

Inclusiveness and students' participation

(15 februari 2011)

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2. KERN VAN DE ZAAK

(1) Good morning everyone. I'm Sander and I'll be talking today about inclusiveness in higher education in Flanders and the relation to students' participation.

(2) To start with a short introduction: I am a Flemish student, student representative as a matter of fact, and I study History in Ghent. I am a member on the Board of Governors and execute the policy on social and diversity matters.

(3) As we only have a short time to talk, we'll cut right to the chase. VVS is short for, in English, the National Union of Students in Flanders. We are the umbrella organization of all student councils in Flanders at the universities and university colleges, such as the Erasmus University College Brussels which is hosting us today. Our organization represents all the students in Flanders and we make participation on a national level happen. We keep an eye on a lot of topics concerning education, such as exams and quality control, but also participation and international affairs such as the Bologna process.

(4) VVS as a student organization exists for quite some years now, but it isn't until 2005 the topic got professionalized. Diversity became a topic "as such" and policy proposals concerning students from ethnic and cultural diversity groups was formulated. Before there was attention to the topic of course, but it was not structurally embedded and depended on the goodwill and commitment of individuals. We are since then an active participant in all taskforces and councils concerning diversity on the Flemish level. These also work on other student groups which need our attention while aiming for an inclusive higher education. A few examples are the Flemish Educational Council (VLOR) and the Support Center for Inclusive Higher Education (SIHO).

(5) The policy we propose is formulated in our assembly, constituted by the student unions as you already know, but we notice that there isn't much expertise in the matter. We need to acknowledge VVS and the Flemish student councils have their difficulties reaching students with disabilities to engage them in students' representation. However, we still strive for this aim of inclusiveness on all levels of student participation: from the curriculum committee to the Flemish Educational Council. Every student should be able to represent themselves and make his opinion heard.

The policy we eventually propose also aims for inclusiveness. The accessibility of higher education is a topic we try to keep in mind in every topic we deal with, as it eventually comes up in every topic. This idea is also reflected in the UN

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which proposes “reasonable accommodation” to empower persons with disabilities – also students that is. All persons should be able to enjoy life and the opportunities society provides, to the fullest. Creating this situation in the higher education field in Flanders, is one of the goals of the National Union of Students in Flanders.

(6) As I already hinted, we have a lot of topics and projects we’re working on with the students in Flanders, a few of which concern students with disabilities.

The first one is research which is being conducted on the participation of students with a disability, directly linked to our objectives stated earlier. Although it will take quite some time before we have the results, it is worth it. Estimates say in Flanders about 12-15 percent of the people have some sort of disability. In our higher education, we only have about 3 percent actually disclosing themselves as such. Even with assuming there are many others who prefer not to disclose, the gap is too wide. And the first step to closing it would be finding the causes and listening to suggestions from the current generation.

A second project is the creation of a best practices manual, for student unions to be able to be receptive towards student with a disability. Since it is not unthinkable we also unknowingly create barriers.

A third project VVS is conducting is creating a global vision and approach to students with a disability in Flanders. Today, the policy to these students is fragmented between the educational institutions, the Ministry on Education, several support centers, etcetera. We want equal and optimal chances for all students with disabilities which means we need this global approach. The wellbeing of the student is our goal!

(7) Besides from these projects, we also have a lot of challenges ahead. As you all know, governments all across Europe are making budget cuts and the budget reserved for higher education also got its share of the cuts in Flanders. We aim to maintain and improve the accessibility of higher education in Flanders, even in these circumstances. We will be keeping an eye out for rash decisions!

Another challenge is the research and development of best practices.

Last but not least, the empowerment of students with disabilities needs our attention. We mentioned it before: student participation is too much a thing of the happy few. You are all informed students engaging in all kinds of challenges: if you have hints and tips, don’t hesitate to share them with us! Give us your opinion and keep in mind that we welcome everyone.

(8) This was it! If you have any questions or remarks: as I mentioned before, don’t hesitate to share them with us. If you’d like to contact us through phone or mail, you can find our coordinates on this last slide or in our text. Informative questions concerning diversity policy can always be addressed directly to Hanne, our staff officer for social and diversity matters. Thank you for listening to our short presentation!