

# VU University Amsterdam's Vision for Education

## *Introduction*

This document, the *Vision for Education* at VU University Amsterdam, represents an actualization of the Strategic Plan 2011-2015 and builds upon the vision set out in *Looking Further in Education*, a publication that marked the university's 130th anniversary in 2010.

Chapter 1 considers the educational aims of VU University Amsterdam in the 21st century. What does the university wish to achieve, and who does it aim to reach? The answers to these questions are placed in the context of the university's modern-day identity. The document then goes on to discuss the implications in various policy areas, including the form and profile of the Bachelor's and Master's programmes (Chapter 2) and the university's position as an international seat of learning with its roots firmly in the Amsterdam region (Chapter 3).

Chapter 4 examines the way in which VU University Amsterdam pursues ongoing renewal within education, keeping pace with social and technological developments at both the national and international level. The prime consideration throughout is the role played by academic staff, researchers and students. They are the ones who, together with the support staff, represent the embodiment and personification of the university's Vision for Education.

### ***Chapter 1. The modern day identity of VU University Amsterdam***

The traditional ambition of universities has been to educate the young adults who will shape and lead the society of tomorrow. VU University Amsterdam is strongly committed to continuing this tradition. The objectives of our educational processes therefore go beyond the attainment of quantifiable performance indicators. Our ambition remains unaltered: to nurture talent and help students to achieve their full potential. We strive to develop rounded academic professionals who are capable of independent thought and scientific reasoning, who can solve problems and apply scientific knowledge in a conscientious and meaningful way. They should be capable of subjecting the arguments of others to balanced and constructive analysis. They should be able to establish new relationships between thoughts and ideas. They must be aware of their own preconceptions and biases, as well as those of others. They must be prepared to accept and act upon their own responsibility, taking a leading role within a dynamic society that is marked by a high degree of diversity, complexity and internationalization. In short, VU University Amsterdam wishes to develop engaged and responsible academics who constantly explore and push back the boundaries of existing knowledge. With this objective in view, the only relevant performance indicator is the degree to which alumni achieve this status. This is the indicator which forms the ultimate motivation for all who are directly or indirectly involved in the university's education. It is the indicator which we aim to monitor even more closely in future, allowing us to intensify contacts with our former students.

VU University Amsterdam was established in 1880 as an academic institution which would operate entirely independently of church or state. The primary aim of its founders was to provide opportunities to members of the protestant movement in general, and the Dutch Reformed Church in particular, enabling them to achieve emancipation by means of an academic vanguard. It was important that students should be introduced to the world of scientific and academic endeavour without having to compromise or abandon their (Reformist) convictions.

The university went on to see extremely strong growth, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, and continued to draw many of its students from the section of society whose advancement it was founded to promote. The success with which successive generations from that group established themselves in Dutch society leads us to conclude that the founders' mission has indeed come to fruition. In today's world, universities still have an important role to play in promoting social emancipation. VU University Amsterdam has therefore never lost sight of its original identity, and indeed continues to cherish and foster that identity. However, there has been a shift in emphasis. The focus is no longer on a particular group, but on a clearly defined vision of academic practice. That vision is based on the firm belief that science and learning in any form can never be seen as separate from our personal values. This does not mean that the university applies methodologies which are different than those found elsewhere. Nevertheless, our education, like our view of academic practice, incorporates significant reflection on the values which surround and permeate academic practice. What constitutes a sound scientific theory? What is the appropriate balance between theoretical simplicity and explanatory strength? Are all observations informed by theory, and what is the value of the theory if it cannot be backed by experimental evidence? However, the primary expression of VU University Amsterdam's unique identity lies in the attention we devote to the motives and motivation of academic practice. Why does a scientist conduct a particular research project? How has science influenced him or her as a person? Is there an interplay between his personal convictions and scientific activities and, if so, is his work as a scientist integral to his sense of who he is? Academic staff at VU University Amsterdam are given every opportunity to discuss such questions with each other, and most importantly with their students. Indeed, students are encouraged to initiate such discussions. This helps them to appreciate their own cultural, religious or philosophical beliefs, as well as their implicit or explicit preconceptions, all of which can then be placed in an appropriate context. They thus learn to interact with the other members of our diverse and complex society in a balanced and fair-minded manner.

The Vision for Education at VU University Amsterdam is very much in keeping with its culture, which is based on the three core values of *personal engagement, openness and responsibility*.

In the light of the foregoing, the core value of *personal engagement* is reflected by the respect accorded to the personal identity of the teacher and the student, and the vital part that their identity plays in the educational setting. Academic development relies not only on the curriculum and the textbooks, but also on the woman or the man teaching the class. The personal touch can be seen in many aspects of education, including one-on-one supervision of graduation projects and a range of small-scale teaching methods, such as practicals and tutorials. Although lectures offer less opportunity for personal interaction, experience shows that even this form of tuition can involve a personal dimension. VU University Amsterdam therefore continues to regard full-scale lectures as an effective educational

instrument. They enable the student to take personal responsibility and to demonstrate self-discipline, since they demand good preparation, active participation and effective private study if the full educational benefits are to be gained.

An important difference between today's VU University Amsterdam and that of fifty years ago is that, in addition to protestant Christianity, the academic staff now represent a far broader range of religious, philosophical and political convictions. In principle, no one is excluded on the grounds of their personal beliefs, provided they are willing to enter into an open discussion. The university sees the opportunity to discuss how personal beliefs can influence scientific practice as part of its distinctive profile. It is an expression of the second core value: *openness*. Today's academic community is marked by significant diversity in social backgrounds, ethnicity, religion, political views, lifestyles and learning styles. Diversity is an immense strength, provided that it does not remain latent but inspires both the educational activities and the extracurricular life of the university. VU University Amsterdam regards diversity as a fact of life, and one that offers the university exceptional opportunities to establish a clear and distinctive profile. As stated above, our aim is to prepare students to fill positions of responsibility within a society in which diversity is no longer an incidental phenomenon to be welcomed or opposed, but a clearly established reality.

VU University Amsterdam prepares its students to accept and act upon their personal responsibility in this pluriform society. It therefore requires them to accept and act upon that responsibility during their time at university. This goes beyond completing the various course components successfully and on time, and beyond making adequate preparations for their future professional career. It means encouraging all students to make a meaningful contribution to university life. This is the practical manifestation of the third core value: *responsibility*.

## **Chapter 2.                      The Bachelor's-Master's structure**

This chapter considers the distinctive positions occupied by the Bachelor's and Master's programmes in relation to the identity of VU University Amsterdam as described in Chapter 1.

### **2.1      Bachelor's: self-contained programmes offering a variety of further options**

It is now ten years since the Bachelor's-Master's structure was introduced in the Netherlands. The advantages of this system were widely acknowledged from the outset, whereupon the transition was relatively smooth. One advantage was that each university was able to introduce new initiatives at Master's (postgraduate) level in order to achieve better coordination between its graduate programme and its chosen specialist research fields. In this perspective, a Bachelor's programme was seen as a logical precursor to a relevant Master's programme at the same university. More recently, however, it has become increasingly apparent that the Bachelor's-Master's structure creates a new moment of decision for students: having gained a Bachelor's degree, should they continue to study the same discipline at the same university, or should they explore new avenues elsewhere? Is a Master's programme which is a direct continuation, in both time and content, of the Bachelor's programme the

best option? The success of the University Colleges and Liberal Arts programmes, in which there is no automatic progression to postgraduate education in the same discipline, has helped students and universities to appreciate the relevance of these questions.

The answers to these questions partly determine the vision for education at Bachelor's level and how the university monitors and maintains the quality of that education. The majority of the Bachelor's programmes at the university do indeed prepare students for a Master's programme in the same discipline, or one which is closely related. Their learning objectives and graduation requirements reflect this fact. However, it is no longer a 'given' that a student completing a Bachelor's programme at VU University Amsterdam will go on to take a Master's degree here, and doing so is not the most appropriate academic career choice for all students. We attach great importance to the contribution that teaching staff make to the development of their students, and therefore recognize that a change of academic setting may offer greater added value, both in terms of personal development and career prospects. This is perhaps even more true in the case of mature students. Another consideration is that good graduates who opt to pursue their education at a university elsewhere in the world enhance the reputation of VU University Amsterdam by acting as ambassadors. Amsterdam University College regards the number of its graduates admitted to Master's programmes at prestigious international institutions as a quality indicator. There are a number of specific Bachelor's programmes, such as those in economics, business management, law and mathematics, in which the quality of education can be measured in the same way, at least in part. Conversely, our own Master's programmes will become more attractive to international students if highly qualified alumni 'spread the word'. As in so many areas, investments must be made before the benefits can be reaped.

When the Bachelor's-Master's system was introduced, employers suggested that demand for graduates with only a Bachelor's degree would be limited. Anyone who had not gone on to complete a Master's degree was considered an '*unvollendete academicus*'. Today, there are a variety of reasons to revise this position. For students, the increasing cost of a Master's-level education is an incentive to enter the employment market armed only with a Bachelor's degree. Given the worsening shortage of qualified staff, employers may soon encourage graduates to forgo, or at least postpone, studying for a Master's degree.

In the light of these developments, VU University Amsterdam regards its Bachelor's programmes as 'self-contained', with learning outcomes differentiated according to the specialization that the graduate will go on to pursue. Faculties enjoy a considerable degree of freedom in this regard, including the freedom to design a programme as monodisciplinary or multidisciplinary in nature. The academic level of the programmes is partly safeguarded by incorporating a clearly identifiable academic core, while the consequences of the various choices made by the faculties are expressed in the learning objectives and in the information provided to students. As students near the end of the Bachelor's programme, we encourage them to make a carefully considered decision about progression to a Master's programme. They are offered guidance and advice on the alternatives open to them, whether here at VU University Amsterdam, at another institution in the Netherlands or anywhere else in the world.

All Bachelor's programmes at VU University Amsterdam have a number of common features which help to establish the profile of our undergraduate education. The most noteworthy are:

- All Bachelor's programmes are academic in nature. We understand this to imply a strong emphasis on active, 'exploratory' learning, where asking the right questions is just as important as giving the right answers. Research methodology is a standard component of the curriculum. Each cluster of programmes has its own academic core, which combines an introduction to research methodology and academic skills with a consideration of scientific philosophy, ethics and academic integrity. Faculties may also include the history of the relevant discipline and/or academic English in this aspect of their programmes.
- All students should be presented with intellectual challenges and equipped to identify and push the (upper) limits of their abilities. Students who distinguish themselves intellectually (before or during the first year of the Bachelor's programme) are given a chance to derive even greater benefit from their time at university by means of the excellence ('honours') programme offered in association with the University of Amsterdam (UvA). There are also two VU University Bachelor's programmes which have a 'dual-track' structure. The International Office offers advice and assistance to students seeking admission to an accredited institution in another country.
- Apart from a small number of well-considered exceptions, every curriculum allows students to choose their own electives, up to a maximum of 30 credits. This part of the programme is usually concentrated in the first semester of the third year. Students can choose from a range of minors, some of which are university-wide and some of which are restricted to the student's own faculty, enabling them to explore disciplines outside their chosen field of study. Alternatively, students can spend a semester abroad or study their chosen discipline in greater depth, taking in aspects which are not included in the standard curriculum.
- Every Bachelor's programme includes intensive, small-scale methods of teaching such as practical (laboratory) sessions, classroom project groups and individual mentoring. Nevertheless, the traditional lecture remains an important educational resource. This type of large-scale activity allows students a certain degree of anonymity. They become aware of their own personal responsibility, and learn to resist the temptation of shirking that responsibility.
- Students are expected to complete a three-year Bachelor's programme in no more than four years. This does not mean that it is not possible to complete the programme in the allotted three years, or that students are encouraged to 'take their time'. There are some students for whom the extra year is essential, perhaps due to a physical disability or other exceptional circumstances. All other students admitted to VU University Amsterdam can complete the Bachelor's programme in three years. However, we believe that it is important to allow every student to take advantage of the stimulating university environment in order to pursue personal development above and beyond the standard academic curriculum. For this reason, we consider it socially responsible to allow an extension of (no more than) one year. This allows students every opportunity to become actively involved in the administrative and organizational aspects of the extremely varied student community, to

- gain international experience, to take part in the various community projects run in association with secondary schools, or to explore their chosen discipline in greater depth.
- During the first year, students are expected to demonstrate their aptitude and ability to complete the remainder of the programme successfully. At the end of this year, they are subject to a 'Binding Recommendation on Continuation of Studies'. The university therefore expects first-year students to devote most of their time and attention to study rather than extracurricular activities.
  - The individual guidance offered to students varies in intensity over time. During the first and second semesters, there is particularly close contact, including mentoring, tutorials, interim assessments and targeted deployment of IT resources. There is less direct contact during the third, fourth and fifth semesters, but far more in the sixth semester in the form of thesis (or graduation project) supervision. Students who do not take a full and active part in the contact activities of the first year are at risk of receiving a negative recommendation, which means that they are excluded from the remainder of the programme. The lower intensity of guidance in the third and subsequent semesters is intended to encourage students to define, accept and act upon their own personal responsibility. The final semester is largely devoted to writing a thesis or completing a graduation project, involving close personal supervision from a member of the teaching staff.
  - The risk of any mismatch between prospective students and programmes is minimized by means of realistic information and a comprehensive introduction to university study and university life. The aim is to ensure that each student is able to select the most appropriate subject and programme at the earliest possible opportunity. The university runs a Summer School which is geared towards 'first generation' students, and various summer courses to resolve any deficiencies in prior knowledge and skills. Personal interviews to assess applicants' aptitude and motivation have been part of the selection procedure for the medical disciplines for many years. They are now being trialled in other disciplines and are likely to become a standard part of the intake procedure from 2014. Where appropriate, an assessment of Dutch language skills is also part of the admission procedure. Experience suggests that students wishing to transfer to university from a programme at a university of applied sciences (via the 'HBO Propedeuse') are less likely to complete a degree programme successfully. Legislation is now in place which allows additional admission requirements to be applied, and we intend to do so in a number of disciplines. VU University Amsterdam advises students who have already commenced HBO education to complete the full programme before applying for university admission. Prospective students who are currently in the higher general education (HAVO) stream at secondary school are advised to progress to the more academic pre-university VWO programme.

## 2.2 *Master's programmes: firmly embedded in research*

The Master's programmes offered by VU University Amsterdam enjoy close links with the university's research programmes. Even students who do not intend to pursue a full academic career should have a sound understanding of what scientific research entails, its possibilities and its limitations. The standard

curriculum therefore requires students to conduct an independent research project, culminating in the production of the Master's thesis. VU University Amsterdam does not offer Master's programmes in disciplines in which it lacks research capacity of international standing.

The link between Master's programmes and research not only has an important effect on education; it also benefits research. After all, the process of valorization depends to a significant degree on Master's graduates. Alongside the regular Master's programmes which prepare the student for professional practice, VU University Amsterdam also offers qualified students the opportunity to take a research Master's in preparation for a full academic career (beginning with a PhD). The regular programmes in the exact sciences are two years in duration, while all other disciplines have a one-year programme. The research Master's programmes are all of two years' duration and prepare students for progression to a PhD programme, either at VU University Amsterdam or elsewhere. A research Master's degree also provides a stepping stone to research positions outside the academic world, perhaps in the private sector. Admission to a Master's programme demands a relevant Bachelor's degree from VU University Amsterdam or another accredited institution. In other words, students are not allowed to continue their studies at Master's level unless they have successfully completed all components of their Bachelor's degree. This requirement facilitates a 'cohort' approach in which students commence and complete the programme as a unified group, thus enhancing study discipline. For this reason, the vast majority of programmes only take on new students once a year. All students are expected to complete the programme within the allotted time. Any extension is granted as an exception rather than the rule.

While possession of a Bachelor's degree is a firm requirement, the Master's programmes can impose additional admission criteria. As the range of eligible Bachelor's degrees becomes ever wider, greater emphasis is being placed on careful selection procedures which increasingly include a personal interview. In the interests of internationalization, whereby we wish to attract both international students and staff, many Master's programmes are offered in English. Accordingly, proven competence in English is a requirement for students and, of course, teaching staff.

### ***Chapter 3. Internationalization, national position and regional relevance***

This chapter considers the position that VU University Amsterdam wishes to occupy within the international academic community, its relevance to the regional economy, and its accountability at national level.

#### ***3.1 Internationalization of the graduate job market***

Increasingly, higher education in the Netherlands is expected to prepare students to fill positions on the international job market, whether in the private sector, public governance, law and justice, or higher education itself. All VU University Amsterdam programmes therefore devote specific attention to the international context. While spending six months of their Bachelor's programme abroad is a good investment for students, it is not enough to prepare them for an international work setting. We therefore pursue internationalization in various other ways, certainly within the Master's programmes

and – where possible and appropriate – the Bachelor’s programmes as well. Through deliberate ‘internationalization at home’, we strive to create an atmosphere in the lecture room and on the campus which closely approximates the international setting in which many students will eventually work.

Education in English is indispensable in this respect. VU University Amsterdam devotes considerable attention to the English language skills of its staff and students. By providing even more programmes in English, we are increasing our ability to attract researchers and teaching staff from countries other than the Netherlands. They, like students from other countries and backgrounds, are given every opportunity to familiarize themselves with the Dutch language and culture, without being obliged to communicate in Dutch in their education-related activities.

The majority of Master’s programmes are now conducted in English. The aim is that international students should represent 25% of the student body by 2015 (compared to 16% in 2010). This ambition reflects our strong belief that Dutch students also benefit from the opportunity to function within an international context, as many will be required to do during their professional careers.

To date, VU University Amsterdam has been more cautious in offering Bachelor’s programmes in English (of which there were only three in 2013). The selection of students with qualifications gained in another country demands considerable care and attention. Having developed the relevant expertise, we will now prepare to introduce further programmes in English, although to a limited extent. The International Office will play a significant part in the process, as will the networks of individual staff members. The recruitment of students from outside the European Union demands specific expertise and the input of various central support departments, including Communications, HRM and the Student and Education Office. To ensure that the necessary expertise is embedded in an appropriate manner, for the time being we will confine our activities at an institutional level to a number of ‘focus countries’, being those in which the university has existing or nascent partnerships.

### *3.2 Internationalization goes hand in hand with regional relevance*

VU University Amsterdam’s internationalization policy does much to foster the development of the Amsterdam region as an economic centre of European importance. Our campus and our leading university hospital are located in Zuidas, a dynamic new district that is the centre of Amsterdam’s burgeoning international business services sector. The strong international focus and reputation of VU University Amsterdam helps to create a setting which promotes innovation. By attracting talented international students and highly qualified international researchers, we establish further opportunities for synergy with and between private sector companies, government authorities and cultural organizations, thereby making the region even more attractive for all concerned.

This is one of the reasons that VU University Amsterdam is particularly proud of its ability to attract students from all segments of Dutch society, including the ethnic minorities. For many prospective students, proximity is an important consideration. We will therefore continue to attract a significant number of students from the Amsterdam region, particularly at Bachelor’s level. Further

internationalization will entail extending our outreach to recruit students and staff from elsewhere in Europe and beyond.

### *3.3 Cooperation with the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and the significance of VU University Amsterdam to the Amsterdam region*

Until comparatively recently, cooperation between Amsterdam's two universities was confined to a joint Faculty of Dentistry (ACTA) and a few small-scale activities. However, significant progress has been made this area in the past few years. Amsterdam University College is a highly successful joint undertaking. The two institutions' faculties of exact sciences are now in talks about an intense collaboration both in research and education, as are their respective medical centres. Inspired by these developments, a number of other faculties have begun to explore the opportunities for joint initiatives. It is becoming increasingly evident that combining our strengths will permit far more efficient use of the available resources, and will lead to better overall performance. The fact that the two institutions are located in such close proximity to each other creates opportunities which are unique in the Netherlands.

Closer cooperation between the two Amsterdam universities will also cast their relationship with the city in a new light. Together, VU University Amsterdam and UvA represent an even more attractive proposition for the international private sector. Greater efficiency in the use of resources will be matched by better visibility and enhanced accessibility for (potential) partners in the region and beyond.

In recent years, VU University Amsterdam has attracted more first-generation students from the Amsterdam region than UvA, and particularly those from the ethnic minorities. It should be noted that in doing so, our university has never resorted to an explicit incentive policy or any form of positive discrimination. Rather, this development is probably due to the emancipatory character which has marked VU University Amsterdam since its foundation in the nineteenth century, and which continues to set it apart to this day. The role we play in the Amsterdam region is similar to that taken by Erasmus University in the Rotterdam region and UCLA in Los Angeles, as an accessible, non-elitist university which is willing and able to promote the intellectual development of the local populace. Of course, being accessible does not mean that we make any concessions with regard to the intellectual ability, aptitude, motivation or prior qualifications of prospective students. It does, however, mean that coming from a non-academic family or from a different cultural background is absolutely no bar to admission. VU University Amsterdam is proud to have embedded this fact extremely firmly within its own culture.

Because the talent and potential of first-generation students does not always manifest itself fully during their secondary education, we like to rise to the challenge of drawing the very best from these students once they are on our campus. To ensure that first-generation students enjoy the same prospects on the graduate employment market, we demand that all students show the same high degree of motivation, commitment and intellectual ability. These aspects are assessed by means of various matching activities. The Summer School courses are another way to make prospective students fully aware of the requirements and of their own personal responsibilities. In addition to providing the very best academic education, VU University Amsterdam wishes to contribute to the social and personal development of first-generation students. We therefore encourage them to participate in a broad range of

extracurricular activities which will help them to develop and maintain a social network. The university's location in a district of Amsterdam which is rapidly developing into an economic centre of European importance is certainly an advantage in this respect. However, one problem we have noticed is that the students who would benefit most from greater social interaction often spend much of their university career living at home. This is largely due to financial considerations, for which there is no simple short-term solution. For now, pursuing the further development of the university campus as a vibrant centre of student life, throughout the day and well into the evening, would appear to be the most appropriate response.

#### 3.4 *The development of the campus as part of the Zuidas*

All of the education and research activities at VU University Amsterdam are concentrated within its compact campus. Within the foreseeable future, the campus will also include various cultural and sporting facilities, as well as student accommodation, all of which are currently located elsewhere in the city. The campus enjoys excellent connections with all parts of Amsterdam and with Schiphol Airport. Together with the adjacent VU Medical Center and the ACTA Faculty of Dentistry, ours will soon be a unique 'city campus' where all disciplines are housed within walking distance from each other. This offers excellent opportunities for students who wish to enhance their curriculum by exploring aspects of other disciplines, perhaps by taking a minor. Moreover, the campus will help to intensify contact between students, and between students and staff. The proximity of leading private sector companies, mostly in the services sector, and the direct connections with all other parts of the Amsterdam region provide excellent opportunities for practical (work) experience. The university will help students to take advantage of those opportunities by actively seeking further cooperation in the field of research with companies in the region. Moreover, we intend to involve alumni to a much greater extent than we have in the past. The university itself will also offer some students work experience as student assistants and tutors, or in its various community projects.

#### 3.5 *The national context: decreased funding and increased accountability*

For some time, higher education in the Netherlands has faced a significant decrease in direct government funding. At the same time, the number of young people seeking admission to higher education has risen, and will continue to rise until at least 2020. VU University Amsterdam has seen particularly rapid growth in recent years, from 15,000 students in 2002 to some 25,000 in 2013. More students and less funding combine to place the quality of education under pressure. There are limits to 'responsible' growth, and in our case those limits are now in sight. Where growth has indeed placed quality at risk, we have introduced measures such as admissions quotas and ballots (the *numerus fixus* system).

The decline in government funding has been accompanied by a demand for greater accountability in the use of public resources. Not only must educational institutes meet certain performance requirements, they must maintain detailed records and publish reports to demonstrate that they are using public funds responsibly. In the past, a professor was free to close the door of the lecture theatre or practical laboratory behind him and to educate his students as he saw fit. Today, there is far more pressure to

justify the form and content of the course and its outcomes. The prescribed protocols depend heavily on quantifiable indicators, such as graduation rates, drop-out rates and the number of students transferring to other programmes. While it is unlikely that these performance indicators provide an adequate reflection of quality, VU University Amsterdam regards the willingness to ensure accountability as part of the professional responsibility of the university as a whole, as well as that of each individual staff member. However, a statutory requirement to provide external accountability does not safeguard the quality of our education. That can only be achieved by means of a consistent and widely endorsed culture of quality, in which staff and students can raise concerns when appropriate and in which those concerns are promptly and adequately addressed.

#### **Chapter 4.      *Ongoing renewal in education***

##### *4.1.      A Vision for Education rather than an educational concept*

VU University Amsterdam does not subscribe to any one educational concept or method, such as ‘problem-based learning’ or ‘student-centred learning’. Rather, we apply a more general approach in which the university is seen as a community of learners, with three pillars or spearheads of education policy: *monodisciplinary and multidisciplinary acquisition and development of knowledge, active participation, and the link between education and research*. These spearheads combine to form a framework within which there is considerable room for discretion on the part of the individual faculties. The acquisition and development of knowledge within a given discipline is expressed in the leading role that key questions and relevant core concepts fulfil within the Bachelor’s programmes. The students’ active participation in educational activities of various types benefits the transfer and assimilation of knowledge, and prepares them to take a similarly active and participative role in their future professional practice. A clear link between education and research instils in students the realization that knowledge becomes outdated and needs to be constantly renewed. Students are active partners in the process of renewal, most notably within the graduation projects which conclude both the Bachelor’s and Master’s programmes.

##### *4.2.      No academic education without academic research*

Teaching staff and the programme directors bear overall responsibility for the process of educational renewal, both in terms of content and implementation. Awareness of the international developments within the relevant disciplines is essential. One consequence of the reduction in government funding is that the link between teaching and research can no longer be taken for granted. The standard amounts made available by the government and based on student numbers are not sufficient to allow every member of staff to devote a significant proportion of his or her time to research. This means that researchers must seek funding from other sources, usually by means of open competition. The time that they are able to devote to education is then restricted. Nevertheless, VU University Amsterdam believes that the link between education and research remains absolutely crucial to our ability to provide education at the appropriate academic level. The link emphasizes that an academic education involves far more than imparting facts and equipping students with (just) enough knowledge to secure

employment. An academic education must train students to think for themselves. It must instil the ability to define, analyse, address and solve complex problems. Active involvement in ongoing scientific research is a potent instrument in this regard. However, maintaining the link between education and research calls for increasingly inventive measures. When recruiting academic staff, for example, we attach particular importance to a candidate's ability to combine education and research. It is important that the two activities are mutually reinforcing, each serving to inspire and motivate the other. To ensure that students are fully aware of the academic nature of their studies from the outset, staff with a particular affinity for research are asked to teach first-year classes and act as mentors. Students who have seriously underestimated the demands of the programme will then quickly realize that they have made the wrong choice. By creating 'key positions' within education, the university offers experienced researchers who wish to shift their focus towards education the opportunity to do so, and to develop the relevant skills further. It should be noted that this applies to staff with an established track record in research undertaken *in combination with* educational activities, and who now wish to alter the balance in favour of the latter.

#### 4.3 *IT in education*

VU University Amsterdam sees great potential in Information Technology as a key component of educational processes. Its use will enhance and enrich the learning environment, allow a greater variety in teaching methods and assessment, improve efficiency and enable more detailed feedback to be given to students, thus improving educational outcomes. It can also provide greater relevance in terms of keeping pace with the latest developments and the student's own frame of reference and expectations, improved information on education, better student guidance, greater familiarity with professional software, and the ability to take part in educational activities regardless of time or location. Accordingly, we are investing significantly in IT and promoting its use in educational and support processes alike. IT is now used to support larger-scale educational activities, such as lectures, personal interaction and feedback between staff and students. IT enables support staff to work in a more professional, structured and efficient manner, as a result of which they are able to offer information and assistance to a large number of students. Further standardization of communication between students, teaching staff and the support departments is unavoidable and in many ways desirable. Nevertheless, the computer can never entirely supplant personal interaction.

#### *Concluding remarks*

The quality of any university is determined by the quality of its people: the academic community of staff and students. Quality is greatly enhanced by diversity in opinions and convictions. Nevertheless, a university needs an overall vision which inspires and provides direction in the many situations which call for choices to be made. That vision determines the identity of the university; it explains how and why VU University Amsterdam is what it is today, and defines what we wish to become in future. This document is intended to provide such a vision, to inspire and provide direction. The contents have been widely

discussed, both formally by the established consultation bodies and informally by various *ad hoc* groups. The publication of this *Vision for Education* does not mark the end of this process. We hope that it will be seen as a 'living document'. It can only fulfil its purpose if it continues to be a topic of lively discussion throughout the university.

28 December 2013