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Evenement Event

A visit to the Anton de Kom university

In February last year Raf Bocklandt, Diletta Martinelli and Nicos Starreveld visited the Anton de Kom University in Paramaribo to assess the possibilities for cooperation between the math communities in Suriname and the Netherlands and expand the connection between the University of Amsterdam and the Anton de Kom University that already exists through the Paalman-de Miranda foundation. Here is a short account of their visit.

The Anton de Kom University is the only university in Suriname and is located in the west of Paramaribo. Established in 1968 as the University of Suriname, it was later in 1983 renamed to honor Anton de Kom, a Surinamese resistance fighter, activist, and writer. The university currently has around 4,000 students spread across four faculties: Medical Sciences, Social Sciences, Technological Sciences, and the Faculty of Humanities.

Anton de Kom was a key figure in Suriname's anti-colonial struggle. He was born at the end of the 19th century in Paramaribo but moved to the Netherlands in the 1920s. In 1932 he returned to Suriname, where he actively opposed Dutch colonial rule. This activism led to his arrest and exile back to the Netherlands by the Dutch authorities. In 1934 he published *Wij Slaven van Suriname*, a book about the history of Suriname, that highlights the oppression of its people. During World War II, he joined the Dutch resistance against Nazi occupation. He was eventually arrested and died in a concentration camp in 1945. Today, he is widely regarded as a national hero, symbo-

Anton de Kom

At the campus of the university

A tribute to de Kom at the location where his home used to be.

lizing Suriname's fight for independence and social justice.

One of the programs offered is a three-year bachelor's degree in mathematics, which admits a fixed cohort of twenty students every two years. The teaching staff consists of approximately ten lecturers, and the curriculum closely resembles that of a Dutch mathematics program, though it offers fewer optional courses in the second and third years.

The program started in 2015 under the instigation of Shanti Venetiaan, who is a professor in Applied Statistics. Additionally, she is the president of the University. Venetiaan also has a connection with the University of Amsterdam, because in 1994 she did a PhD under the supervision of Chris Klaassen.


Aïda Paalman de Miranda

Networks supporting Mathematics activities in the Global South

A small but highly active community is dedicated to supporting mathematical initiatives in the Global South. Notable organizations in this effort include the Commission for Developing Countries of the International Mathematical Union, the European Mathematical Society Committee for Developing Countries, and the French association CIMPA.

At the University of Amsterdam's Faculty of Science, Diletta Martinelli is leading efforts to strengthen academic collaborations with the Global South. An emerging network of scientists there is working to expand connections with institutions in Africa and Suriname, aiming to enhance visibility for individual projects and foster new synergies. The ultimate goal is to increase research collaborations, establish sustainable academic partnerships, and facilitate student and staff exchanges. For more information or to get involved, please contact Diletta Martinelli.

Ietje Paalman

The mathematics department at the University of Amsterdam already had a strong connection with Suriname, because one of its former professors was Aïda Paalman-de Miranda. Born in 1936 in Paramaribo, she moved to the Netherlands at the age of 17 to study mathematics at the University of Amsterdam. At the time, Paalman was the only woman in the faculty. She graduated cum laude in 1960, that same year she defended her PhD thesis on topological semigroups under the supervision of Johannes de Groot. Her work contributed significantly to the fields of topology and set theory.

In 1980, Paalman became a full professor in pure mathematics, making history as the first female full professor of mathematics in Amsterdam. Her research focused on representations of topological semigroups. She was also very engaged in mathematics education and is fondly remembered by her colleagues and students.

After Paalman passed away in 2020, a fund was established in her honor to support Surinamese students. The *Aïda Paalman-de Miranda Fonds*, part of the Amsterdam University Fund, was created to encourage the development of talent among Surinamese students. Through this fund, motivated and talented students from Anton de Kom University can receive a scholarship to study for one or more semesters at the Faculty of Science, Mathematics, and Informatics at the University of Amsterdam.

In September 2023 the first two students came to Amsterdam for a semester at the UvA. One student read mathematics, and also did his bachelor thesis at the Korteweg-de Vries Institute for Mathematics. The other one studied physics. This year

one more student came to Amsterdam to follow advanced courses and to write her bachelor thesis. Currently the Paalman-de Miranda foundation offers two students from the Anton de Kom University the possibility to do an exchange semester at the UvA. Building on Diletta Martinelli's experience with establishing collaborations with the Global South, we organized a visit to the Anton de Kom University to find ways to expand this connection. During the trip we got in touch with students who were interested in applying for the fund and we also met up with the two former students who had spent a semester at the UvA with the aid of the fund.

Our visit

As part of our visit we held several meetings with the teaching staff and students of the mathematics program at Anton de Kom University. These discussions centered around crucial topics such as structuring bachelor projects, offering joint advanced courses, and fostering research collaborations.

One of the primary focuses was on structuring the supervision of bachelor projects. Nowadays many projects at Anton de Kom University rely on external specialists for supervision, which creates challenges in coordination and continuity. Drawing from our experiences in Amsterdam, we shared insights on how to choose relevant topics, coordinate student progress, and looked at possibilities to do joint supervision between internal and external supervisors.

A second topic we discussed was offering a joint advanced modeling course, building upon their existing courses, inspired by our course *Modelleren en Simuleren* in year two, with the addition of some practical applications interesting for Suriname. The possibility to offer a joint Advanced Modeling course in year three was very well received and concrete steps to implement this will be done in collaboration with Clarisha Nijman, one of the local teachers.

Finally, the visit also provided an opportunity to discuss research. Despite facing challenges balancing teaching responsibilities with research duties, several staff members at Anton de Kom University are looking for interesting research projects. We identified areas of mutual interest and looked at collaborations with colleagues from related disciplines, and even research visits to the Netherlands, which could enrich their research profiles and enhance teaching quality.

The future: challenges and opportunities

This initial trip marked the first step toward what we hope will grow into a more structured collaboration between the two universities. We are now actively discussing concrete possibilities for joint courses and staff exchanges. Additionally, we explored the idea of organizing a workshop on Mathematical Methods for Ecology, which could foster interdisciplinary connections and strengthen ties between the mathematics department and the broader scientific community studying Suriname's rich biodiversity. Despite the enthusiasm and positive energy from everyone involved, the main challenge remains securing sustainable funding, especially in light of recent budget cuts in Dutch academia. However, we are exploring various international funding opportunities and remain optimistic that joint activities will be possible in the near future.