

# Re-imagining the University: taking a step towards a social and collaborative university

Group assignment Debating Development 2023-2024

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# Re-imagining the University: taking a step towards a social and collaborative university

## Introduction

The university isn't a brave space! This sentence is a contradiction of what Swati Kamble, a guest speaker for our debating development series, wanted to initiate. This sentence was the first agreement made by us, a group of five students, consisting of one studying physics, a law student, one Erasmus student studying economics, one social scientist, and a linguistics student. We are a diverse group of students; none of us had an overlap of educational interests going into this series. Nevertheless, after our first discussion, we quickly concluded that our different educational paths did not result in different challenges. This paper addresses the shared challenges we faced when starting our academic career and poses our solution to finally shake down the ivory tower.

The first problem we agreed on was the anonymity of a student starting at our university. When describing our first day at our university, we shared the sense of feeling isolated in some way. Despite sitting in a full auditorium, the feeling of being an individual was prevalent. We found this feeling strengthened by the fact that we all got called out more with our student code than with our own name. As we discussed the facilities that are supposed to help with these feelings, we concluded that these institutions do not have the capacity to help every student within a reasonable time. "At least we were equal", or at least that's what we believed. After the session on (anti-) racism and gender (in)equality, we all concluded that this feeling of equality is nothing more than a myth.

A second problem we faced was the structure of the university itself. We felt that there was a top-down structure without influence from students or researchers. This vertical structure works as a factory to produce as many academic outputs as possible and acquire funding. In this way, the university tends to make a name for itself in the international academic world. This factory prioritizes quantity above quality and perpetuates fierce competition. When voicing our concerns regarding this factory-like system and other problems, the university system tends to silence us. An example is the student strike for Palestine at our university, which has been sanctioned by the university itself.

Finally, we discussed breaking down this ivory tower and posed a solution for the problems we are facing. This solution includes the introduction of social collaboration projects to help steer policy and encourage our university to be more constructive. The collaborative projects to be included in the curriculum will help students connect with other students with the same concerns regarding society as them. On top of this, removing the codification practice and improving student integration policies and actions will help foster a more unified and interconnected student body that strives to better society.

## The ongoing isolation faced as a university student

In this paragraph, we tend to focus on the ongoing isolation of students at the university. This concept is intertwined with the consequences of student isolation, student codification, and everyday forms of discrimination towards minority groups.

Levine et al. (2023) studied the mental well-being of students transitioning to a university. They found a pattern within the group of questioned students, which consists of low depression when starting university and an increase in thoughts of depression during the first year of university. This transition may be caused by the loss of the community those students had been building up during their secondary school period. A main cause of this breakup in the community is the increased distance between them and their previous school friends (Oswald & Clark, 2003). Lovell and Webber (2023) introduced trainee programs where students can slowly break down their isolation. They stated that general positive feedback was achieved after an intensive six-month training program. However, this trainee program is not the standard at a general university.

At the University of Antwerp, all initiatives towards isolation, depression, etc. are handled by a central organ: STIP (Studenteninformatiepunt). This organ tends to be a focal point for study coaching, psychological care, social care, etc. (UAntwerpen, 2023b). However, the practical organization is not capable of supporting students on a structural level. From my own experience, a standard meeting with a student psychologist at STIP has a waiting time of minimally three weeks. Other than STIP, there are other university-driven initiatives like Students for Students (SFS) (UAntwerpen, 2023c). This is an initiative where students can find comfort and make connections with other students. This organization consists of ten students volunteering to reach out to their fellow scholars. We focus on the quantitative problem regarding SFS. The number of student volunteers, 10, is the number of people to maintain the well-being of their fellow students. Currently, the University of Antwerp consists of 23,202 students (UAntwerpen, 2023a). This means that, hypothetically, one student of the SFS organization is responsible for 2302 students' well-being. We tend to conclude that these organizations cannot stop the longitudinal wave of depression described in the article by Levine et al. (2023).

These university initiatives are set up to help with the consequences of student isolation, but they take little to no preventive action towards depression and isolation. This is why a supportive healthcare system from the university is needed to address mental awareness (Kar et al., 2021). However, the healthcare system is still limited in its actions, and the university itself should take steps to create a welcoming feeling, in which it currently fails.

The university system creates anonymity with the introduction of student codification. The prime example of student codification is the implication of student numbers, which is obligated by the Flemish governing instance (Vlaamse overheid, 2019). Students are given an identification number to make it easier for the management to trace their individual progress. These numbers may make administrative affairs easier, but meanwhile, they create an increasing sense of anonymity among students and their professors (Woessner et al., 1998). This is where the aspect of personality comes into play. Woessner describes personality as a mentor who helps students with problems concerning their study program and private lives. This personality starts with being addressed by your own name. In my personal academic career, I got addressed more by my student codification number than my actual name. This sense of anonymity got so far that I address myself with my student codification number towards professors, as my name has no meaning anymore. We tend to conclude that it is easy for a student to feel isolated, because of the lack of personality given from the university in the first place even though personality is a main factor to feel appreciated as a student (Ahmed & Naqvi, 2015).

Lastly, there is an everyday form of racism and sexism inside the university institution. Bourabain (2020) stated diversity is achieved at a macro level as there are more and more members of minority groups in graduate and PhD positions. Still on a meso level, everyday racism and sexism are achieved as 47/50 woman interviewees opened up about sexism experiences they had to endure during their academic career. One of the driving factors was the smokescreen of equality. Bourabain described this as a paradoxical climate where attention is paid to the construction of an inclusive academia, but it is not effective. This construction becomes an approach to how we can measure inclusion by making inclusion stations. In other words, inclusion becomes a bullet point on the list to tick off if the number of stations is achieved. We can detect the smokescreen of equality in the accessibility of international students starting at the University of Antwerp. To register as an international student starting at our university, students have to undergo a Dutch language test to achieve a B2 level (UAntwerpen, 2023d). On the upper surface, this is a fine method of inclusivity. In reality, this is a form of discrimination, as the Dutch courses require way more than a B2 level.

## Overarching top-down vertical system faced as a university student

Recently, university ranking systems have become increasingly popular. These systems have been thriving at placing ranking systems on every single possible asset in higher education (Culum Ilic, 2023 9:50). This gamification of academic excellence has led to a split in paradigms, resulting in two different relevant paradigms that will be discussed in this paragraph.

The ranking systems perpetuate the individual competitive paradigm, which is currently dominant in higher education institutions (Culum Ilic, 2023 11:20). This paradigm has caused accountability, transparency, and efficiency to become important elements of contemporary university governance, holding universities accountable through providing accessible information to educational consumers. This so-called 'accountability movement' has led to a proliferation of evaluative measures and a performance-driven culture where the performance of individual subjects or organizations serves as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As a result, higher education, as a form of production, has become standardized to make 'outputs', 'levels of performance' and 'forms of quality' more calculable and comparable (Ball, 2007).

The individual competitive paradigm thus results in a factory-like production of knowledge where the work of professors and researchers must meet quantified metrics outlined in grant proposals and departmental performance rubrics. These evaluative measures lead to the detachment of knowledge from its context, resulting in a loss of meaning and transforming it into an end-product in an academic environment that is driven by competition and a growth-oriented knowledge economy. This process generates cultures of distrust, hierarchy, competition, and fast scholarship in the race to produce more in the least amount of time (Van Hecken et al., 2020).

In addition to creating a factory-like environment of competitive fast-scholarship, the relationship between professors and their students weakens as students have grown to be treated as customers. According to Giroux (2002), this economic relationship between the students and their teacher is closely related to the neoliberal reforms that have commercialized higher education. The consequence of this commercialization is that students have begun to take on the attitude of customers in the sense that they view higher education as a commodity to be bought (Delanty, 2002; Newman et al., 2010).

Our problems are clear: due to the university ranking system that perpetuates the individual competitive paradigm, a hierarchical top-down structure has been put in place. This top-down structure forces professors and researchers to compete with each other and to take part in an environment of competitive fast-scholarship where knowledge has become the end-product instead of something that can be (re)produced, accessed, and understood by all (Van Hecken et al. 2020). Furthermore, this top-down structure widens the already existing gap between students and their professors, as the latter are encouraged to focus on research and publications as a means of economic productivity. The latter economic factor also increases the gap between the students and their teacher.

The second paradigm is the social collaborative paradigm, which opposes the individual competitive paradigm. It states that universities have a third mission next to education and research. The third mission is community engagement. The concept of community engagement is one that is hard to define and therefore has many definitions (Barker, 2015). We have chosen the definition by TEFCE, which is as follows: "We therefore define university community engagement as a process whereby universities engage with community stakeholders to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial even if each side benefits in a different way." (Benneworth et al., 2018). Community

engagement could be the solution to the abovementioned issues as it introduces a new type of knowledge: "knowledge democracy is the idea that knowledge is to be measured through its capacity to intervene in reality and not just represent it" (Somers, 2023 1:56) This diverse type of knowledge calls for a revision of current classic teaching methods, which we will discuss in the following paragraph.

## Social responsibility in the academic context

The abovementioned problems are caused by the individual competitive paradigm, which causes universities to be focused on productivity in the form of outputs and funding. Our proposed solution for these problems is one that can be situated within the social collaborative paradigm. This paradigm calls for community engagement.

Firstly, community engagement calls for a revision of current classical teaching methods. The current classical teaching method is a lecture. We, a group of five students, experience lectures as a top-down way of teaching. In our experience, a lecture is structured in such a way that there is one entity that transfers knowledge to a group. We think this one-directional transfer of knowledge adds to the hierarchical structure of our university as well as increasing the gap between students and their professors. Additionally, classic lectures usually have no way of engaging with community stakeholders. This is where service learning comes into play. Service learning is a form of education that focuses on serving, reflecting, and learning. Students serve society by engaging in a concrete community. In doing so, they reflect on their experiences in a structured way, learning academically, socially, and personally (KULeuven, 2023). Service-learning helps students develop as complete individuals with not only academic but also social and personal skills, becoming responsible and critical citizens (KULeuven, 2023).

Service learning as a part of community engagement is our proposed solution for this top-down hierarchical knowledge transfer. We propose that a multitude of service-learning initiatives be set up. These projects would be designed as elective courses, so each student would be required to select one to participate in. We also propose that each professor be obliged to partake in at least one of these sessions so as to include professors and make a start to change the top-down hierarchical structure between students and professors.

Our vision for these service-learning projects involves partnerships with local non-profit organizations such as Feestvarken vzw, Wel Jong vzw, and TEJO Vlaanderen vzw. These collaborations would consist of groups of 20 students that hold weekly meetings with these organizations. These weekly meetings with specialists within the organization would then serve as an alternative way of learning; the students would first get to know their chosen organization through someone with field experience. Secondly, the students will be encouraged to actively participate and add to the inner workings of their organization.

It becomes evident that service-learning is a possible solution for the top-down hierarchical way of acquiring knowledge. The service-learning projects enable students to actively partake in the organizations they have chosen. This way, they get to work with people who have field-specific knowledge instead of only listening to them in a two-hour lecture. Evidently, the gap between teacher and student diminishes in these settings where student and teacher become equal.

The other problem discussed in this essay is the prevalent sense of isolation among students. We propose two solutions. Firstly, we think that the service-learning projects we already proposed could also help with this sense of isolation. As of now, students mostly partake in lectures. In these lectures, students are forced to sit in a lecture hall for two hours on average and listen to what the professor has to say. In our experience, students are never forced to communicate with each other during these lectures. It is perfectly possible to go to a lecture and sit alone. This classical teaching method thus creates a system where it is possible for students to not communicate with their peers at all, apart from a couple of group assignments.



The service-learning initiatives are different in that way. Firstly, the groups are way smaller, enabling an environment where the students and the specialists will know each other's names. Secondly, the students are forced to engage in their organization, forcing them to work together. These environments will enable communication and connection between the students in small groups and between the students and the community of their chosen organization.

The second solution that we propose to counter student isolation is to abolish student codification. As I have mentioned above, the current classical teaching method that is dominant at our university enables students to go incognito and never know each other's names. That is also the case with their professors. In our experience, professors rarely know our names, as student numbers are used as identifiers for students. The use of such identifiers reinforces a depersonalized environment within educational institutions, hindering the establishment of meaningful connections and a genuine sense of community. By moving away from student codification, we aim to cultivate an atmosphere that prioritizes the unique identity and worth of each student, fostering a more inclusive and supportive academic environment where individuals can truly feel a sense of belonging.

## Conclusion

Student anonymity and a top-down university structure are the main problems we addressed in our paper. Still, we are conscious that these problems are intertwined and cannot be resolved individually.

Therefore, we proposed a solution that addresses both factors: Social community engagement. We believe that community engagement abolishes the top-down structure as it abolishes the one-way teaching entity. In this way, the university organization will not be the hierarchical system, as non-profit organizations will take place for teaching. Secondly, we believe that student codification can be resolved as community engagement will take place in smaller groups. In this way, we tend to narrow the bridge between a secondary school and the university itself. Students can be called by their names this way, as they will take on collaboration projects in a compact and intense setting.

To end our paper, we want to address the fact that the problems we addressed are the tip of the iceberg. The ivory tower is settled inside the core of the university, and it is not possible to fully describe this in merely 3000 words. This is why we are not advocating for a swing with a wrecking ball towards the ivory tower, but rather a process where we tend to relocate the focus of the university itself. Our goal was to honor the words of Swati Kamble at the beginning of our sessions, and that is to make our university finally a brave space!

## Recognition of the group member's contributions

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E.M. and S.v.d.M. wrote the essay; E.M. wrote the third and fourth paragraphs (1436 words) and S.v.d.M. wrote the first, second and last paragraphs (1558 words).

E.M. edited the parts of the essay and did lay-out on the essay.

S.v.d.M. did two interviews for the video and R.L. did another one.

S.L. coordinated the video, transcribed the interviews and edited them.

K.H. recorded a solution for the video and edited it.

R.L. wrote said solution.

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