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Ons kenmerk 21fgw003  
Uw kenmerk fgw21u0058

**Negative Advice Frame Curriculum Humanities in Context at Macro Level**

Dear dean, dear Fred,

On the 19th of February 2021 the Faculty Student Council of the Faculty of Humanities received an advice request (fgw21u0058) regarding the Humanities in Context curriculum at macro level, i.e.: the intended study profile, the didactic principles and the structure of the study programme.

By means of this letter the FSR FGw gives its negative advice on the Humanities in Context bachelor (BA HiC) curriculum at macro level. Hereafter, we will clarify the negative outcome of the recommendation per relevant topic.

Firstly, the *Curriculum description Bachelor Program HiC* contains little detail regarding the content of the fields of study. Despite including nearly one hundred pages of documentation about the BA HiC, there is no insight into what specific subjects the propaedeutic year will eventually contain. 'Global societal problems' is a broad and vague concept, especially as no selection method for these "problems" is presented. **The FSR FGw wonders how and by whom these societal problems will be chosen. Will this be done by the HiC teachers or students?** Also, no definition is given of what the program sees as a societal problem. In the paragraph about the *object of study*, the research focus is, in our opinion, too broad.

The FSR FGw is aware that the curriculum is still a 'work in progress', however, the council believes that the current timeline is too short to develop the remainder of the curriculum – two and a half years – in six months including holidays, considering that the development of the current six months of the curriculum has already taken a year and a half. As the FSR FGw discussed with the fDB, the state of development we are comfortable with depends on the amount of time the fDB is willing to spend on

the development of the bachelor. We understand that some changes will be made, as happens in other bachelor programmes and faculties. Since this is a new BA, including two entirely new majors, and there is no existing research school associated with the BA HiC, we believe that a stable foundation for the second and third years should be established prior to the start of the program.

The delivery of the major tracks in July 2021 and the start of student recruitment in October 2021, as is planned in the time path seems impossible to the FSR FGw, especially, at the current pace the development is moving. The FSR FGw is also of the opinion that it is unwise to largely realize the details of the major tracks curricula after the program has already started, as suggested during the *Overlegvergadering* of March 16, 2021. There must be more substantive clarity for future students, especially because of the major track structure. When a potential student chooses the BA HiC without having substantive knowledge of the two years following the propaedeutic year, the FSR FGw regards this as a poorly informed choice of study. Continuing, there is also a lack of clarity regarding the connection to the labour market, this aspect has been elaborated only for the *Global Culture Studies* major because here the knowledge from the existing BA Cultuurwetenschappen is used. For students and their parents this [career option] is an important aspect that can influence a person's choice of study, but despite the fact that the HiC team mentions this as a point of attention the connection between the training and the labour market is not further elaborated in concrete terms.

The responsibility for developing the remaining curriculum rests with the future teaching staff and the TLC<sup>1</sup>, moreover no outside teachers will be hired with experience in the specific didactic method or specialisations of the majors. Moreover, there is no set-up yet as to which faculty teachers, in addition to current BA Cultuurwetenschappen teachers, will be part of the BA HiC teaching staff. The board expects that this team of teachers will largely consist of the current BA Cultuurwetenschappen team. Yet, the current workload of this teaching team [BA Cultuurwetenschappen] is already very high. After our meeting on the 16th of April 2021, we know that the time allocated to the teachers for developing the BA HiC curriculum will be within their set of hours. However, we are unconvinced of how this is going to be realized. We believe this estimation to be unworkable, especially considering the tight time frame. Including the fact that the FSR FGw is negative about the language change for other reasons, we find the planning regarding the language change and the curriculum design highly unrealistic. Also, the BA Cultuurwetenschappen team has not been involved in the current curriculum design which makes the FSR FGw sceptical and concerned about how future collaboration will proceed.

Furthermore, taking into account the different proposed specialisations in the BA HiC and **the reference to a small teaching staff, it is unclear to the FSR FGw how the teachers will be**

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<sup>1</sup> It is unclear to the FSR FGw whether the TLC has the necessary expertise to perform all the intended tasks assigned to them in the *HiC curriculum description*. In addition, it is also not mentioned whether the TLC has the time and space to carry out these tasks in the short term, which also worries us about the workload.

**distributed over the different majors. Especially when taking into consideration the student numbers per track and the teachers' expertise.**

## Study profile

The intended study profile can quickly become problematic, according to the FSR FGw. The program intends to train students

*"...tot experts in het onderzoeken en creëren van culturele, sociale en maatschappelijke veranderingen die bijdragen aan het oplossen van problemen die voortkomen uit grote maatschappelijke omwentelingen zoals digitale transformatie, klimaatverandering en globalisering. Studenten willen en kunnen een impact maken." (fgw21u0058, 2)*

The FSR FGW sees little geographic self-awareness, including awareness of the UvA's perspective and its own positionality. The danger here is the perceived idea of superiority where HiC students have the expertise and knowledge to "solve" global social problems – that HiC students know better than people present in the local situation. This can give the students and the program an unjustified sense of expertise on the topics. Furthermore, the focus on "solving" can result in the discussed topics being oversimplified in order to make them manageable and solvable. If it is designed as it is now described in the curriculum design, the program presents an imperialist view of the world. According to the FSR FGw, this is a bad development: the faculty should strive for a nuanced, self-aware and decolonized perspective within its education, especially when designing new curricula.

## Structure of the study programme

In addition, the structure of the program is disconcerting for the FSR FGw. Only the propaedeutic year is scheduled for garnering fundamental knowledge. Which does not include many methods derived from the humanities. According to the curriculum design, the methods incorporated into the program from a humanities perspective are: narratology, metaphor and symbolism. **Nevertheless, it is still unclear how these methods will go hand in hand with the other didactic methods, and what focus point(s) will steer these methods.** The FSR FGw considers it important that these topics are clarified in the curriculum plans, again because here the expertise is explicitly derived from the humanities.

Only 66 EC is attributed to the majors, which is limited compared to other humanities BAs where specialization is present from the first year. The FSR FGw is sceptical about the allocated minor space of the BA HiC, as potential depth in the major can be lost here. However, CoH education director Dr. Carlos Reijnen confirmed in the HiC follow-up meeting on March 29 (2021) that the minor space will not be taken out of the program, as this space could strengthen the connection with a potential master programme. The FSR FGw is of the opinion that specialization must be emphasized and regarded with

importance in a bachelor as broad as BA HiC and thus it is worrisome that only 66 EC is left for the major.

The second year contains 24 ECs of 'free' elective space, which in the current design will consist of packages aiming to aid the connection with different masters. The FSR FGw is convinced that the 24 EC free space should offer students the opportunity to discover themselves and their academic interests. For a bachelor-master connection to rely on these 24 ECs, is therefore regarded by the FSR FGw as an undesirable development. The number of choices the students have to make in the BA HiC after their initial choice of study is disproportionately high and can be perceived as stressful by students (decision fatigue). In the *Expert meeting New Interdisciplinary Bachelor Program at UvA Faculty of Humanities* is described that at many interdisciplinary universities extra guidance is given for students to aid them in their decisions. The BA HiC also aims to provide additional guidance to students through regular tutoring sessions. **It is unclear to the FSR FGw how this extra guidance is realized within the set hours of the teachers and how this will be funded.** After our meeting on April 16 (2021), it became clear to the FSR FGw that the BA HiC will not receive extra budget to realize these plans but that the extra guidance will be paid from the standard budget. **The FSR FGw would like to know which activities in the program will then receive fewer hours and budget to compensate for the extra guidance.**

The courses present in the propaedeutic phase contain 6 EC or 3 EC, or 6 EC divided over two blocks. The FSR FGw interprets the division of these credits as an indicator for a high study pace and a lack of profundity. In addition to this observation, the possibility to teach 3 EC courses is not yet available in our OER A. In the curriculum description, under the point *propaedeutic year*, it is described that some 3 EC and 6 EC courses cannot be taken separately but can be tested separately. This can, among other things, cause problems for the resits, the coherence between the two subjects and communication concerning examinations.

### Didactic principles

The FSR FGw also has several concerns regarding the *method of assessment*. BA HiC focuses on testing via projects, creative products and portfolios. The current curriculum leaves little room for individual work, such as written exams and essays. The FSR FGw sees this as an important skill for fully-fledged humanities graduates and an important aspect in the preparation for a humanities master. In addition to learning to work together, developing individual study skills is also important in an academic education. The opportunity to develop creative skills is also lacking in the current educational goals. Taking the mentioned 'cultural products' into account, the FSR FGw would like to stress that *learning by doing* does not guarantee that students will ultimately be able to acquire/deliver a high-quality cultural product.

In the report *feedback Councils on curriculum description HiC of 21 January 2021*, the concern was expressed whether the didactic method would be maintained enough for HiC students if existing modules were to be used in the bachelor. The FSR FGw shares this concern, and also wonders whether HiC students with the aforementioned focus on projects and cultural products will ultimately develop sufficient competence to participate in subjects outside the BA HiC, where traditional exams and essays may be present (or are the norm), as they will not be trained in this in the current curriculum design.

The FSR FGw is of the opinion that the board has too broad of a wish for the student profile. This is reflected in the number of decisions that still have to be made for the study program: the board wants to attract a diverse group of Dutch students, as well as international students. HiC should be a choice for students who wouldn't normally choose the humanities, but it should also attract creative and artistic students.

In our opinion, uncertainties are still present because no market research has been carried out. The idea that HiC will attract students is therefore entirely based on the fact that other interdisciplinary courses attract students, which does not necessarily indicate a group of diverse Dutch students. There is no evidence yet that HiC's target student population will actually choose HiC. This brings us to the following point: The FSR FGw is not convinced that HiC offers anything new in its current form, especially considering the existing range of interdisciplinary courses at the UvA and in the Netherlands. The UvA alone has a wide range of comparable bachelor's programs, such as *Bèta-Gamma*, *Future Planet Studies*, *AUC*, *Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, and *Humans, Society and Technology*. The BA HiC has to compete with all these programs for prospective students.

In the curriculum description, point 10 *grouping and community building* mentions the wish to make the BA HiC an open and inclusive community. This point is mentioned without arguing **why** and **how** HiC will create such a community. Expressing a desire to make an open and inclusive community does not mean that this dream will actually be realised – concrete plans are needed for this. The FSR FGw sees having this wish as a good development but drafting the idea without a clear delineation we consider unrealistic, also due to the fact that we see that other programs at the faculty already struggling with this. The curriculum design describes the plan to organize a mentoring structure among the students, to strengthen student development and group formation. Reasonably, this is not possible for freshmen, as they are the first (and only) batch of HiC students. The FSR FGw wonders how this structure will develop in the first year. Unfortunately, as currently worded, these activities will not be financially reimbursed or rewarded through ECs. Students will have to do a lot of extracurricular work without compensation, which offsets the goal of inclusivity of the study program. If students are expected to put in extra work and hours into extracurricular activities for their program without compensation, only students who, for example, do not need a side job will be able to fully engage in these activities. Furthermore, it is difficult to create a sense of community for a program that

is being created from scratch. Encouraging the students, through financial compensation and scheduling these activities within designated class hours may help.

What's more, certain 'extras' - such as their own faculty 'meet-up' location and extra guidance - that HiC students will receive will create a gap between HiC students and other FGw students who do not enjoy the same privileges (and are perhaps also in need of such facilities, including a refurbished or new space). As an example, this is the case in the Faculty of Law between PPLE and the other law students. The FSR FGw is of the opinion that isolated programmes are not beneficial for overall community building in the faculty. It does not add to the notion of diversity of ideas and people, a goal HiC wants to strive for.

Bilingual education will also have a substantive influence on the BA HiC, which is why the FSR FGw criticizes the choice for bilingual education in our dissent letter(21fgw004) concerning the language change. During the program, the intention is to let the students cooperate with companies, cultural institutions and/or to let the students perform voluntary work. Offering such social partnerships entirely bilingual is challenging to say the least; we definitely foresee complications for the intended international students compared to Dutch students. It will be more complicated and more demanding for international students to work with Dutch-speaking institutes and companies where Dutch language is often required or an advantage. The potential partners listed under Point 16 are unconfirmed and for the most part work in Dutch. Some of these potential partners have previously collaborated with the UvA, albeit unsuccessfully. Whilst it is still unclear whether these partners want to collaborate with the Faculty of Humanities, the programme [HiC] largely dependent on these collaborations content-wise.

Collaboration between BA HiC and these companies/partners can involve ethical dangers. In case of a potential cooperation, it must be disclosed why and how certain companies have been selected and in what way the cooperation will ensue. This is important to protect the students and the academic prestige of our faculty.

To conclude, the FSR FGw advises negatively on the Humanities in Context (HiC) bachelor curriculum at the macro level. As a student council we have an obligation to protect the (future) students of the faculty and make sure they are taken seriously. The FSR FGw wants these students to be seen as more than just an experiment to strengthen the financial future of the faculty. The education of these students should be of high quality; the faculty should be able to ensure that they are well educated academically and that their education offers them a realistic future on the job market or in academia. The FSR FGw cannot state at this time that the HiC bachelor at the macro level gives us that confidence.

Yours sincerely,

On behalf of the FSR FGw,



**Zazie van Dorp**

*Chair FSR FGw*