



Frank van Vree

**Autonomy and accountability in the humanities.
Some observations in the light of the protest movements at
the University of Amsterdam.**

I was asked to say something today about current discussions at the University of Amsterdam on issues around freedom and responsibility, or autonomy versus control, about the question of how academic freedom is related to the issue of transparency and accountability to society, or, as politicians put it: to the taxpaying citizen.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is a very complicated question, because it is not so difficult to formulate ideals about academia, but the reality often turns out to be so much more stubborn – as was proven last year, considering the success of the protest movement at the University of Amsterdam and at the Faculty of Humanities in particular. A movement that started in the midst of a financial crisis and shook the University to its foundation – a crisis that still has to be overcome, though we are recovering, slowly.

In this brief lecture I would like to deal with these issues from two perspectives:

- first and foremost I would like to present a layered analysis of the actual crisis, its causes and its roots in the recent past;
- secondly I would like to investigate how we may counteract certain tendencies, reversing developments undermining the kind of academic professional autonomy which I consider to be necessary for good and responsible scholarship.

So let's start what I called 'a layered analysis' - not only by sketching the background of what has happened in Amsterdam since the autumn of 2014; but instead I would like to have these events function as a starting point for a long-term analysis - an analysis we definitely need when we talk about academic freedom, autonomy and professional space.

So, in short, my intention today is to outline the playing field, in order to prepare the discussion on autonomy and accountability in the humanities, and the academy as a whole.

Trained as an historian, brought up with the work of Fernand Braudel, one of the leading figures of the extremely influential French school of historians around the journal *Annales* – long before the era of peer-reviewed A-journals in English – I will distinguish three time layers for my analysis, using Braudel's model - just for inspiration, nothing more:

- *l'histoire evenementielle*: a sketch of actual events from November 2014 until April 2015;
- the midterm developments in the previous years;
- the structural changes within academia in the last decades.

1. Facts and events: a brief sketch

Early November 2014 the Board of the Faculty of Humanities launched a discussion paper, titled *Profiel 2016* – a discussion paper, sent to the academic community, presenting two scenarios for reforming the Bachelor's and Master's programmes at the Faculty of Humanities: a Faculty with about 7000 students, 1400 staff, a budget of about 80 Me, 28 BA programs and 68 MA programs (with numerous tracks and specialisations).

This plan *Profiel 2016* was a response to an acute financial crisis, demanding budget cuts of about 8-10 Me within four years. The financial deterioration was – for almost 80% - due to the outcome of a drastic decline in student numbers in the Bachelor's (almost 2000 or 30% in four years); at that moment, autumn 2014, it was not even fully clear that 8-10Me would be enough, because a few months earlier the Board of the University had discussed a possible 13 Me, more than 15% of the annual budget.

Although *Profiel 2016* was a *proposal*, to be discussed in the various boards of the Faculty, as was clearly stipulated in the cover letter, things ran out of hands the very first day. The most radical scenario, which was explicitly meant to be an exercise and effort to think out of the box – be it with good arguments and taking developments elsewhere as a possibly inspiring example – was framed to be an established political fact, the Board of the Faculty having decided to change the College of Humanities into a Liberal Arts College.

This frame was going to take over the planned discussions in less than 24 hours, not only within the Faculty, but also publicly, thanks to the very short lines between the University of Amsterdam, politicians and media. We as a board appeared unable to regain control over the agenda, being subject to fierce political battles and a process that I myself had professionally studied before: *media logic*. You all know what followed: protest meetings,

demonstrations, letters of protest, not only to the Faculty Board, but also to the media.

Two weeks later, after consultation of the student and staff representatives, the Chairs of the Departments and other boards, we decided to set up working groups to develop alternative plans to solve the most urgent problems of the Faculty, to start with the weak and still declining position of many Bachelor's programmes, particularly but not exclusively in the domain of language and literature (some of them attracting only a handful of students), and the huge number of small and specialised Master's programmes and tracks which we were actually no longer able to pay for. Two months later, while we, the Faculty Board, were designing a new plan based on the final reports of these working groups, the main building of the Faculty, the Bungehuis, was occupied by a very small, but highly politicized group of students and staff members from various faculties of the University of Amsterdam and the Free University.

This occupation, that started as a rather isolated event, being prepared outside of *Humanities Rally*, the main protest student movement that emerged the day after launching *Profiel 2016*, appeared to be a catalyst – a catalyst for what I would call a truly revolutionary process, brought about by a broad coalition of discontent students and, above all, staff members, mainly from the faculties of humanities, social sciences and law at the University of Amsterdam, but with a much wider appeal, not only in this university, but also elsewhere, even abroad.



And you may all know how it went from that moment on: the occupation of the Bungehuis, which attracted a growing number of students and staff, lecturing, sleeping and partying, was ended by the police after 11 days. The next day, at the end of a march of protest with about 1500 people, some protesters managed - more or less accidentally - to open the door of the main Hall of the University, the Maagdenhuis, which was consequently taken over and kept occupied for more than six weeks. In these weeks the protest movement grew considerably, attracting more and more attention, also internationally. After long negotiations, resulting in an agreement on democratisation and financial transparency, the majority of the occupiers were ready to leave to building. A minority, however, seemed to be reluctant

to leave, causing confusion, which led to a decision by the Board of the University to ask the police to evacuate the building. This resulted in new protests, forcing the President of the Board to resign.

I characterized the process as ‘truly revolutionary’ – and in doing so I refer to *the process itself*, in terms of:

- (1) the ability to unite a wide range of people and to absorb a great variety of complaints, feelings of discontent and deep worries;
- (2) the way the protest developed, getting more radical over time, pushed forward by small but highly symbolic incidents;
- (3) how the protest literally overran authorities, questioning their very legitimacy, authorities that appeared to be unable to regain control over the events;
- (4) the way it attracted support from various, often opposite interests within society;
- (5) the pivotal role of (continuous) news streams by social and institutional media; the occupation attracted huge media attention, which was definitely influenced by an almost nostalgic sympathy for student protest, particularly after the Maagdenhuis was occupied, an event that reminded many people of the ‘good old days’ of student protests in the late sixties;
- (6) a cathartic closure, in the form of a symbolic execution of the main representative of power.

In this process, the focus shifted completely from the actual problems at the Faculty of Humanities to the University as a whole, or even more: to the academic climate in the Netherlands as a whole, particularly the increasing pressure on staff and students in terms of performance, funding, regulations, with ‘efficiency thinking’ (*rendementsdenken*) and ‘professional autonomy’, including ‘democratic control’ as buzz-terms.

That's the short story, the sketch of the events.

But as I said, there are also two more time layers, (1) the first of these leading to a more detailed analysis of the crisis in the Faculty of Humanities, (2) the other to a long-term analysis of the structural changes at the universities. Especially the latter is relevant to the main theme of my lecture this morning, the issue of autonomy and accountability.

2. Midterm developments in the previous years at the Faculty of Humanities (2010-2014)

I will dwell only briefly on this subject, but I think we cannot do completely without an analysis of the midterm developments if we want to understand the dynamics of the events as they actually evolved.

However, we may discuss this issue by reformulating it into a simple question: *Why did Profile 1016 cause such an explosion among staff and students?*

Obviously, a lot had happened before already, causing the budget cuts and the plans of reform to be nothing more than the fuse in the proverbial powder keg. Just to mention a few of the most important changes and measures the Faculty of Humanities had been confronted with the previous years:

- the introduction, heavily disputed, of a new academic year schedule, consisting of two 8-week and one 4 week block per semester, in 2010-2012; the introduction of this new schedule by the Board of the University, ignoring an almost general opposition, forced the Faculty to rewrite all existing programs and courses, which of course put great pressure on the staff;
- the introduction, from 2010 on, of a program called ‘studie succes’, consisting out of a whole series of measures to promote the engagement and success rate of students, as well as the didactic quality of programs;
- the introduction of ‘performance contracts’ by the Government with the institutions of Higher Education, which were subsequently converted into key performance indicators by the Board of the University, with regard to number of teaching hours, research profiling, higher output, decrease of student drop out rate etc.

And this was not all. More specifically the Faculty had recently gone through

- an intensive, very time consuming review process of almost all of its bachelor and master programs (2013);
- a complete reorganization of the governance system, at all levels of the Faculty, on the order of the Board of the University, in 2013-2014, in accordance with the administrative model of the University, which aroused a lot of resistance and even more uncertainty about roles and responsibilities of faculty functionaries;
- a process of reorganization of the Faculty’s research institutes: though this was purely content-driven and based on bottom up decisions, it caused a lot of worries.

All together these changes and measures turned out to be the ingredients of the proverbial powder keg, waiting to be set alight, as actually happened when *Profiel 2016* was launched in November 2014.

From this perspective I, as dean, and we, as Faculty Board, made two major strategic blunders. First of all, we seriously underestimated the unrest that was already there, among a great deal of the staff, with regard to all of the above points. And secondly, by presenting an *integral* plan for the future as an answer to current problems, we simultaneously created an *integral* oppositional movement, absorbing a great variety of serious complaints and worries. The consequences of these mistakes were considerable, as I have pointed out.

3. Structural changes within academia in the last decades 1980's - now.

Having analysed the main causes and course of the crisis in the Faculty of Humanities, one important question remains unanswered: why did the protest movement find such a strong response outside the own faculty, at the University of Amsterdam and far beyond?

That very question leads us directly to the third part of my analysis. I would have liked to dwell on this topic, but that is not necessary in this company: I think *Science in Transition* itself has made a significant contribution to this analysis. For now my objective is simply to exhibit some developments that led to the alleged loss of freedom, autonomy and professional space and the consequent and widespread discontent among so many academics.

A few important developments:

1. Information systems

Often forgotten, but I think perhaps one of the strongest determinant factors in education - as well as other public sectors - during the last three decades: the introduction of large, comprehensive systems for information and administration, scheduling teaching, buildings, courses, standardizing student's results and teaching loads, examination regulations, besides electronic learning environments and communication systems – systems that encompass almost all core areas of professional practices in teaching, administration and governance. It is beyond doubt that the feeling of losing one's professional autonomy and freedom is a consequence of the increasing standardization, regulation and - if you like - disciplining force of these systems.

I can put it differently: when I started to work at the university, 27 years ago, the Faculty was more like a chain of islands, each island run by the staff, or, more often, by the secretary of the department, doing almost everything on her own, from the enrolment of students in courses and the planning of class rooms, to writing ads announcing examinations to be placed in the university weekly.

2. A systematic decline of funding in combination with greater dependency on performance

Since the 80s the Dutch government reduced the funding per student by more than 50%; in just the period between 2000 and 2014 the amount per student went down from € 19.600 to € 14.300 (adjusted figures). Obviously this decline has led to a huge pressure on the staff, in terms of teaching load - apart from the fact that the sheer number of classes has gone up as well. On the other hand, there is more performance-based funding in education and research than ever before.

3. Rising demands with regard to knowledge and skills of staff and a much fiercer international competition.

Not only has the labour market become truly international, in virtually all fields of science, but also within the university itself the growing competition is producing classes of winners and losers, between tenured and non-tenured staff, the latter being more and more dependent on the fluctuations in student numbers and grant results.

4. Increasing control of education, quality monitoring and demand for accountability.

The growing significance of this policy of intervention and control finds its expression in various developments:

- Partially internally through internal reviews and assessments (university-wide), program committees, examination boards, research evaluations – propelled not only by a growing internal competition and a need for holding up standards, but also by students demanding transparency and searching - as consumers - value for their money; last but not least a sharply felt fear for reputational damage appears to be a strong motive for the urge for control.
- Partly externally, through a national system of reviewing programs, once in a few years, leading to a bulk of paperwork, but also to a stricter system of internal surveillance;
- Also externally driven, the introduction of performance requirements from the ministry of education, often fuelled by politics after incidents and irregularities (e.g. raising minimum contact hours in the 1st year of the BA, stricter control on examinations, diminishing the drop out rates, obligatory matching programs for freshmen etc.);

5. Increasing political interference in research

The current active research policy by national and European governments, in terms of agenda setting, valorisation etc, requires a constant adjustment of the university's research policy, in terms of research priority areas, as well as the rise of a whole new class of research policy officials, both at a local and national level.

4. Autonomy and accountability: ideals and reality

With this incredible complex playing field in mind, we may now make a start to discuss issues of academic freedom, autonomy, professional space and accountability in order to rethink and to realize the ideal of the academic professional: a professional who, on the basis of his or her skills and knowledge, both as a teacher and a scholar, is fully entitled to act on what he or she considered best for students and for the development of his or her field of knowledge. But this, ladies and gentlemen, is not the only ideal at stake, as I will point out later.

When we examine the ideal of the academic professional in the light of the complicated playing field I just sketched - a field defining the rules and borders for its players being the university staff - it is immediately clear how difficult it may be to achieve these noble ideas nowadays.

Indeed, there are so many forces that oppose or hinder any steps in that direction. Take for example the quick reply of the National Student Union, last year, to a proposal of the Minister of Education to make the national review procedures a bit lighter: the Union denounced the proposal, arguing that students should be entitled to compare the standardized quality of programs at different universities.

I could give numerous examples, not only of opposing forces, but also of tensions and contradictions which are more or less inherent to these very ideals, such as the often very concrete conflict of *individual* interests and the idea of a more or less self-governing academic *community*, or the urge for full autonomy and the social and political responsibility of academics - just to mention a few.

But what strategy then should we follow, to give teachers and scholars at least some comfort, by realizing as much as professional autonomy, without neglecting our duty, as public institutions, to transparency?

I think we have opportunities to do so, but up to now we have not really tried to find alternatives. Why, for example, should we not give teams, responsible for a program, confidence in what they do and how they manage their quality standards, without overloading them with rules and paperwork? It is up to them, and only after three years do they have to render an account and report to a review committee, according to the principle 'Confidence in advance, accountability later'.

In this simple proposal lies the core of the strategy I would like to pursue and to promote: create professional space where it may be possible, not individually, but along teams, working bottom up, starting at the level of educational teams, research programs, schools, institutes.

Although I am not very optimistic - this may hardly surprise you - that we might easily turn the tide and fundamentally change the underlying structures of today's universities, I have still hope that we can at least do something.

We should, for example, systematically identify where we can create more professional room, pushing back uniformity in regulations and leaving more room for plurality, counting more on accountability than control at various levels, developing more variety in quality measuring and quality standards - particularly through procedures that are less bureaucratic and come closer to 'real life', and through standards that reflect the values of scholarship in various fields, including 'orchid disciplines', fundamental science, and,

indeed, the humanities. Without a doubt our keynote speaker today, James Wilsdon, will discuss this subject.

In conclusion

I started this introduction with a picture of myself in the midst of protesting students. I frankly admit that the past one and half years have been very tough. But on the other hand, the Faculty Board and I, as its dean, have had very little to choose but to carry on and to try to create a more stable financial future and to make our programs in teaching and research better.

There was and there is no other choice, which means that we make our hands dirty just by entering the playing field I described earlier. Nevertheless we might conquer back some room, in teaching evaluations for example, or in the assessment of humanities research – a national project which I am presiding, which searches for a model enabling humanities scholars to show what they themselves consider to be valuable, a model including the diversity in research and publication cultures in the humanities, by giving more credit, for example, to hybrid categories of output, such as books for a larger audience, exhibitions, public lectures, articles in newspapers, and also to those written in Russian, Spanish, Dutch or French....

I can tell you, this is a tough subject. But we all know, changing systems is hard work, no matter under what the circumstances. Even when it seems to become a bit more quiet....

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