whereby different disciplines can elaborate research questions in such a way that they can lead to research projects that are both socially relevant and academically interesting. That presupposes free space for the development of research questions in this process. This space requires time and it requires a relative freedom from direct intervention of societal partners. And it requires that some counter-mechanisms are established to minimize the domination of this process by societal partners with money. But the most important requirement is of course that public expectations about socially relevant research leave room for the traditional debates in the disciplines. Interdisciplinary and societally relevant research is only possible against the horizon of more fundamental disciplinary research.

The need for new forms of communication between society and university is also a challenge to democracy. Of course one could argue that the current arrangements are also democratically validated (in the end, through elections). However, we presuppose a more substantive view of democracy. In such a view, the *representation* of all stakeholders in scientific research needs to obey certain minimum standards. When this is not the case, where certain social groups are able to exert a much stronger pressure on research than others, one cannot say that the outcome is democratically legitimate simply because a parliamentary majority has approved of it. Democracy is not just about high-level laws. At a lower level in the daily life of funding-allocation decisions, a more balanced process needs to be organized in which all social stakeholders can interact with scientists. But this interaction requires new types of channels. We don't

think that incidental forms of ‘knowledge-valorization’ will fulfill this task or that it is helpful if NWO expects those measures from individual researchers. It is much more important to think about think-tanks and other settings that systematically analyze what kinds of possibilities exist to facilitate a better interaction between societal problems and research activities. But this interaction will only be fruitful if we take into account those requirements that are relevant for a fruitful dialogue between stakeholders and academia.

Although we cannot work this out here, we think a similar external democratic deficit is at stake in education policy. Here too important societal needs (such as those for an army of well-trained French and German-speaking academics) are not addressed by the university. For both education and research, then, a more active role of politics is actually necessary to solve this external democratic deficit. It needs to facilitate the space in which the communication between politics, society and academia is organized, to protect academic freedom in this process, and to ensure that mechanisms are established that make it possible for universities to fulfill their public role.

### 3. The academic community and its management

The second democratic deficit relates to the internal democracy of the university. It is not self-evident why democratic forms should be needed at the workplace, and in which sense there is something analogous to a *demos*. It is obvious that democracy at the university cannot be understood in the same way as the one by which we legitimize the democratic rights of citizens to decide the way they are governed. If we plea for a form of self-governance of the university, this has to follow from the kind of institution a university is and not directly from the democratic rights of the actors involved in this institution. The university is a public institution like the police, the military or garbage collection. Why would it need to be governed democratically, in contrast to some of these other institutions?

The internal policy structure of any public institution should reflect the

institutional goals. The military needs a hierarchical chain of command because of its internal goal: disciplined action in situations of great stress, where there is no time to deliberate about the right strategy. In contrast, the tasks of the university necessarily require that its different activities are exercised in a space of relative independence. Researchers need to have the space to perform their research in such a way that the internal logic of research can fruitfully be exercised. For teaching it is necessary that there is a space in which students can develop their skills and knowledge in such a way that they are enabled to develop as professionals and citizens, who have highly developed capacities to think and act critically and independently.

For an institution with these goals academic staff – and to some extent students as well – need to be able to play a central role in governing the university. An institution which is geared towards autonomous thinking needs to mirror these capacities for self-governance in its internal structure. This is all the more pressing since the modern complex university is characterized by a high level of coordination in research and teaching. The classical idea of ‘academic freedom’ of researchers and teachers was developed in a time in which, say, a professor in the humanities or law only needed not to be disturbed and censured in his research activities in order to have effective academic freedom. Even in these disciplines (and to a greater extent in the natural sciences), however, the independence and autonomy that is required for research can nowadays only be protected via university policies where the researchers themselves are exercising a collective form of decision-making about central aspects of university policy. The factually inescapable need for coordinated policies in the modern university tends to limit the individual academic freedom that is required to exercise self-governance. The only way to regain this freedom is at a more collective level. The more academic work transforms into a collaborated and coordinated activity the greater the need for effective influence of researchers and students on the conditions under which research and teaching are performed.

There is a link here with the first democratic deficit discussed above. Universities have changed rapidly over the last decades and are trying to be more responsive to questions from society. But this process is now mainly

directed by the management of the university. The professors who are involved in this management (rectors, deans, heads of department etc.) try to ensure some influence of the academic community on those processes but they are in a position of having to exercise their duties in the context of policy strategies that are developed on a higher level (e.g. governments with their science agendas, boards of the university with their 5-year plans, etc.). Staff and students have a say in this process only to a limited degree.

One part of the problem is the formation of common opinions within the university. This is partly the fault of the academic community itself, which too often has accepted that others make decisions about their work, instead of articulating their concerns themselves more often and in a more organized way. In order to have an effective form of impact we need to create spaces in which the academic community can form opinions and comments on policy questions. There should be a process of deliberation within the university by regular meetings, publications in the university journal etc. so that policy issues can be discussed in such a way that controversies, arguments for and against different views are elaborated and publicly exchanged. The tasks of the faculty and university councils would then be to ensure that those positions and arguments are transmitted to the places of formal decision-making of faculty and university. To be clear: that this process of deliberation is currently largely absent is *not* the fault of the members of these councils but is a result of a specifically inert culture.

This culture is, however, also partly the result of a policy structure that seems to be guided by a lack of trust in the capacities of staff and students for self-governance. It is surprising that the most important decisions about the highest positions of the university (*College van Bestuur*) are not taken by the academic community but by a supervisory board (*Raad van Toezicht*) that is installed by the minister. The academic community has only a minimal influence on the composition of the CvB, and the RvT consist of people that are by definition from outside the academic community. To be clear: it is a valuable thing that the university has a board of experienced outsiders that are regularly giving advice. But the decisions about the composition of the executive board should come from the aca-

demic community itself.

Some are concerned about a more extensive form of democratic decision-making within the university. They are afraid the model of the ‘elected rector’ is in a problematic tension with university traditions. If the rector has to run for office, organize a campaign within the university, make promises to different parties, etc., it seems unlikely that some of the most talented professors would be willing to be a candidate. Only those who like to go to receptions, shake hands and do all the activities that a politician has to perform would be potential candidates. It is unlikely that this would encourage the best professors to declare their candidacy. But in other countries we see a variety of organizational options for electing the board: via all members of the academic community, via the university council, on the basis of a committee that is installed by the university council, etc. Candidates can declare their candidacy themselves or there can be nominations by specific groups within the academic community etc.

Thus, there are various possibilities to meet these concerns, but what all of these models would have in common is that the election of the executive board of the university would be legitimized by the academic community itself and would be an expression of trust in the capacity of the university to govern itself. If even the arguably most hierarchical institution in the world (the Roman Catholic Church) is able to elect its new leader in an orderly fashion from among its own ranks, there is no reason to distrust universities to do the same. Such a trust is necessary for the development of a culture of a university in which an open discussion about central topics of university policy is possible.

#### 4. The political representation of the academic community

We will be much briefer here. The current student and staff protests have shown, we think, that whatever one thinks about the specific complaints that are being made, these complaints have been insufficiently echoed over the last decades by the formal channels that represent the academic

community in social and political forums (such as the CvB's, the VSNU, the KNAW, etc.). Remediating the previous, internal deficit would alleviate this problem to some extent. If the universities function more democratically internally, we can expect CvB's to be more representative of the opinions of staff and students.

However, we also see in health care, education and many other public sectors that many on “the shop-floor” feel insufficiently represented by official management channels. Therefore, it is necessary that organizations such as *De Nieuwe Universiteit* (students) and *Rethink* (staff) fulfill an independent function in communicating their views to Parliament, Minister and society at large. Having such a separate channel of communication and representation should not be seen as a motion of distrust in university management. Rather, these organizations could serve as a place where the academic community itself creates and debates long-term views about the future of the university, its research and education policies etc. These can then serve as an input in more formal channels of decision-making both within the university and in “The Hague”. They would provide a valuable ‘input from below’ from which university managers could profit in fulfilling their own responsibilities,

Solving this third democratic deficit, however, does require that these new organizations actually *do* represent the *entire* workplace. Otherwise, political and social actors will not listen to them but put them aside as small groups of radicals. This means that academic staff and students have to be willing to support and staff these organizations. In the end, then, having more democracy requires a more active academic community itself.


## 5. The way forward

This article has addressed some central problems of democratic decision-making, representation and accountability within and towards universities. Discussion today tends to narrow to debates about ‘the elected rector yes or no’. We have aimed to sketch a more comprehensive picture of the

university and its relations to the outside world, and we have highlighted a triple democratic deficit in these relations. A new balance needs to be established in the relations between political actors and society at large, the academic community of staff and students, and all those in university management. In all those relations more accountability and representation is necessary. Only then can we fruitfully address serious problems of research and education policy.

Rutger Claassen is Associate Professor of Ethics and Political Philosophy at Utrecht University. His main research interests include theories of social justice and theories of markets and marketization.

Marcus Düwell is Professor of Ethics at Utrecht University. His main research interests include the link between ethics and aesthetics, issues in bio-ethics and human dignity as a foundation for human rights.

 This work is licensed under the Creative Commons License (Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0). See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nl/deed.en> for more information.