

On the failure of the joint housing plans of our science faculties

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The rationale behind the joint housing plans of the two science faculties in Amsterdam can be explained in 30 seconds to the average Amsterdam taxi driver (as is the experience of the first author). The fact that it nevertheless did not happen is much more difficult to explain. There is not one single narrative; it is more a head of Medusa, or a Gordian knot if you want. In this note we make effort to do so anyway.

There were two direct reasons for the decision in April 2017 to discontinue the plans. Firstly, the VU could not afford further delays in making decisions about the new buildings under development at its campus. The NU building (where the UvA computer scientists would have been housed) was at the stage where the interior design had to be fixed. For another research building (SWT) the preliminary design process was imminent and this required clarity on the critical technical requirements such as vibration level of floors. End of April the VU had to move forward, one way or the other. At this critical point in time the central student council of the UvA voted against the housing plans. Months of discussion hadn't persuaded them to cast a positive vote. Unfortunately, the council had the legal "right of consent" on this issue. This meant that the UvA executive board was unable to give the green light. Given this situation, the boards of VU and UvA decided on 21 April 2017 that the joint housing plans could not be realised.

There were many other factors that contributed to the negative outcome. The fact that the housing plans were a package deal, where all elements where needed to make it work, was an important complicating factor. For example, the move of VU Physics to the UvA Science Park location was only possible if the UvA computer scientists moved to the VU campus. The resistance of the UvA computer science students was an important underlying reason for the UvA student council to withhold its consent. The fact that UvA and VU found it difficult to agree on the financial arrangements did not help either. The financial rules were finalized at a very late stage and only through intervention of the Science deans. Last but not least, internal issues that UvA and VU had to face during recent years played a role. The VU is on a tight financial leash; UvA is struggling with political debates about the perceived democratic level of the university.

In the end, we as Science faculties were faced with a bizarre outcome, namely that perfectly rational housing plans, for which there was widespread support among the academic staff and which also would have saved both universities money, were cancelled for reasons basically outside our control. As deans we have to accept this result, albeit grudgingly. Cooperation will have to be done from a distance, or in some cases through focused staff exchanges. It is frustrating to think of all the time and energy spent by many on both sides of the Amstel river. Luckily, the staff has shown a remarkable resilience in the period since April.

There are still many ties between the two Science faculties. We intend to continue to support collaboration in education in the joint degrees. We are working on new and more simple ways to facilitate this, realising that this can only be sustainable if both universities feel a joint

responsibility for the programs, both are clearly recognizable as partners to (potential) students, with transparent financial agreements. A partial bilocation of the educational program given the new situation is being developed, primarily based on the expertise and facilities at the two campuses.

We also will continue to stimulate joint research initiatives, for instance in upcoming grant opportunities in Physics/Astronomy and Information Sciences. Such initiatives are important to create new energy in the collaboration.

At the moment we do not envisage a specific future role for the IAB. If you like, we can inform you on how things have developed in a year or so. For now, we would like to thank you as members of the IAB for all your support and advice in the last couple of years.