



Voices of AUC Dec. 2022 Report

AUC Student Council 2022-23

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Introduction

Voices of AUC is an annually held event in which students and staff come together to discuss important issues at AUC, as well as suggestions for improvement. As organisers and hosts of this event, the Student Council is responsible for prompting the discussions and recording the answers. This report consolidates the results of the Voices of AUC discussion which occurred on December 1st, 2022. In accordance with these results, changes are recommended in an attempt to inform future decisions made by AUC management and other participatory governing bodies. The general recommendations will also be used to inform our own work as a council moving forward, and we are therefore open to discussing them further with anyone who would like.

About the event

The theme for this year was entitled *Thoughtful Changes*, intending to encourage both thought-provoking discussion and suggestions for positive change. The theme and questions

throughout were intentionally broad and open, in order to encourage students and staff to mention what matters to them. We selected the following four areas of discussion:

1. Diversity
2. Mental Health and Wellbeing
3. Student-Staff Community
4. Sustainability

The selection of these areas was based on what we felt was important according to our Policy Plan and experience as student representatives, as well as suggestions from students and staff.

The event lasted approximately two hours, with around 50 people in attendance, the majority of which were students. Participants were asked questions pertaining to each area of discussion, and discussed within their tables. After each topic, one representative from each table was invited to share the results of their discussion. These were recorded in minutes of the event. Attendees were also encouraged to write the highlights of the discussion on a shared webpage called Padlet. These were the sources used in the writing of this report. For a full version of the minutes or Padlet responses page, please contact the AUC Student Council via email (info@aucsc.nl).

This report presents a summary of topics discussed and ideas presented for each area of discussion. Taking into account issues raised, the Student Council has formulated some general recommendations for action after each section and concludes this report with final remarks on limitations, strengths, and adaptations for future Voices of AUC events.

Diversity

The word “Diversity” featured prominently in AUC’s motto “Excellence and Diversity in a Global City”, and remains widely used in AUC's discourse. During this year's Voices of AUC, we invited AUC students and staff to come together to reflect on this concept in the context of AUC. The two questions, which were asked to inspire the discussion, were:

*How do you feel about diversity at AUC?
Where do you feel education at AUC could be diversified?*

The following paragraphs are synthesising the outcomes of these discussions.

(Lack of) diversity in the cultural, socio-economic and gender aspect was a central point of discussion. Many attendees noted the very Western / European focus at AUC concerning student membership, while others acknowledged the already very diverse character of AUC compared to other Dutch universities. Voices were raised to not only attract an even more diverse student body, but also to preserve that diversity once the students are here. It was noted for example that people usually do not share cultural celebrations and that the new committee AUCommunity could be a new catalyst for change in creating an even more welcoming



atmosphere. Furthermore, fostering a diverse environment in the classroom was mentioned as a means of creating a safe space for students, while respecting the fine line between "safe spaces" and putting "diverse individuals" in an uncomfortable spotlight. The gender disparity in women- and men-identifying students was pointed out as well.

The lack of socio-economic diversity was addressed from many attendees: The tuition price leads to a greater student body percentage from a higher socio-economic background, which further creates a lack of differing student perspectives. However, it was also mentioned that the housing opportunity at AUC and Scholarship Fund helps to diversify AUC because it makes the programme more accessible for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Diversifying education was a major point of discussion. The overall Western focus in courses was addressed, especially in Social Sciences and Humanities. The demand for a de-colonisation and diversification of the curriculum was raised, particularly with regard to authors / readings and guest lectures. Moreover, it was broadly emphasised that less Eurocentric perspectives would contribute to a more diverse education, for example through more international guest lectures.

The usage and meaning of the term "diversity" was strongly under discussion. Many agreed that the term is used a lot at AUC, yet not clearly defined. It was noted that there seems to be a miscommunication about what AUC perceives as diversity and what students perceive as diversity. Some mentioned that policies focused on diversity must be better communicated to the students. Staff shared the impression that there exist many different perspectives on these pieces of "diversity" policy among staff as well without a space to discuss this openly.

Other points raised were that the buildings are not accommodating to neuro-divergent people for instance because of too bright lights in study rooms, and that AUC as a very left-leaning college does not always allow for more strongly varying opinions to be expressed.

Concluding Remarks:

1. (Lack of) diversity and the definition of the term are pressing issues within the community.
2. There is a broad consensus that specifically socio-economic diversity must be addressed.

General Recommendations:

1. The faculty concerned with AUC's vision should discuss further and revise the Western/European focus of AUC, both in terms of admission and education.
2. The gender disparity in admissions should be continuously addressed.
3. There should be (more) training opportunities for staff, especially professors, on how to create a diverse and safe (in-class) environment.
4. AUCommunity should be supported in their effort of creating a welcoming atmosphere for students and celebrating various cultures.



5. The housing and scholarship opportunities should be strengthened since they can make AUC more accessible through accommodating students with varying socio-economic backgrounds.
6. De-colonisation and diversification of the curriculum should continuously be of highest importance.
7. More emphasis on international guest lectures, for example through online means, would help in including more different perspectives in the classroom.
8. The discussion on AUC's definition of "diversity" should be open to all members of the community (students and staff).
9. Internally, more spaces should be created for staff members to discuss issues such as "diversity (policy)".
10. Accommodations for neuro-divergent people should be further explored for instance in collaboration with AUCSC, DivCom and other Student Councils.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing remains an especially prevalent topic at AUC given the high-pressure academic programme and large proportion of international students. AUC is also no exception to global trends of increasing mental health issues as a result of COVID-19. AUC offers a range of its own support services for students intended to help them during their studies. The following questions were asked surrounding this subject.

What should AUC's role be in students' mental health and wellbeing?

Do you think the wellbeing services at AUC are sufficient? Which changes do you envision?

The discussion which followed these questions concerns different subjects. The input of the attendees is organized according to these subjects.

In 4 of the 5 tables occupied, the pressure or stress of the academic program at AUC was specifically mentioned. Students mentioned a variety of causes for this, including a high workload in courses, a strict attendance policy, stress of not getting into desired courses, difficulty getting extensions, and pressure of maintaining a certain GPA for scholarship students. It's worth noting that the discussion of stress and pressure was not only the most commonly mentioned sentiment, but that it served as a basis for the discussion that followed.

Regarding the current support resources, much of the discussion was centred around the Student Life Officers (SLOs). Many expressed appreciation for the SLO system and Peer Support, and believe AUC offers more support than other universities, which they feel is warranted given the stress of the academic program. However, there was a widespread sentiment among the attendees that the support system does not work perfectly. Most reasons given for this are communication-related. Some said that incoming students have difficulty understanding and navigating this system. Others expressed a wish to have more clarity on what students can expect from the support offered at AUC and on the limits of support.



Many felt that the SLOs are not used enough because students don't understand when to reach out to them and what they can do for students. Some also argued that the SLOs are not accessible enough to students due to lack of visibility and transparency about how to reach them, though others attributed SLO under-usage to the difficulty students have in asking for help. At the event, the SLOs expressed awareness of a struggle with visibility and mentioned that they are trying to increase awareness of how they can help. This answer did not satisfy some students at the event, who believed more could be done with respect to SLO visibility and awareness.

The tutor system was also mentioned in this discussion, as one table asked for more clarity on how tutors can offer support. Additionally, another table shared that students do not feel every tutor supports the mental health and wellbeing of their tutees in the same way. It seems there is not a common understanding of how tutors can help among students nor among tutors.

From the discussion regarding the current support system, it seems that the needs, or at least the expectations, of students are not entirely met in terms of mental health and wellbeing support despite efforts to do so.

Some mentioned a psychologist at AUC would improve the current situation, as they believe a psychologist would make it easier for incoming international students to reach out for help without navigating the Dutch healthcare system.

Furthermore, some students felt that the attitude of lecturers is not understanding enough. Some students expressed that they are given work that is highly time-consuming and not academically challenging, leading to avoidable stress. Others mentioned that some lecturers feel an honours program should be stressful. Two tables mentioned that lecturers cannot always tell when a student is genuinely struggling, which makes it more difficult to know when to grant extensions or accommodate students in other ways.

Concluding remarks:

1. The current wellbeing resources at AUC do not meet the expectations of the students.
2. Shortcomings of the wellbeing resources are attributed to communication issues, for example regarding SLO visibility.
3. Mental health and wellbeing at AUC is closely related to the academic pressure of the program.
4. It is not clear how the tutors can offer support.

General Recommendations:

1. More clarity should be given regarding the role of the SLOs in students' lives.
2. Attempts to improve SLO visibility should continue, though more research should be done regarding whether visibility is truly the only gap in the support system or if a change in the structure would improve the resources more.



3. The tutor system should be clear, consistent, and homogenous regarding its role in the student support system.
4. Acknowledgement of AUC students' susceptibility to mental health and wellbeing issues should extend beyond the SLOs, and lecturers should try to be mindful of this issue as well.

Student-Staff Community

In contrast to other universities, students and staff members are in closer contact at AUC due to the size of our faculty and the character of our programme. In the best case, a well-nourished community ensures a pleasant working atmosphere, and makes every member feel comfortable and secure. With this topic, we wanted to initiate discussions concerning the current state of our student-staff community and possible improvements. Specific questions asked were:

*How can we foster/ create a student-staff community?
What do you think about the tutoring system at AUC? Do you envision any changes?*

In the following paragraphs, the outcomes of these discussions will be shared.

The attendees broadly spoke up for more joint student and staff events, since having more social relationships plays an important role in allowing for discussion facilitations such as Voices of AUC. It was strongly pointed out that most AUC bodies (BoE, BoS, Management, Student Life Officers etc.) need more visibility. Suggestions included having a fair/market where students and other staff members can chat with these bodies, ask questions, and establish more personal connections. Students are often insecure when approaching a body such as the BoE for example, since they don't personally know who they are talking to. It was further mentioned that few teachers have open hours; an increase could foster better relationships and connections. Students noted that favourite courses at AUC are the ones where they have better relationships with their teachers. Having more social events with teachers and tutors was another central concern. Also, students would like to have easier means of reaching staff members and more accessible information on who to reach out to for which concern. Further, the wish to provide tutors with a budget to go out and have a drink with their tutees was expressed. Staff should also be invited more directly to student events to make them feel more included.

Students strongly appreciate the tutor system. Yet, while some tutors are going beyond their role or are often overworked, others' support is lacking distinctly. These different levels of involvement of tutors are a very frustrating experience for many students. The creation of a more standardised tutee experience was suggested and the idea of a tutor evaluation system broadly supported, especially amongst students. A tutor feedback form would be a good idea since it could touch upon the tutee experience disparity and inform changes to make it a more homogenous experience. Furthermore, from the student perspective, it was broadly criticised that tutors are often not aligned with the student's track/major. A new point raised was the idea of training tutors in basic mental health for critical situations when students open up about it.



Staff mentioned that there are different resources to talk about bad experiences with teachers, yet the existing resources lack awareness/visibility. Students shared their experience that some lectures are more willing to take feedback than others, and appreciate more chances to give feedback. Students further noted how difficult it can be to connect with teachers from VU and UvA. Especially, when it comes to Capstone supervision, this becomes a major issue for 3rd year students. Furthermore, it was mentioned that there should be more awareness amongst teachers concerning the disability handbook.

An additional concern raised was that Service Desk could have more office hours. Finally, experiences of controversial language being used by staff members were shared by students. Especially in a diverse community such as AUC, all members must be safe from such acts.

Concluding Remarks:

1. There are not enough possibilities for joint students and staff events; a circumstance which negatively affects the student-staff community feeling.
2. Feedback and support systems at AUC are not sufficient / sufficiently used or non-existent when it comes to the tutoring system.
3. AUC must be a safe space for all members of the AUC community where no one is subjected to discriminative and controversial language.

General Recommendations:

1. There should be more joint student-staff events.
2. A tutor evaluation form should be created to address the tutee experience disparity.
3. More means should be available for tutor group bondings.
4. The course / teacher evaluation systems should be revised and improved.
5. Better connections to UvA and VU teachers should be established.
6. Service Desk office hours should be revised.
7. A safe space for all members of the AUC community where no one is subjected to discriminative and controversial language must be ensured.

Sustainability

Given the current state of the climate crisis, a push for more sustainability is on the agenda of AUC students and staff. With an already relatively sustainable academic building, the question for this topic was:

What do you believe is the next step for sustainability at AUC?

Some expressed that they feel AUC is already doing well with respect to sustainability, though almost all attendees gave suggestions where they felt more could be done. Regarding the building and its facilities, most tables mentioned that the lighting is wasteful, as there are



more lights than necessary, and that they are on after closing hours and during the weekends. Some also suggested removing the disposable cups by the coffee machines or incentivising people to use their own reusable cups. It was also mentioned that the canteen could use less plastic and sell less meat. Finally, some questioned whether the heat pump in the Academic Building is working or not.

Many pushed for more courses to account for sustainability. Economics courses were specifically mentioned here. Some wished for more awareness of sustainability, such as budgeting and low-emissions travel. Some also wanted to increase the responsibility of the Sustainability Commission to advise not only AUCSA, but also AUC and the Student Council.

Lastly, the moving situation was strongly highlighted in this discussion, as each year many students move in and out of the dorms, and many items get discarded in this process. Some pushed to make this process less wasteful, perhaps by re-implementing the free pop-up stores and by increasing the awareness of how to dispose of large broken furniture or appliances. Many did not know that you can make an appointment with the municipality for this.

Concluding Remarks:

1. The Academic Building could be doing more with respect to sustainability.
2. Sustainability is not as high on the agenda as many would like.
3. The moving period in the dorms generates a lot of avoidable waste.

General Recommendations:

1. The facilities should continually move towards more sustainable practice, and the necessity of bright lights in the building, plastic in the canteen, and single-use cups should be evaluated and changed accordingly.
2. Sustainability should be more incorporated into the courses and curriculum at AUC.
3. There should be a greater focus in the coming moving periods to minimize waste with the help of AUC external communications and DUWO.

Final remarks on limitations, strengths, and adaptations for future Voices of AUC events

Limitations

Unfortunately, there was a disproportionate number of students and staff present at the event. Little attendance of AUC lecturers amplified that tension. The late hours (6-8pm) might have made it difficult for many staff members to attend. In the sustainability discussion, it was



unclear what was meant for some attendants. Additionally, there was no time for a plenary session on this topic. Time management generally must be improved. In informal feedback, the council was made aware that some student attendants felt like there was no safe space for discussion, due to the public environment and at times intimidating presence of management.

Strengths

The student council was specifically delighted about the high turnout compared to previous Voices of AUC events. Also, every table engaged in lively discussions, which was the intention. The new strategy of integrating Padlet worked well and ensured that everyone could add their thoughts, even when there was not enough time during the plenary to hear every single concern. The snacks were well-received.

Adaptations

The Student Council intends to learn from the limitations and strengths for future Voices of AUC events. In hopes to attract greater attendance from lecturers and other staff, we intend to publicise the event earlier and reach out to lecturers directly rather than only via the Heads of Studies. We also believe a more balanced attendance would change the atmosphere of the event and hopefully create a safer environment for voicing a variety of perspectives. The Student Council was also influenced by much of what was said, and has discussed initiatives based on concerns and suggestions here, such as planning a Bodies of AUC fair for the following year.

