

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam's Educational Vision

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**Table of
contents**

<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	3
<i>THE IDENTITY OF VU AMSTERDAM IN 2018</i>	4
<i>SPECIFYING THE CORE VALUES</i>	5
<i>THE STUDENT AS A PARTNER IN INNOVATION AND EDUCATION</i>	7
<i>A CLOSER LOOK AT VU AMSTERDAM'S EDUCATIONAL APPROACH</i>	8
<i>VU AMSTERDAM IN CONTEXT</i>	9
<i>LAST BUT NOT LEAST</i>	9

Introduction

In 2015, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam published its long-term vision in the VU 2015-2020 Vision document. This document formed the basis for an institutional strategy which sets out the milestones that VU Amsterdam wants to achieve through this vision. The corresponding plans described in the university's 'Education on Track' vision document are intended as a guide for everyone studying and working at VU Amsterdam. The educational vision illustrates what VU Amsterdam stands for as an educational institution, what makes VU Amsterdam distinctive and what we need to do to maintain this identity.

As such, this vision has played an important role in strengthening the content and quality of the education we provide within VU Amsterdam. For this reason, VU Amsterdam has several programmes that have been ranked excellent by students and external parties. The aim of this revised educational vision is to help ensure the successful continuation of these educational programmes.

The evolving educational landscape and the increasing complexity within society have prompted a review of the existing educational vision. This revised educational vision builds on the previous vision, but also offers further elaboration on recurring themes, such as academic citizenship, the university community and solidarity with society.

This vision is intended to inspire, innovate and facilitate, and is a guideline for everyone who is part of the VU Amsterdam community. The vision can steer us in the right direction when implementing educational innovation, when determining a strategy for the future of the faculty or when designing a specific element within the curriculum.

The identity of VU Amsterdam in 2018

Since its foundation in 1880, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam has cherished its freedom and independence: a strong tradition in teaching and research that is free from the influence of church and state. The university promotes the free and open communication of ideas. This original Protestant-Christian identity is expressed in the values that VU Amsterdam propagates in 2018. From this basis, a number of core values have taken root in the academic culture of VU Amsterdam: a culture that is *personal*, *open* and *responsible*. These three values serve as a guideline for the work and conduct of staff and students alike, and shine through in our teaching and research.

VU Amsterdam's mission answers the question of *why we teach*: to make the world a better place by *educating students to become responsible, critical and committed academics* who are keen to further their own personal and professional development. In its academic teaching, VU Amsterdam is keen to emphasize not only the practice of science, but also the societal value and relevance of the questions posed in the world of scientific and academic endeavour. Scope and attention is devoted to considering what motivates teaching staff and students, and the kind of formative influence the academic world has on the members of the VU community. Students are encouraged to give account of their own values, beliefs, cultural identity, and their implicit and explicit assumptions. By doing so, students learn to relate to each other and to the increasingly complex and diverse society to which they belong.

In the tradition of the university's founders, there is still the recognition that teaching and academic research are not value-free. VU Amsterdam's aim is to be at the very heart of society and make a genuine contribution to society through its activities. In addition, a focus on academic quality and the pursuit of rigorous academic research are important conditions for providing high-quality academic education.

Specifying the core values

VU Amsterdam's core values are expressed in teaching through the content of the curriculum, the approach to teaching and how teaching staff relate to students and other stakeholders at VU Amsterdam.

Personal: an academic community in which each member is recognized.

High-quality and valuable education starts and ends with the ***teaching staff***. VU Amsterdam is proud of its inspiring teachers, and has an eye for the personal development of every teacher.

VU Amsterdam cherishes the idea that every student has a ***talent***, and is proud of the role it plays in discovering and developing this individual talent. Students are ***unique and valuable***, and are given the opportunity to realize their full potential within the university. Each student is heard, seen and recognized. Mentors and tutors play an important role in education at Bachelor's level. Small-scale teaching methods, such as practicals and seminars, provide a personal touch in the supervision of students.

VU Amsterdam is a ***community of learners***, in which teachers, researchers and students meet each other in formulating and reflecting on shared questions. Students are actively involved in education through peer review and other forms of feedback. The unique contribution of each student is an underlying principle.

Wherever possible, the ***value of the personal background and experience*** of students and teachers feeds into the educational process, providing a direct link between education and the issues that concern society. Education is often interactive and promotes an ongoing academic dialogue among students and between students and teachers. The personal research interests and experience of the teaching staff are brought into the educational sphere as much as possible.

By creating a ***positive learning culture*** within VU Amsterdam, learning becomes an everyday habit. Students are motivated to keep reflecting on their own development, and making mistakes is valued as a step in the development of academics who reflect critically on their own performance and progress. ***Critical thinking*** is an essential value within the academic core. Students are motivated to think independently, to remain critical and to assess the truthfulness of information.

Open: we are *open* to diversity in disciplines, nationalities, religious beliefs, world views and social convictions.

VU Amsterdam is an ***inspiring meeting place*** where mutual respect is the foundation for working on connections between disciplines, cultures, religions, social views and societal issues. Confronting differences leads to new insights and innovations, to clarity and sharpness of focus, and furthers academic excellence.

VU Amsterdam promotes lifelong learning. The university's academic community welcomes students and staff from a wide diversity of backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, educational background, phase of career, beliefs systems, political convictions, lifestyles and approaches to learning. We embrace this diversity as an integral element and see it as adding value to the university's educational culture. We are inclusive, and the power and richness of this diversity only shine through when it is not left latent and unspoken, but is fully acknowledged both in education and extra-curricular academic life. A heterogeneous academic community brings many different viewpoints into the lecture theatre, creating a gathering that enriches the academic discourse.

Diversity is more than cultural, social and intellectual variation. Different academic disciplines can have their own view of the same social problem, and their own potential solutions to that problem. Lecturers at VU Amsterdam organize education in such a way that students learn to approach and discuss issues from different angles. Our students become aware that many complex issues cannot be resolved in a single dimension. Issues and problems are tackled using a **multidisciplinary** approach. In doing so, it is of course essential that our students first acquire an in-depth understanding of their chosen discipline.

VU Amsterdam's focus goes beyond academic excellence alone. The university sees it as its task, challenge and responsibility to lead all its students to academic success.

Responsible: engaging with people, education, society and the world.

Alongside teaching staff, our students also play an important part in the **connection between university and society**. The education offered by VU Amsterdam encourages students to engage with each other, their degree programme, society and the world, and to take this level of commitment into their future career. On the one hand, students are encouraged to take up a position in the world and to be open to others and to otherness. On the other hand, VU Amsterdam appeals to the sense of responsibility that already exists within the student community.

Education and research at the university are aimed at making a contribution to **solving society's problems**. The nature of those problems and the people affected by them are open to debate. VU Amsterdam encourages teachers and students to define their own position and responsibility in this regard, while remaining open to other ideas and perspectives.

Wherever possible, education is provided in the form of interactive teaching methods, with problem-based learning or self-directed learning as a possible interpretation. By using real-life cases and dilemmas from society, and by involving stakeholders – such as the public sector, the business community and social organizations – education becomes more **relevant and valuable**. As part of this approach, VU Amsterdam seeks intensive contact with the Amsterdam region, the professional field and alumni.

Complex societal problems form an important aspect of the education we provide. In this regard, it is important that we do not work towards a unique solution, but that the various values that matter to those involved become clear and comprehensible. Our students are encouraged to define their own position, and in doing so become reflective, critical and committed academic professionals, who can find their way in a complex, globalizing and diverse world, which is changing ever more rapidly.

At VU Amsterdam we expect students to take responsibility and not simply attend university in order to consume education as a product. The programme management and the teaching staff are responsible for designing **high-quality degree programmes which set realistic targets**, while the students who take these programmes are then **responsible for their own student life cycle and academic success**. As the student life cycle progresses, the level of guidance from the programme will steadily decrease. Students play an active part in feedback and assessment, and extensive use is made of peer assessment.

In Community Service Learning (CSL) activities, students apply their knowledge and skills for the benefit of society and learn from the experience. The value of CSL for students lies in its status as an active and effective learning method. CSL also brings students into direct contact with social developments that raise challenging questions. Students experience how their efforts can impact society and how they can take personal responsibility for their actions. CSL also strengthens connections with the job market.

The student as a partner in innovation and education

VU Amsterdam's campus forms a platform for solving issues of primary social relevance in four key areas: Governance for Society, Human Health & Life Sciences, Connected World, and Science for Sustainability. Students are encouraged to come up with solutions to issues that are of added value to society. To solve these issues, we deviate from standard forms of education, and go in search of an experimental and multidisciplinary approach that makes full use of the intelligence, involvement and creativity of students and other stakeholders.

In order to promote cooperation between its faculties, VU Amsterdam focuses on forming networks, and the campus is being further developed as a virtual and physical platform for a VU community. Even when students leave VU Amsterdam, the network they have formed during their studies will continue to be of value to them in their careers.

In this experimental environment, partners from the public sector, the business community and civil society organizations are involved with a view to solving these issues in the broadest possible context. The students are regarded as partners in this learning environment and are given scope for initiative. We work with stakeholders to explore opportunities for achieving commercial knowledge transfer with the solutions we develop.

In addition to student involvement in innovation, students have a say in the allocation of resources for educational innovation projects. This enables them to make an active contribution to shaping educational innovation.

A closer look at VU Amsterdam's educational approach

VU Amsterdam is proud of the high quality and inspiring nature of its study programmes, which are both state-of-the-art and in line with social developments. The education on offer has been designed in accordance with four principles which embody the university's core values:

- Each *student* is primarily responsible for his/her own student life cycle and academic success (core values: personal, responsible). Each student is given a substantial measure of autonomy and encouraged to utilize his/her capacity for self-management.
- VU Amsterdam is *inclusive* (core values: open, personal, responsible). The diversity of both students and teaching staff is an integral part of the education students receive.
- Societal issues are studied and addressed from a *multidisciplinary* perspective (core values: open, responsible).
- VU Amsterdam is fully aware of its *social responsibility* (core values: open, responsible).

Teaching staff

When it comes to delivering high-quality education and promoting VU Amsterdam's values in education, the university's teaching staff play a central and crucial role. Their teaching skills, their ability to inspire students and position their subject within the larger context of the programme and to link it to research, forms the basis of education at VU Amsterdam. Guaranteeing these qualities, which are integral to the lecturer's position as a member of the academic staff, forms the core of the university's staff policy with regard to teaching. VU Amsterdam explicitly connects teaching and research in its policy on the academic career path. A strict division between teaching and research is not desirable in any permanent academic position. Every academic, including staff whose career is focused on teaching, should have a foundation in research and seek to maintain this throughout their career. Likewise, it is impossible to carve out an academic career without demonstrable experience of and proof of proficiency in teaching. However, achievements in teaching and research may vary in proportion to one another, and in terms of staff appraisals it is possible for performance in one area to compensate for the other.

Educational innovation

Providing well-designed education and implementing it as well as possible is self evident. In addition, our academic staff also exercise their *freedom in responsibility* through ongoing development in the field of education and educational development. Safeguarding and improving the quality of education in a positive learning culture in collaboration with colleagues is of paramount importance. VU Amsterdam offers a broad and attractive range of knowledge-sharing and professionalization opportunities which are actively used by lecturers. Experimenting with new teaching methods and techniques, notably digital techniques, is encouraged. VU Amsterdam supports this at university and faculty level by providing resources and expertise.

VU Amsterdam in context

The city of Amsterdam

Amsterdam is an important stakeholder in VU Amsterdam, and many of the university's Community Service Learning projects take place in the city. As a knowledge institution, VU Amsterdam makes an important contribution to the further development of the Amsterdam region into an economic centre of European allure.

Because regional proximity is an important factor for prospective students when choosing a university, the Amsterdam region remains an important catchment area for VU Amsterdam. The university is proud to reflect the diversity of its own region.

The Netherlands

VU Amsterdam wants to maintain close links with society at large and to distinguish itself in terms of the social frameworks it offers its students. The university will continue to strengthen its commitment to partners within the public sector, the business community and civil society organizations. Collaboration with these partners is firmly anchored in education, allowing students to situate their learning in a valuable context.

International

The responsibility borne by VU Amsterdam is not limited to Dutch society, but applies to the entire world. Scientific and academic endeavour is also an international activity. Research cannot flourish without strong international cooperation. VU Amsterdam operates in a strongly globalizing environment: students are formed into world citizens through regular international student exchange opportunities and internship projects with foreign partners.

At the same time, VU Amsterdam is determined to remain at the heart of Dutch society. Where language of instruction is concerned, the language chosen reflects the nature of each individual programme. This choice takes into account the specific objectives of the degree programme, and whether it reflects VU Amsterdam's core values. In addition, international mobility, content and quality of education, academic progress and development, and preparation for the diverse job market (including the academic career path) are taken into consideration when choosing a language.

Last but not least

The university is a special institution, one of the oldest in our society. An institution encompasses more than just an organizational structure. An institution is characterized by a strong orientation towards a number of specific values that determine the actions of its members to a great extent. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam is a unique university, driven by a number of fundamental and sustainable values: its approach is personal, open and responsible.

Like all universities, VU Amsterdam needs a vision that inspires, sets a course for the future and guides the choices it makes. A vision that stems from its own identity and expresses why VU Amsterdam does what it does. That is the purpose of this document: to inspire and give direction. To this end, wide-ranging discussions have been held in established forums and ad hoc committees within VU Amsterdam, focusing on our core values and principles of educational design. This document has now been finalized but the discussion goes on. After all, a vision can only function if it remains the subject of discussion within the institution.