Dear Executive Board,

Hereby does the Central Student Council (hereafter: CSR) send an unsolicited advice regarding the yearly structure, 8-8-4, of the UvA.

Over the course of the last few weeks the CSR has been evaluating the 8-8-4 year structure; considering some potential alternatives and ways of implementing these alternatives. Although the 8-8-4 structure works well for some faculties, the CSR has a general consensus that some degree of change, or at least flexibility with regards to the year structure, would be beneficial for the UvA and its students. Hence, in the following letter we will outline the most essential elements of the CSR's discourse, and finally, the CSR will request the creation of a working group charged with the task of evaluating the efficacy of our current system, as well as the potential for change.

8-8-4 in its Current State

As has been mentioned, the CSR reached a general consensus that 8-8-4 is problematic for quite some faculties on a number of fronts, and that the UvA would benefit from modification. The main reasons leading us to this conclusion are as follows: firstly, 40 weeks of university a year is for many students unsustainable. Part of the reason that the UvA has a growing mental health problem is the fact that students endure what are somewhat inevitable periods of stress for excessively prolonged timespans. This is particularly problematic for those individuals who may be more prone to mental health issues, for those who might need to work on the side in order to fund their education, or for those who face any multitude of common circumstances that inhibit their ability to endure university education for 40 weeks a year.

Secondly, for those people who want to pursue internships, the options are scarce. Either they undertake their apprenticeships during university time, which might not be logistically possible, and would likely involve taking on a large amount of pressure due to the double commitment, or they sacrificing half of an already relatively short summer, which might not give students enough time to recuperate for the coming year. If the UvA wants to prepare its students for the workforce, then it should at least give them the opportunity to
achieve what is considered to be increasingly important to the contemporary employer - work experience - the attainment of which is seldom possible under the current system.

Thirdly, the system we have in place puts a lot of pressure on the 4 week blocks. For staff it is a huge challenge to fit a course in such a small timescale and students are put under high workloads. A system where this workload is relieved would be preferable. By designing the transfer from the 8 weeks to the first weeks in such a manner that the 4 week block doesn’t start immediately after an exam or by following a complete different system, this workload would become more bearable.

Lastly, what we have seen when it comes to a lot of the UvA’s biggest student issues, is that there simply is not enough funding being allocated to the necessary facilities. For mental health, there is a lack of student psychologists; for social safety, there is a lack of trained ombudspeople; for numerous fixus, there is a lack of academic resources in general, and so on. Part of the reason that the university’s available funding is so strained, is the cost of keeping this massive institution fully running for almost 10 months a year. In that sense, reducing the number of active school-weeks could not only improve employability, give students flexibility with their time and mitigate mental health issues, but it could also mobilize spending, thereby improving the university two-fold in the course of a single action — ‘killing two birds with one stone’.

As a final note on this part, I would like to stress that we are living during a uniquely malleable time. The current pandemic situation has led many to accept that when life goes back to ‘normal’, things are unlikely to be the same as they were before coronavirus. In that sense, given that people have accepted wide-scale change as an inevitable consequence of this major health-event, right now might be the best moment to pursue this adjustment of the year-plan. This ‘fresh start’ could be the perfect instance in which to implement change without disrupting people’s expectations of uniformity.

Year Structure Alternatives

Once we’ve accepted that the UvA needs a change, the question turns to what this change would look like. The following are a few suggestions out a more extensive list. However, prior to describing them in detail, it is important to note that the CSR has decided the most appropriate implementation strategy as being ‘Restricted Decentral Autonomy’. We have recognized that 8-8-4 is a decentral issue, and that while some faculties might prefer to change the system, others would find it beneficial to retain the current year plan as opposed to any available alternative. As such, this implementation strategy would give faculties a choice of two (three, at most) options, one of which is 8-8-4 (in the case that they do not want to change anything). The other option(s) could be any of the following:

7-7-4: There has been a lot of support within the CSR towards a 7-7-4 system, in which the first week of each 8-week academic block is either, reserved for community building - there would be no classes or major work assignments, giving students the opportunity to recuperate before the start of the next block (we call this ‘Community Building: 7-7-4’) - or these weeks are ‘saved’ and used for the summer, contributing a complete additional month to the summer period (we call this Longer Summer:7-7-4). The latter option would reduce the length of the period of stress that students would need to endure, while also providing flexibility for those students who want to attain work experience. Furthermore, the 7-7-4 system would be ideal in terms of its alignment with faculties who choose to stick with 8-8-4, because the two Year Plans can operate quite seamlessly side-by-side. Our two main concerns for this system, however, are that the content of a 7-week education would be compressed into 6 weeks, which might create even more intensity, and that for courses which have midterms, a 6-week block of learning may not be ideal due to logistical reasons.

10-10-10-10: In this system, 7-week blocks of teaching are followed by three weeks of exams and resits. This means that students who do not have resits are entitled to a week of recuperation before the start of the next block. The 4x10 system also satisfies the concerns of students with midterms (in particular, FEB students) for a number of reasons: firstly, midterms can take place as scheduled due to the retention of a 7-
week academic period. Secondly, with all of their resits being scheduled at the end of the academic year, this system allows resits to be done consistently throughout the course of the year, giving them more time to rest during the summer.

With these suggestions in mind, I would like to stress two general points before moving to our final request of a working group.

Firstly, extending the summer, or increasing holiday time in general, has little to do with getting more free time for the sake of it. Of course, students can choose to spend extra weeks of holiday however they want, even if that be doing nothing. However, the 2 main goals of changing the 8-8-4 systems are a) mitigating stress levels, and b) giving students flexibility with regards to how they want to spend their university time as preparation for the future. If they want to pursue work experience opportunities, they should not be inhibited from doing so. Flexibility, in that sense, is the name of the game.

Secondly, if we look at schools around the world that are known at least for their strong academic culture, Oxford has 24 weeks of university, Science Po has 24 weeks of school, National University Singapore has 30 weeks, University of Sao Paolo has 34, Stanford has 30 weeks. As a council, we might not be in favour of the UvA resembling some or any of this institution, but the trend that we are trying to demonstrate is that good education does not necessarily mean a drawn-out education. Either way, we think that we should put some question marks behind the idea of an a 40-week year.

Our Request

We are fully aware of the high level of complexity of this issue, as well as the effort which would be required to create any sort of change. In that sense, we do not expect an overnight decision. Instead, what we would like to see is the formation of a working group which would evaluate the current structure of our academic year, and what opportunities there would be to change it. It would be important to have members of the central medezeggenschap in this group, as well as delegations from the faculties and experts in planning and corporate structures. Ultimately, we would hope to see some modification occur in the coming years, but this would be the first step of many.

The CSR hopes to have informed the CvB sufficiently on the subject and is open to answer any questions left unclear,

Met vriendelijke groet,

Pjotr van der Jagt
Voorzitter