

Students share their views on ‘the digital agenda’ of the UvA



On 18 February, students from various faculties and backgrounds defied a severe storm to discuss the digital agenda of the UvA. The goal was simple: ensure that UvA’s digitisation plans match the needs of students, and incorporate their ideas. It turned out to be a very valuable and energetic meeting, in which students took full advantage of the opportunity to contribute their ideas.

‘Consultation of the tribe’

This certainly wasn’t one of those typical meetings, in which participants mostly listen to monologues by speakers. No, this was a meeting based on the African ‘consultation of the tribe’ format. In such meetings, the chief gathers everyone around a camp fire, briefly shares some information, and then poses his questions to the tribe. The meeting itself is all about listening to the person who holds the talking stick. Critical questions or debate are not allowed, which creates an safe environment for everyone to share his personal perspective. At the end of the meeting, the chief shares what he has learned and concluded, based on the gathered collective ‘wisdom of the tribe’.

The digital agenda

In our case, the chief was Maarten Emons. Besides Director of Information Management, he is also leader of ‘the digital agenda’ program. Maarten and his team, jointly with more than 100 focus group members and many experts across the UvA, have been working on the development of the digital agenda. This agenda, which will be finalized in the coming months, provides direction to the development of digitisation at the UvA, in order to anticipate the rapidly changing world.

It is critically important that the digital agenda will actually help our students and staff. So, chief Maarten shared key points of the UvA’s draft digital agenda with the students tribe, and then invited all students to share their perspectives on the following questions:

- Does this digital agenda match your needs and experiences as a student?
- What would make you even happier? What other points would really help you?

Student perspectives on digitisation

It was remarkable how well all faculties were represented by the participants in the session. Also remarkable was the diversity of home countries of the students, which – besides the Netherlands – included Czech Republic, Brazil, Russia, Mexico, China, France, Malaysia, Germany and Serbia.

It turned out that this diverse group was very aligned in their views on digitisation at the UvA. Here are some highlights of what students had to say:

1. **“UvA should remain a campus university.** Online cannot and should not takeover face-to-face classes and meetings. We should not forget that students go to this university to be taught by someone who we can ask questions; not to visit YouTube and watch videos. So digital is the icing on the cake, not the core! In addition, UvA’s presence in the centre of Amsterdam is a key part of its identity, of what makes it special and attractive as a university.
2. **Make it easier to find information.** Especially for foreign students, it is very difficult to find information, e.g. on how to register. Information is spread over multiple websites and apps. Students are told “it’s all on the website”, but in reality it is a quest.
3. **Use digitisation to better support students with a disorder.** For instance, students with a bipolar disorder would really benefit from recorded lectures, or the option to take exams remotely. Also, if UvA would change its font type, blind students and students with dyslexia, could better use technology that can read out written text.
4. **Align which technology and tools are being used.** Many teachers use different systems and tools, which is very confusing for students. In addition, students receive many messages and alerts from different systems and apps, which is annoying and not helpful.
5. **Strengthen the digital skills of lecturers.** Many professors don’t know how to use tools like Canvas or Zoom properly, which weakens the value of their classes. Teachers could e.g. attend a workshop where they are informed on how to use key tools (now everyone has his own way to e.g. upload information, inform students etc.). Features should be used in the same way.
6. **Be careful using data and AI.** As more data become available, we have to ensure that this is secure, and that we’re transparent on how it is used. Students have a right to own their data.
7. **Make digital education more fun.** When you’re following classes online, it sometimes feels like the ‘bad screen’, and after classes you switch to your personal ‘good screen’ again. That’s weird.
8. **Be careful in the use of fraud detection technology (proctoring).** We understand the need to detect fraud, but if students are afraid to go to the bathroom, that’s not OK.
9. **Use digitisation to bring together ideas and insights from around the world.** On topics like enrolment or sustainability, there is an incredible amount of experience and ideas from students from all over the world. The potential power of bringing this together digitally, is huge.
10. **Continue to talk with us, not only about us.** We are really happy that students are consulted on plans that will affect us, which often doesn’t happen. Please do continue to involve students more often going forward, not only on digitisation but also on other relevant subjects!”

Conclusions from the chief and his wise men

Having heard lots of valuable ideas from the students, program chief Maarten Emons had a brief consultation with a few team members, and then came back with his conclusions. Such as the opportunity to use digital for being more inclusive, the strongly articulated message that the UvA should remain a campus university, and the importance of ‘teaching the teachers’.

Maarten thanked the students for joining and their valuable contributions, and told them that he will make sure that their perspectives are taken into account as the digital agenda is further developed.

More information

If you have any questions, please send an email message to: digitale-agenda@uva.nl.