



7. Organisation: we are agile thanks to our process and governance design

In order to achieve our ambitions, we must be able to adapt our broad range of research and education quickly and at any time. As an academic environment, the UvA must challenge staff and students to be the best they can be and to think beyond the boundaries of their own discipline. We can only do this if our organisation is lithe in terms of change processes and agile in its daily operations.

This requires a degree of flexibility and team spirit that is generally found in each of us but which is not easily brought out due to the complex, pyramid-shaped professional organisation that characterises the UvA as a whole. In the field of education in particular, agility in operational management is a challenge due to the quality requirements, digitalisation and the changing student population. Over the next few years, we want to encourage teamwork, entrepreneurship and agile management in the field of research and education within the UvA.

An effective operational management set-up makes collaboration and entrepreneurship easier for end users (students, lecturers, researchers, partners, decision makers). The challenge in operational management is to achieve, with the available resources, the right balance between responding flexibly to opportunities on the one hand and efficiently implementing standardised processes on the other. The art is to use standards ('ISO standards') that enable research groups and degree programmes to maintain their autonomy, while, at the same time, being able to carry out their activities anywhere in the UvA. Only for very good reasons should staff and students feel restricted by specific faculty procedures and practices.

Internal mobility and the long-term employability of staff help build and establish standardised processes. We want to encourage both. As things stand, employees who change roles within the UvA regularly have to contend with different procedures and practices; they can help identify and tackle any issues that arise. Together with the revised Social Charter, job rotation helps make the organisation more agile. In addition, wherever possible, it avoids formal reorganisations.

The agile academic system that we are striving for requires us to:

1. making the most of creativity through teams and entrepreneurship
2. using standards for business design and operational management processes
3. narrowing the gap between professional service providers and end users



7.1 Making the most of creativity through teams and entrepreneurship

Individual employees possess a great deal of creativity, which helps us identify and take advantage of opportunities in education and research. Scope for creativity, and the feeling that this scope exists, is therefore crucial. This requires trust, mutual commitment and the freedom to take (responsible) risks. At the same time, we want to achieve our shared objectives. In order to strike a good balance between the two, we want to move towards more programmatic and ‘fluid’ work practices in teams, and towards co-creation between academics and professionals from operational management. We will focus more on what needs to be achieved and less on how we must achieve it. This requires entrepreneurship, and clarity over what is fixed (legislation and regulations, finance, quality system) and the extent to which there is scope for professional autonomy. Clarity can help keep rules and regulations to a minimum and let employees have more ownership over the primary process.

Another thing that helps improve the organisation is the recognition that not everyone has to be good at everything. We work in teams which are more than the sum of their parts. It helps if we are proud of both our own achievements and those of others. If we realise that teaching and learning cannot flourish without effective operational support. If not only our work practices are fluid but we also enable periodical changes in individual roles both within and outside of teams. We are all jointly responsible for the degree programmes that we offer, the research contracts and programmes entered into and the care given to our patients and clients – not just for our own particular area.

Investing in teams demands a fair amount from managers. They must be able to inspire, lead and motivate a group of people. Managers must put their trust in people, give team members the opportunity to deploy their various talents and to jointly evaluate collective performance. As far as team members are concerned, this way of working requires them to take a stand and show commitment, in a spirit of collective responsibility for their work and based on the trust that has been placed in them.

We will be a better, more agile organisation if we embrace a culture which values entrepreneurship and experimentation and understands that time needs to be devoted to them. It’s okay to make mistakes – because we can learn from them. Entrepreneurship is what is known as an outside-in principle: employees are given the autonomy to respond to a perceived need or opportunity in the outside world and take responsibility for the result. This is different from performing a task handed down from the top and being accountable for the process. As an organisation we are working towards an open atmosphere in which this can be done safely, within clear conditions.

This requires a specific mindset. In formal organisations, new initiatives often end up at the back of the queue for facilities and accommodation, whereas what you really want to do is to embrace them and take them forward. If we are to encourage internal entrepreneurship, we must be aware of this.

Things to do

- Invest in tools for project-based working (for managers and employees) and in familiarity with flexible working practices.
- Encourage internal entrepreneurship and value teamwork by including it in the HR policy and toolset.
- Further expand the Amsterdam Research Based Campus concept on the Roeterseiland Campus and in the University Quarter, i.e. link innovation to accommodation strategy. This could follow the example of Amsterdam Science Park, where researchers, students, businesses and social partners are all based at a single location and can easily interact with each other.



7.2 Using standards in operational management

We can only make the most of the variety within the UvA and collaborate effectively beyond the boundaries of units (and even across the boundaries of other Amsterdam-based institutions) if the design of ‘systems’ is sufficiently flexible to help rather than hinder people. Examples of this include digital assessments, or the way in which costs are settled for lecturers in interdisciplinary courses. The need for elimination of barriers to collaboration in governance models and administrative procedures is clear not only from the educational collaborations within the UvA but also, for example, from the joint degrees with VU Amsterdam and from the merger of AMC and VUmc into Amsterdam UMC.

The needs of education and research constitute our point of departure. Over the next few years we must continue to work on effective standards and definitions (‘ISO standards’) for our process chains and on collaboration between the service units themselves and between the service units and the faculties. Not everyone needs to do exactly the same but we must eliminate historical differences in the operational management of faculties and degree programmes where they get in the way of our agility and our ability to respond to change. We are already doing this in the Teaching Logistics programme, for example.

We are supplementing the UvA governance model with a mechanism which, where differences are identified between existing practices, enables us to determine which minimal standards must be adhered to. We will also ensure that the choices we make are coherent. The executive committee (BVO, which comprises of directors of operational management of faculties and services) will play a greater role in this. As an ‘alliance’ of commissioners, the BVO already plays a major role in the design of the operational management processes. This will continue to be the case but we will strengthen this role and ensure that decisions regarding desired standards are prepared by an authoritative, specialist advisory board.

Things to do

- Adopt standards for the UvA’s operational management. Be wary of differences that we see as ‘that’s just how it is at the UvA’.
- Strengthen the role of the BVO in the governance model as a forum for collaboration between the faculties and with the service units.
- Set up a UvA Standards Board (USB) to provide authoritative advice on administrative standards and definitions in the business processes, which also make external collaboration easier.



7.3 Narrowing the gap between professional service providers and end users

Top-quality teaching and learning requires not only the flexible business processes described above, but also professional service providers who develop, manage and improve the processes. This includes both people who work in education and research (such as study advisers, laboratory staff, library staff and business developers) and people in general services (such as ICT, administration, secretariats and facilities). They too are committed to education, research and knowledge transfer. The aim is that each and every one of us will be genuinely proud of our work ('at the UvA, things are well organised' – even if sometimes things don't go quite right). If all goes well, support and management staff will be doubly proud, of the professional quality of their own work and of the academic quality and reputation of the UvA as a whole. To this end, we are working towards two objectives: carefully considered standards and an awareness of quality in the process chains (as described in Section 7.2) and, at the same time, less distance between operational management and the primary process. The latter can be achieved, among other things, by aligning the work of the service units more effectively with faculty operational management and vice versa.

In 2017, on the dissolution of the administrative merger, an implementation plan 'Samen Doen' was drawn up for each of the four services that work jointly for the UvA and AUAS in order to maintain the collaboration and benefit from economies of scale. This includes, for example, higher quality, sustainability and/or lower costs per unit. Once 'Samen Doen' has been evaluated, we will continue to work on successful shared services.

Supply of and demand for the 'products' the services provide are defined in the Service Level Agreements (SLAs) which the faculties and service units enter into on a periodical basis. Generally speaking, the unit supplying the product has an excellent understanding of the quality and costs of the product, as well as a professional opinion regarding potential improvements or savings. However, it is important to better organise the demand side. This will allow the professional expertise and needs of users to be taken into account more effectively both when improving operational management and when improving products.

Things to do

- Develop a vision on the value of operational management to end users and the primary process and for the division of tasks between shared service units and faculty operational management.
- Draw up a new implementation plan for the services shared between the UvA and AUAS (following their relocation in 2021) for the remaining period of the plan.
- Complete the upgrading and professionalisation of the SLA cycle in 2022.