Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam's Educational Vision

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Contents

Introduction

This vision is intended to inspire and to encourage innovation, 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 education or when designing a specific element within the curriculum.

In 2019, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam set out its long-term strategy in its Strategy 2020-2025 document. VU Amsterdam's educational vision reflects and informs the university's strategy. It illustrates what VU Amsterdam stands for as an educational institution, what makes the university distinctive and what we need to do to maintain this identity.

The quality of our education comes first. It is self-evident that VU Amsterdam provides its students with well-designed education and fulfils this educational role as well as it possibly can. The educational vision helps to strengthen the content and quality of the education we provide at VU Amsterdam. It is the reason why several programmes at VU Amsterdam have been ranked as excellent by students and external parties. The educational vision contributes to the further continuation of our broad range of high-quality educational programmes.

The evolving educational landscape, the acceleration of online education in response to the COVID-19 crisis, and the increasing complexity of society have prompted a review of the existing educational vision. The previous educational vision – published in 2018 – has been updated with a focus on blended learning: incorporating a vision and design principle for how to achieve active learning using an optimal mix of on-campus and online education. New priority areas from the VU Amsterdam Strategy 2020-2025 have also been incorporated into the educational vision: sustainable and enterprising.
The existing elaboration on recurring themes, such as academic citizenship, the university community and connectedness with society, remains as strong as in previous versions of the educational vision.

The identity of VU Amsterdam in 2021

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.

Its original Protestant-Christian identity is expressed in the values that VU Amsterdam propagates in 2021: *personal*, *open* and *responsible*. These three words serve as a guideline for the work

In our education we pay attention to the **personal development** of our students

and conduct of staff and students, and shine through in our teaching and research. In addition, a focus on academic quality and integrity, and the pursuit of rigorous academic research are important conditions for providing high-quality academic education.

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 engaged academics* who are keen to further their own personal and professional

development. Not only do we impart knowledge to our students, but we also encourage them to take a wider perspective, *A Broader Mind*. Our teaching focuses on our students' personal development, wide-ranging academic knowledge, and orientation on society.

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. VU Amsterdam's aim is to be at the very heart of society and make a genuine contribution to society through its activities.

⚗ VU Amsterdam is keen to emphasize the societal value and relevance in its **academic teaching**

Specifying the core values

VU Amsterdam's core values are expressed in teaching through the content of the curriculum, the way we teach and the relationships between those involved: our teaching staff, our students and other stakeholders at VU Amsterdam.

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

VU Amsterdam cherishes the idea that every student has *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. Every student is heard, seen and recognized.

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. By creating a *positive learning culture* within VU Amsterdam, learning becomes an everyday habit. We motivate students to continue to reflect on their own development. We appreciate the value of making mistakes and see this as a stepping stone in the development of

graduates working towards self-critical academic awareness.

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. Their teaching skills, their ability to inspire students and to link their subject to research, forms the basis of education at VU Amsterdam. Within the academic career cycle, we emphatically combine educational and research activities.

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 form an important part of this process.

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. In our teaching of professionals, this goes further still, enabling us to gather new insights from the field for the benefit of our research and education.

How do we operationalize personal as a core value?

The education we provide centres on the student's own learning process. Our education encourages students to think, contribute, act and reflect, both individually and in groups. We deploy *blended learning* to encourage *active learning* in our students: with the learning objectives of a programme or educational component as our basis, we offer an optimal mix of on-campus and online education that challenges students through active, meaningful learning tasks. In our approach, these online and on-campus forms of education reinforce each other and are increasingly tailored to the student's personal learning needs. *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 student guidance. Wherever possible and relevant, the personal background and experience of students and teaching staff are incorporated into the educational experience.

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

VU Amsterdam is an *inspiring meeting place* where we work on a foundation of mutual respect to connect disciplines, cultures, religions, social views and societal issues. Comparing our differences leads to new insights and innovations, to clarity and sharpness of focus, and to academic excellence.

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 of this diversity only shines 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 our 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. Teaching staff 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.

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.

How do we operationalize open as a core value?

Through the *mixed classroom model,* differences in perspective are utilized to enrich learning experiences for all students present. Differences in perspective are used in education to stimulate critical thinking, to develop analytical skills, and to generate creative solutions. Issues and problems are tackled using a *multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach*. In doing so, it is of course essential that our students first acquire an in-depth understanding of their chosen discipline. We take every opportunity to share our knowledge and experience by means of *open access*. In this way, we promote both academic and social progress while making our educational activities more resilient.

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

At VU Amsterdam we expect students to take responsibility and not simply attend university in order to consume education as a product. The programme managers and the teaching staff are *responsible for designing high-quality degree programmes which set realistic targets*, while the students who take these programmes are *responsible for their own student life cycle and academic success.* As this life cycle continues, the degree of hands-on guidance from the programme is steadily scaled back. Students play an active part in feedback and assessment, and we make wide use of peer assessment.

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. We encourage our students to find their place in the world and to be open to others and to otherness. At the same time, we appeal to the sense of responsibility that already exists within the student community as regards sustainability. The education we provide is fully in keeping with the United Nations *Sustainable Development Goals*. We encourage students to apply their academic knowledge and skills to furthering these goals.

Teaching and research at the university are geared towards making a meaningful contribution to *solving society's problems*. The nature of those problems and the matter of who is 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. VU Amsterdam's educational approach encourages students to develop an *enterprising outlook* as a way of making a contribution to society and tackling societal issues.

> During and after their career, students are welcome to return to VU Amsterdam to work on their **further development**.

Complex societal problems form an important focus for the education we provide. In this regard, it is important that we do not work towards a single 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 to become reflective, critical and committed academic professionals, able to find their way in a *complex, globalizing and diverse world, which is changing ever more rapidly*. During and after their career, they are welcome to return to VU Amsterdam to work on their further development. We aspire to be an integral knowledge partner for individuals and organizations. We encourage *Lifelong Development* and, in addition to our degree programmes, we offer a wide range of courses and programmes for graduates and professionals.

How do we operationalize responsible as a core value?

Wherever possible, we provide education through *interactive teaching methods*, with problem-based learning or self-regulated learning as possible options. Using real-life cases and dilemmas from society, and involving stakeholders – such as the public sector, the business community and civil society – makes education more *relevant and valuable*. As part of this approach, we seek to establish and maintain intensive contact with the Amsterdam region, the professional field and our network of alumni. In *Community Service Learning* (CSL) activities, students apply their knowledge and skills for the benefit of society and learn from these experiences. For students, the value of CSL lies in its status as an effective active learning method. CSL also brings students into direct contact with societal 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.

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 wider social developments. The education we provide is designed in accordance with five principles which express the university's core values:

- The teaching programme is geared towards **active learning**. We use innovative teaching methods to activate student learning by achieving a good balance between face-to-face and digital forms of teaching. (personal)
- Each **student takes primary responsibility** for their own student life cycle and academic success. (personal,

responsible) We stimulate student autonomy and self-actualizing capacities with our teaching.
- VU Amsterdam is **inclusive**. (open, personal, responsible) We want to be a welcoming place for students from a wide range of backgrounds. The diversity of our student body and teaching staff is integral to the education we provide, through principles such as the mixed classroom.
- Societal issues are studied and addressed from a **multidisciplinary** perspective. (open, responsible)
- VU Amsterdam is fully aware of its **social responsibility** and gives expression to this in its teaching. (open, responsible)

The student as a partner in innovation and education

VU Amsterdam's campus is a platform for solving issues of primary social relevance as expressed in four profile themes: *Governance for Society, Human Health & Life Sciences*, *Connected World*, and *Science for Sustainability*.

We encourage our students to come up with solutions to issues that will add value to society. To solve these issues, we deviate from standard forms of education and seek an experimental and multidisciplinary approach that makes full use of the intelligence, commitment and creativity of students and other stakeholders.

To promote cooperation between its faculties, VU Amsterdam focuses on forming networks and further developing the campus as a virtual and physical platform for the 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 career.

In this experimental environment, partnership with the public sector, the business community and civil society is encouraged with a view to creating the broadest possible context for solving the issues affecting society today. Students are seen as partners in this learning environment and given scope for initiative. This enables them to make an active contribution to shaping educational innovation.

We encourage our students to come up with **solutions** to issues that will add value to society.

VU Amsterdam in context

The city of Amsterdam

Amsterdam is an important stakeholder n 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 as an economic centre of European allure. We also learn from the city: Amsterdam is a rich learning environment for our students and as a university we gain insights from the organizations around us thanks to the education we provide for professionals and the meaningful exchange and dialogue we seek to bring about. Regional proximity remains an important factor for prospective students when choosing a university, which makes the Amsterdam region 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 as a whole and to distinguish itself in terms of the social frameworks it offers its students. The university will continue to strengthen its commitment to its alumni partners within the public sector, the business community and civil society organizations. Collaboration with these partners is firmly anchored in educa-tion, allowing students to situate their learning in a valuable context. In our education for professionals, we consolidate our knowledge and strengths while augmenting our network of alumni and partners outside the university.
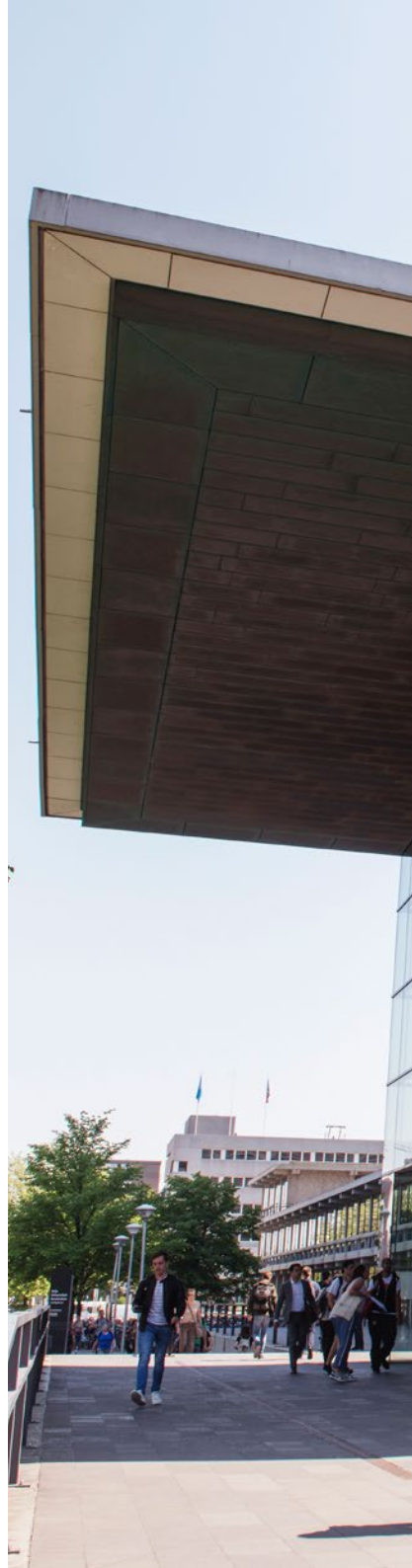
International

The responsibility borne by VU Amsterdam is not limited to Dutch society, but encom-passes the entire world. Scientific and academic endeavour takes place in the global arena. 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 partners abroad. 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 reflects VU Amsterdam's core values. International mobility, course content, quality of education, academic progress and development, and preparation for the diverse job market (including the academic career path) are all taken into conside-ration when selecting the language of instruction.

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 to inspire, to set its course for the future and to guide 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, to guide and to give direction.[1]

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[1] The educational vision is a living document formulated on the basis of wide-ranging discussions held in established forums and ad hoc committees within VU Amsterdam, focusing on our core values and principles of educational design. In keeping with this approach, the latest version of the Educational Vision (June 2021) has been adapted to the new reality of the VU Amsterdam Strategy 2020-2025 and educational developments which partly constitute a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We will continue to have these discussions. After all, a vision can only function if it remains the subject of discussion within the institution.