Voices of AUC brings together students, teachers, management, and staff of Amsterdam University College (AUC) and encourages them to discuss issues, concerns, and expectations to reach new ideas. The event is hosted by a core team of students and faculty members who aim to create a safe environment where all groups can explore each other’s ideas and thoughts on the future of AUC. The event is focused on themes and questions that were developed by the core team based on their relevance for the current and upcoming academic years. These themes allow all attendees to identify key problems, understand each other’s perspectives, and provide ideas for immediate solutions.

“Voices” is grounded in the belief that each member of the AUC community cares deeply about their education, the community, and the values and beliefs that the institution is attached to. Through a participatory leadership approach, this event is inclusive to all members of the community and is a comfortable space to share, discuss, express opinions, and learn to understand each others’ roles.

The topic for this year’s fourth edition of “Voices” was AUC’s Liberal Arts and Sciences: What’s Now and What’s Next? This topic had three main points of focus: the interdisciplinary core of the Liberal Arts and Sciences degree (LAS), the tutor-tutee system, as well as the prospects of a LAS degree. The first theme addressed the core of the LAS programme by looking at the mandatory Academic Core subjects which all students are required to take. The second theme was intended to foster understanding of, and creative ideas regarding how to homogenize the tutor-tutee system as students currently have largely differing experiences. The last theme looked at future possibilities for students that complete the LAS programme, and evaluated how AUC as an institution works towards preparing its students for their upcoming academic or professional careers.
THEME 1: INTERDISCIPLINARY CORE OF A LAS DEGREE

One of the most prominent ways in which AUC's curriculum is promoted, is by placing a strong emphasis on its interdisciplinarity. In practice, this means that students are encouraged to integrate insights from two or more academic disciplines in order to develop a greater understanding of problems that are too complex to be dealt with using the knowledge and methodology of just one discipline. The interdisciplinary core is supposed to give AUC students life-long skills to be used throughout their careers and is one of the characteristics that distinguishes AUC's programme from other bachelor's degrees.

In order for this interdisciplinarity to reach all AUC's students, it is most likely incorporated in the (compulsory) Academic Core. These subjects include Academic Writing Skills, Logic, Big Questions, several methods courses, and languages. Lately however, certain concerns about the Academic Core and the value of an LAS degree have been voiced, like the missing application of theoretical knowledge to real-life experiences. Consequently, the first sub-theme of Voices of AUC 2018 was the Interdisciplinary Core of AUC.

There were certain issues that arose multiple times in the discussions. Firstly, there was an overall feeling that students felt a lack of excitement for the Academic Core. This is in contrast to the purpose of the Academic Core, as it is meant to excite, guide, inspire, and prepare. Therefore, an obvious suggestion was to look for ways to incite enthusiasm in the students for the Academic Core right from the beginning of their studies at AUC.

Secondly, students pointed out that there was often a discrepancy between different teachers of the same course. This was reflected in the way of teaching, the feedback, and grading. The feeling of "unfairness" may in part contribute to the lack of excitement, and is therefore an important point to address. Lastly, it was mentioned that direct use and application of the material from some of the Academic Core courses was missing. Specifically, a connection to the real world seemed to be missing in the Logic course. It was also suggested that the Academic Writing Skills courses could include more realistic applications by shifting the focus to presentation exercises and by offering students more hands-on advice for writing.

Subsequently, these concerns led to a number of suggestions and notes from students, teachers, and faculty members, listed below:

- It is imperative to get students excited about the Academic Core as soon as they arrive at AUC. This can, for example, already be addressed during intro-week by explaining the value of these courses.
- It should be a priority to bring different teachers and their grading methods to a common norm. Ways to do this might be by letting teachers peer-review each other's classes to get a better idea of their mutual teaching styles. Common grading can be improved by making clearer and stricter grading rubrics and by making sure that the average as well as the variation in grades are similar in different classes.
- The Academic Core should be made more applicable to the real world. It was noted previously that certain Academic Core courses were missing real-life relevance. Two courses in particular seemed to be of notable concern: firstly, participants proposed that the course Logic, Argumentation, and Information Flow makes a shift from its purely theoretical stance towards a more applied learning experience. In particular, the segment on argumentation leaves much room for application and could be implemented, for example, by a debate with a focus on fallacies. Moreover, the Academic Writing Skills courses could be more focused on feedback towards presentation skills, tips and tricks for writing and, for example, the use of referencing programmes like "Refworks".
THEME 2: TUTOR-TUTEE SYSTEM

Another unique characteristic of the LAS degree at AUC is the tutor-tutee system. The core faculty members who take on the role of tutors and accompany students throughout their entire time at AUC, are meant to represent an approachable source of information regarding both academic as well as personal matters. In practice, the ways of taking on the role of a tutor are diverse and ask for an adjusted approach for each individual tutee. This makes the role hard to define and often leads to a lack of clearly established mutual expectations. These concerns set the grounds for the second theme of Voices: The Tutor-Tutee system at AUC.

Although many current tutors are fully meeting the expectations of their tutees and succeed in being a good source of guidance, several students voiced that they felt like there is room for improvement. It was therefore suggested that there should be more concrete guidelines, to clarify what should be expected of both parties. It was also noted that students themselves should more often exploit the opportunity to reflect on the relationship they have with their tutor and the tutor meetings with, for example, an independent person like the senior tutor. What furthermore contributes to these issues might be the fact that students sometimes feel like their tutor is not able to help them with their questions. As a solution, it was proposed that all tutors should be aware of the specializations of their colleagues and, for instance, give personal advice in how to give career advice to their tutees.

In order to address these points, a variety of proposals were suggested:

- Both AUC faculty and students should express clearly defined expectations from the tutor-tutee system as a whole. In order to accomplish this, the tutor handbook should be revised and both, the responsibilities of tutors as well as tutees, should be stated. Moreover, in case students feel that their expectations are not met, they should be encouraged to reflect on their relationship with the tutor with an external source, such as the senior tutor.
- Establishing (regular) training programmes or workshops for tutors could help them develop their skills and, for instance, give them insight into how to give career advice to their tutees.
- It was frequently suggested that tutors should refer students to other faculty members that might assist them better with their questions. Even though students said that they are sometimes “afraid” to bother busy faculty members with questions about their field, lecturers expressed much interest in having conversations with students. The fact that lecturers are generally very open to having academic conversations with students could also be better communicated on the AUC website and on Blackboard.
- Students should be encouraged to set goals at the beginning of each semester together with their tutor. These goals should act as personal guidelines throughout the semester and allow the tutee to reflect on their progress at the end of the semester.
- One idea that participants were particularly excited about was to organize yearly non-mandatory tutor meetings with all tutees, during which more experienced students can help their peers with their curriculum and questions about the programme.

THEME 3: PROSPECTS OF AN LAS DEGREE

The transition from AUC to a master programme is a laborious process, which often makes students feel overwhelmed. In fact, finding a programme that matches one’s academic interests proves to be difficult enough, let alone the preparations that need to be made to apply, arrange on-campus housing, and acquire letters of recommendation, while still fulfilling academic responsibilities at AUC. All in all, the process can be a sequence of academic turmoil and bureaucratic hassles, during which students are often in need of some help.

To find out in what ways AUC can aid students with this process, we discussed The Prospects of a Liberal Arts and Sciences degree in the third round. Under “prospects”, we considered several aspects of life after graduation. We placed an emphasis on (but did not limit ourselves to) the master programme, the next step in the academic career of many students, while also discussing how a Liberal Arts and Sciences degree distinguishes students from other applicants on the job market. This included a discussion of how to successfully ‘sell’ the LAS degree to future employees. Moreover, we invited participants to deliberate about the preparation of AUC students for the outside world by investigating how students can already start networking outside the socio-academic bubble via, for example, internships, community projects, and study programmes. In turn, we also covered the preparation of the outside world for AUC students by examining how the university can put the LAS programme on the radar of other universities and employers.

To briefly summarize what the participants discussed during the third round, it is worth noting that a trend emerged to incorporate the second theme in the discussion of the third: the role of the tutor in guiding students towards their masters application. It was noted that tutors could, for instance, give personal advice in the light of a student’s curriculum and desires, by drawing on their knowledge and personal experience. Secondly, there has been some expressed desire for the involvement of alumni to advise students on their career paths in general and their masters applications. The idea behind alumni sharing their experiences is that it provides students with great practical knowledge pertaining to life after graduation that they can draw from. The experiences of alumni can therefore be valuable tools in giving students an outlook on their own career paths after AUC.
Lastly, the importance of developing each student’s narrative was addressed, i.e., the unique collection of experiences and interests that shape an individual in addition to their appropriate grade point average. Knowing exactly what makes a student ‘shine’ is crucial when it comes to writing applications and can help in successfully taking a next step on the career path. Based on this, the following questions arose: How does a students ‘shine’ and how can AUC assist every student in that process? One possible way of doing this is by having ‘reflection’ sessions with the tutor, which was proposed under theme two, during which students would have the possibility to review their experiences, preferences, and values, and incorporate them into a narrative. As a way of translating these topics into policy, some ideas that could be implemented emerged during the discussions:

- It was proposed to make the tutor a more approachable source of information in regards to the possible career paths of their tutees. The tutor handbook, for instance, could include a description of the tutor’s responsibility for counseling tutees on their career options.
- AUC should work more closely with the Alumni Association and make it easier for students to contact AUC graduates. It was suggested to launch a new platform on which it might be possible for current AUC students to get in touch with alumni, to ask questions regarding academic and career related possibilities, and get useful advice from them.
- Organizing meetings with tutors that are dedicated to reflect on one’s own unique collection of experiences, preferences, and values can help students to find out what makes them ‘shine’ and learn how to successfully construct a narrative for their academic career. Since reflecting on one’s own narrative ties into the process of applying for a suitable masters programme or job, it would also be possible to make this aspect part of AUC’s masters and career weeks.
- The Structural Funding is allowing AUC to invest a significant amount of money in the process of guiding students toward their future. AUC will acquire a software developed by University College Maastricht that will give students an overview of the masters they could do, based on their courses and the courses and masters that previous graduates have done. Second, there will be opportunities for students to discuss their future plans with experts. These experts will help our students with developing their ideas for masters, career choices and choices concerning their AUC curriculum. Third, there is more money available for things like master weeks/days, during which students would have the chance to get more information on masters and future opportunities in general.

CONCLUSION

First of all, we, the Voices 2018 organizing team, are delighted by the success of this edition of the event, which allowed us to develop creative proposals to improve AUC’s socio-academic environment. The evening demonstrated the strong involvement of both students and faculty members in AUC’s academic and social life, and we truly believe that this extensive engagement is one of the driving forces behind our college.

For each of the three themes (the interdisciplinary core of an LAS degree, the tutor-tutee system, and the prospects of a LAS degree) new ideas have been pitched. The discussions were very fruitful and the different viewpoints that students, teachers, staff, and alumni had to offer lead to interesting suggestions. For the first theme, the interdisciplinary core of an LAS degree, the most important outcomes were to get students more excited for the Academic Core, to bring teachers and grading to a common norm, and to advance the application of Academic Core courses to the real world. From the discussions about the tutor-tutee system arose the need for clearer expectations from both tutors and tutors, which could be added in annexes to the Tutor Handbook and practiced in tutor trainings. Moreover, tutors should be aware of the possibility to refer their tutees to specialized faculty members, and finally, it was suggested to incorporate the reflection of goals into regular tutor-tutee meetings. The last theme, the prospects of an LAS degree, lead to the idea of increasingly approaching tutors and alumni for guidance towards the life after AUC. Moreover, reflection meetings (with the tutor) were again suggested as a means to construct a student’s own narrative and let them ‘shine’. Lastly, a master’s database and career coordinator will be set up.

The core team would like to once again thank all participants for attending Voices of AUC 2018 and for making the discussions so engaging and inspirational! We hope to see many proposals implemented at AUC in the future and are looking forward to the next edition of Voices of AUC in 2019.
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