

# VU INTERNATIONALIZATION STRATEGY 2020-2025

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## **1. VU INTERNATIONALIZATION STRATEGY 2015 – 2020**

The internationalization strategy of VU is an integral part of the VU Strategic Plan (or the Institutional Plan- IP). The current IP covers 2015 – 2020 and specifies three key objectives for internationalization:

- 1) Creating an international environment
- 2) Strengthening the international profile
- 3) Improving the international mobility of students and staff

The general internationalization focus of this current IP is on providing an international and inclusive environment for a growing number of international staff and students. At the time of the plan's inception, VU was on the low end of the internationalizing Dutch universities in terms of numbers of international students, numbers of English taught programs and numbers of international staff. There were however substantial differences between faculties, with Business and Sciences being far more international than the others. It was also felt, but based on marginal evidence<sup>1</sup>, that VU did not always present an open and welcoming environment to people from abroad.

The objective to raise the international profile followed from the observation that the major rankings indicated that VU was one of those universities that were much better than their reputation. VU scored low on THES and QS (reputation-based rankings) but high on CWTS and ARWU (citation-based rankings).

The current strategy now reads as a very generic one and seems to be typical for a university that is still searching for its proper international position. Preparations for defining the new IP for 2020-2025 have now started.

Chapter 2 presents the current state of internationalization and Chapter 3 the relevant internal and external developments. These provide the basis for the new VU Internationalization Strategy (Chapter 4) for the years to come.

## **2. CURRENT STATE OF INTERNATIONALIZATION AT VU**

The internationalization strategy as presented in the current IP was translated into an action-oriented “VU Internationalization Agenda”, structured according to the three main objectives (see 1).

Moreover, a Working Group on Internationalization was established at the end of 2017 for a period of one year to coordinate cross-faculty internationalization projects, to facilitate more effective budget usage, and to create synergies in the execution of the Agenda.

The realization of the Agenda underwent influences of developments not known at the time of designing the strategy, but the Agenda proved to be a good instrument to keep VU on track. The progress is shown in paragraph 2.1, the results of the midterm evaluation of the IP in paragraph 2.2, and the current situation with regard to the international universities network Aurora follows in paragraph 2.3.

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<sup>1</sup> International Student Barometer showed low scores on host friends, international staff repeatedly reported difficulties of integrating in departments

## 2.1 Progress on VU's Internationalization Agenda 2015-2020

The following results on the three main objectives have been achieved:

### Objective 1: International environment

Different accomplishments throughout the year ensured that VU became more inclusive for international students and staff. The focus has been on developing an institutional language policy, on curriculum internationalization, and on creating a welcoming environment.

This has resulted in:

- ✓ An updated institutional language policy, declaring bilingualism as the new practical standard but having Dutch as the official university language;
- ✓ Relevant support on curriculum internationalization (e.g. with the newly developed Checklist Internationalization for teaching programs) and the development and execution of various advanced training series and workshops on teaching in the mixed classroom;
- ✓ The Global Room and International Staff Network, which both provide a space for interaction between international and local students and staff;
- ✓ The new position of Relocation Officer, supporting academic talent recruitment and retention through the International Talent Program;
- ✓ The availability of a full sports program in English offered by the VU Sports Centre.

### Objective 2: International profile

VU worked on furthering its global visibility and reputation, as a strong international profile is essential to establish high-quality international education and research collaboration, to attract the best talents (students, teachers, researchers) and to contribute to global issues.

This has resulted in:

- ✓ The establishment of the Aurora network as one of the founding partners (more under 2c);
- ✓ The start of a qualitative boost of VU's partner network, leading to new partners such as the Australian National University (Australia), McMaster University (Canada), George Mason University (USA), University of Aberdeen (UK), Universidad Nacional de Colombia (Colombia) and Université Grenoble Alpes (France).
- ✓ The start of an active International Student Ambassador's program.

### Objective 3: International mobility of students and staff

Gaining international experience adds value to the student experience. Dutch and international students can experience this in the mixed classroom at VU, but it is also valuable for students to spend some time abroad. Accomplishments in the field of international program development, student recruitment and promotion of credit mobility show that VU has improved the international mobility of students and staff (figure 1 and 2).

This has resulted in:

- ✓ A strong increase in the number of English-taught bachelor programs (19 programs in 2018 vs. 3 programs in 2015) with a resulting increase in degree enrolments;
- ✓ The development of new short term (faculty-led) mobility programs for VU students;
- ✓ A fifty percent increase in outgoing VU exchange students as compared to 4 years ago;
- ✓ The firm establishment of the VU Amsterdam Summer School in an international context;
- ✓ An increase in diversity of students through the VU Semester in Amsterdam program;

- ✓ Improved support for PhD candidates through offering dedicated information on a new PhD website and by means of new bridging programs and a Graduate Winter School.
- ✓ Concerted efforts by the Amsterdam educational institutes, the municipality and the housing providers, leading to the formation of an extensive support network, to tackle the housing issue and offer international students a suitable place to stay during their studies.

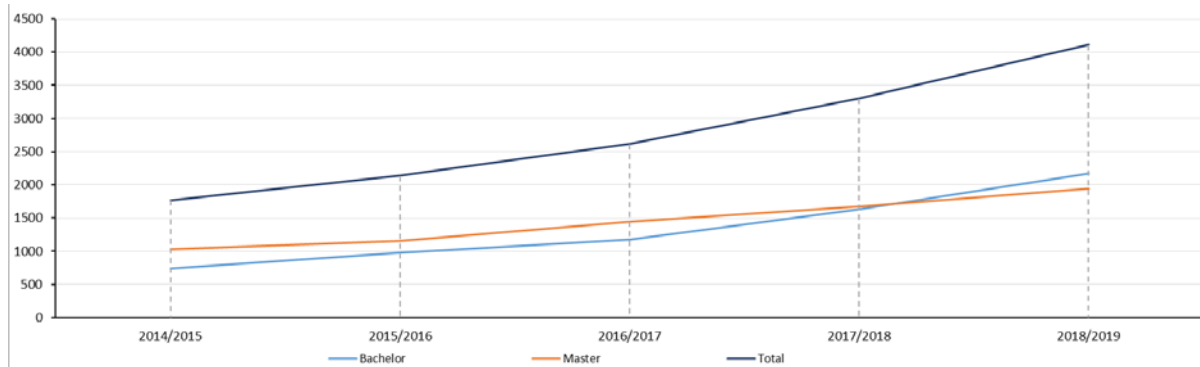


Figure 1: Total number of enrolled students with a foreign degree program at VU, regardless of language of program; UvA first students included

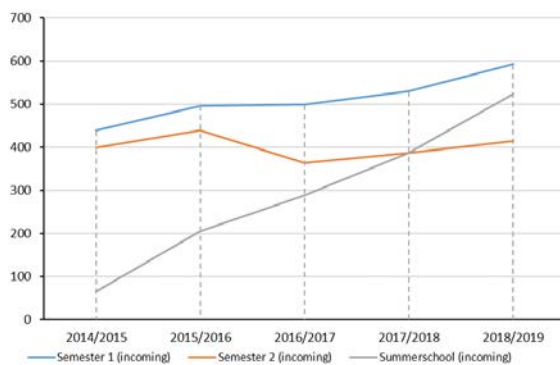


Figure 2a: Total number of incoming credit mobility

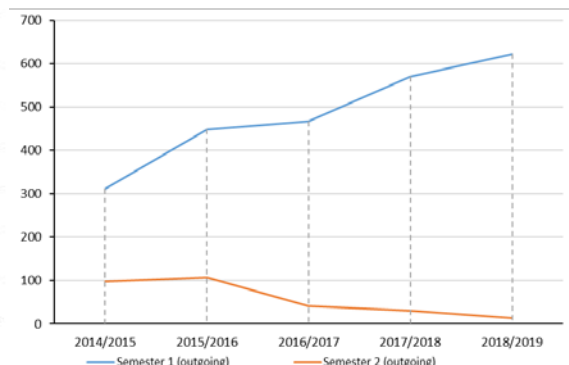


Figure 2b: Total number of outgoing credit mobility

## 2.2 Interim evaluation Strategic Plan and midterm review Institutional Quality Assessment

The interim evaluation of the VU Strategic Plan 2015-2020 and the midterm review Institutional Quality Assessment 2018 were performed in 2018, with the following conclusions and recommendations for internationalization:

The evaluation shows us that much has been achieved in the period 2015-2017. Special mention is made of the very substantial increase in student mobility, the development of a new language policy, the increased internationalization of bachelor programs, and the attention paid to international staff. In order to optimally build on these results, further and more detailed targeting is essential in the period to come. Care should be taken that internationalization is not narrowed down to the anglicization of teaching programs, and that attention should be paid to the creation of budgets for supporting the new language policy. Another recommendation is to be explicit about international enrolment targets at the level of individual teaching programs. Finally, Internationalization should be further developed in close connection to the priorities of Diversity and Talent. In this respect it is recommended that further elaboration is done on the concept of the mixed classroom. After the midterm review of the Institutional Quality Assessment 2018, the reviewing commission reported positively about the development of the mixed classroom, a unique concept with which VU establishes a clear educational profile.

## 2.3 Two years of Aurora

Together with the University of East Anglia, VU formed the basis for the establishment of the strategic university network Aurora in 2016: 9 European universities that are strong in research and share a social mission. The partners share much of their policies and best practices in a high-trust environment in order to improve not only themselves as universities but especially the network as a whole. Aurora members are active in a broad range of projects. Some of them are already sufficiently well-developed, others are at an initial phase. Areas that are important in the collaboration are the impact and relevance of research, diversity and inclusion, educational innovation, digitization, internationalization, sustainability, energy and climate, and human life and health. Academics, students and support staff are involved in all the themes.

Besides the projects, members of Aurora partners meet on a regular basis for the purpose of international benchmarking: deans of all faculties, vice-rectors research and vice rectors education, doctoral Education, Marketing and Communication. Aurora and other partners have also started a project group to work on the European Universities initiative to propose against one of the first Erasmus+ calls.

## 3. DEVELOPMENTS THAT IMPACT VU'S STRATEGY

Since the IP was designed, a number of relevant developments have impacted the execution of the strategy. These developments were often a continuation of existing trends, but some national developments were much less expected.

### 3.1 External developments

- *Substantial slowdown of growth in international degree student mobility*  
Global growth rates of 10% are of the past; current estimates are growth rates of slightly over 1%. Reasons for this are multiple and include the increase in teaching capacity in sending countries, and the decline in the number of students globally but primarily in countries like China and Korea. Substantial population increases are only expected in Africa, a continent where the relation between demographics and HE enrolments is currently weak.
- *National policies affecting higher education*
  - *Increased competition for international students:* Countries such as Canada, Australia, China, France and Germany have set national targets for international student enrolments. The main driver for setting these targets are considerations of economic growth and labor shortages.
  - *Nationalist tendencies:* Increasing protective political views and actions influence higher education, such as Brexit. This causes uncertainty in the academic world about current and future educational and research collaboration with universities in specific countries.
- *Stronger focus on labor readiness of graduates*  
Transferable, transversal or 21<sup>st</sup> century skills all point to the same skills that make a graduate ready for work.
- *European funding for Horizon Europe and Erasmus much higher than Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+*  
Horizon Europe, the successor of the Horizon 2020 program, will have a focus on innovation and on mission-oriented research while the new Erasmus program takes an evolutionary approach and builds on Erasmus+, but with a strong emphasis on inclusion. It is expected that over a period of 7

years B€ 45 extra will become available for international collaboration within these 2 European programs.

- *EU launched an initiative under the name of European Universities*  
This program wants existing European universities to take collaboration to a higher level to create some 20 European universities. EU envisages the evolution over a period of approximately 5 years from networks of 4-6 universities to truly European universities. Primarily funded from Erasmus and Horizon Europe, networked universities are challenged to increase the joint character of their educational offerings and connect these better to excellent – also joint – research.
- *Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*
  - *Inclusion and equity:* European policy is focusing in increasing manner on providing inclusive education, this will be reflected in criteria within large European funds.
  - *Access for all:* The percentage of the Dutch population aged 25–64 who have completed higher education exceeded 35 percent in 2015, a score just above the EU average. Although this percentage has clearly risen since 2001 (when it was just over 24 percent), in a number of other EU countries the rise has been larger, with the result that the Netherlands is now lower in the EU ranking.
  - *Lifelong Learning:* According to Studyportals, the demand for lifelong learning programs far exceeds the current offer.
- *National debates on issues surrounding internationalization of Dutch HE*  
In the course of 2017 and 2018, debates on 4 issues (student housing, language, crowding out effects, unsustainable HE financing) created a far less rosy picture of internationalization of Dutch HE than existed until then. None of these developments per se came fully out of the blue; it is the combination of all 4 debates that surprised most of the HEI's.
  - *Student housing.* Housing has been a pressing issue from the beginnings of internationalization, with supply hardly able to meet the ever-increasing demand. A new wave of internationalization as a result of “bachelor anglification” coincides with a boom in the housing market as a whole. This created a negative image of internationalization, persisting until today.
  - *Language.* There is resistance against the unmotivated or insufficiently motivated switch from Dutch-taught programs to English-taught programs. This, in the view of those against anglification, leads to reduced quality of teaching and diminished Dutch language competencies of students.
  - *Crowding out.* A recent, but frequently heard opinion is that international students drive out domestic students as capacity will not increase proportionally.
  - *Unsustainable financing.* As the budget at the national level for HE is fixed, increased international enrolments lead to reduced levels of funding per student.

### 3.2 Internal developments

- *Mixed classroom.* The main ambitions of VU's IP 2015-2020 of Diversity, Talent and Internationalization have been integrated into the concept of the Mixed Classroom. The mixed classroom brings students together from a wide variety of backgrounds. The teaching and learning culture within the mixed classroom is geared towards getting the most out of the different perspectives of the students, thus providing added value.

- *Comprehensive internationalization.* Internationalization in the period from 2013 until recently has been a focused effort, concentrated in the International Office. There were good reasons for that, not in the least the fact that VU had not managed to attract a substantial number of international students. As the situation has improved VU can now take a more comprehensive perspective towards internationalization and make it an effort of basically every department as due to its pervasive nature, internationalization is everywhere in the university. This process of mainstreaming has already begun and will continue the coming years.
- *Recruitment and retention of international staff.* Reports from KNAW, Rathenau Institute and own research showed some lagging behind of VU compared to the average of Dutch universities (figure 3). VU is now taking action with a new relocation officer and a set of strategic and operational activities to improve international recruitment under the International Talent Program.

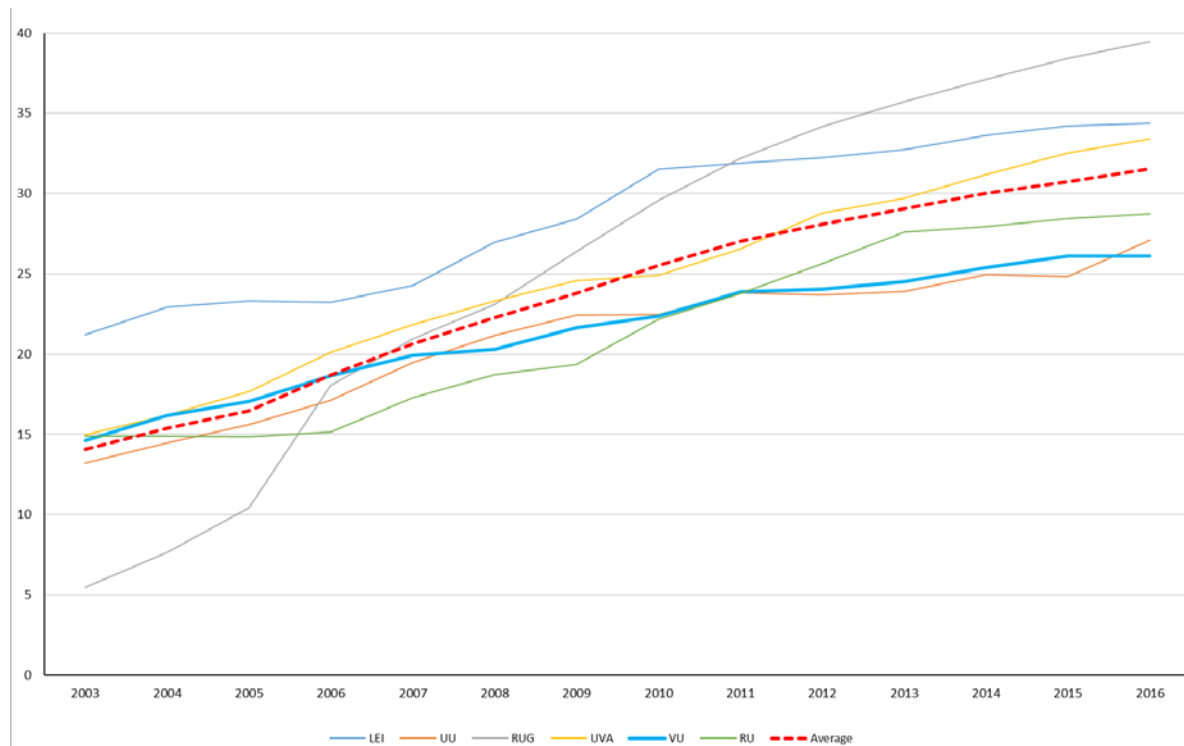


Figure 3: Percentage academic staff with non-Dutch nationality - classic universities (Rathenau, 2018)

- *PhD recruitment.* International recruitment of students is almost exclusively focused on undergraduate and MSc students. Recruiting PhD students has always been hampered by a lack of structure of PhD tracks. VU has put serious efforts in structuring and better presenting these tracks, with very promising initial results.
- *Language.* VU recently decided on a comprehensive language policy with high relevance for internationalization:
  - The official language of VU is Dutch, but bilingualism is the practical standard to facilitate an inclusive environment;
  - Decisions on the instruction language should be well motivated per program, taking into account criteria as laid down in the new language policy.

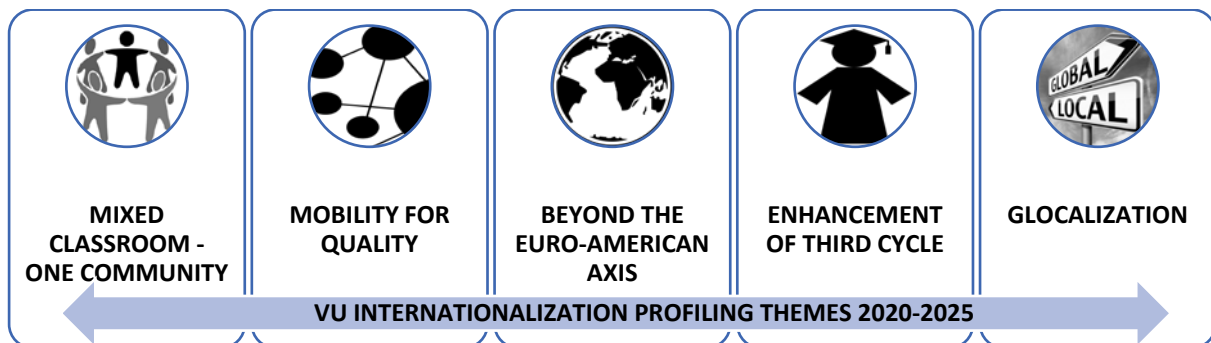
- To improve the quality of English VU made it mandatory for bachelor students in English taught programs to take an English language test, and for teachers in English taught programs to take a test to proof that their competencies are at C1 level.
- In the event of not meeting the requirements, VU will provide additional language training.
- International students and staff are offered Dutch language courses at a reduced fee.

#### 4. VU's INTERNATIONALIZATION STRATEGY

As a result of the previous Internationalization Strategy VU has developed into a more international university, attracting a large number of international students to its welcoming campus. VU sees internationalization and diversity as a way to strengthen the quality of education and research. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam will be the number one university in diversity 1) in terms of its student and staff population and by 2) utilizing a comprehensive approach that reinforces the unique character of the university will in turn again 3) attract students and staff from all walks of life.

##### 4.1 Profiling themes

The VU internationalization profiling themes for 2020-2025 highlight what VU stands for and help the VU community and others to understand better what makes VU stand out from other (Dutch) universities when it comes to internationalization. These profiling themes also function as a guide for the activities following from the new VU Internationalisation Strategy and applies to both students and staff.



##### Mixed classroom – One community

VU provides students and staff with a stimulating mixed classroom environment. International diversity is just one aspect of the diversity encountered in the mixed classroom.

- VU develops specific didactic approaches to create added value out of the large diversity of perspectives and backgrounds, thereby developing its students' transversal skills.
- VU supports extensive integration of local and international students and staff and builds an inclusive community for all.

##### Mobility for quality

VU internationalization efforts on mobility are focused on improving quality of its student population, its (academic) staff body and of its teaching programs.

- VU consciously recruits international talents (degree/non-degree Bachelor and Master students, PhD students and academic staff) who increase the quality of teaching programs through their contribution in the Mixed Classroom.



- VU develops joint Bachelor, Master and PhD programs with structured mobility in collaboration with foreign universities, offering students the best of us in combination with the best of our partners.
- VU widens participation in study abroad for its diverse student population, by offering a wider variety of qualitative short- and longer term studying abroad opportunities.

#### Beyond the Euro-American axis

VU collaborates with universities and other organizations worldwide, among others to address the global challenges as comprehensive as possible. Research and teaching collaborations are very often with partners in Africa, Asia or Latin America.

- VU leverages its international reputation through partnerships, accreditations and rankings.
- VU invests in meaningful European networks (including Aurora) and in international relations beyond the Euro-American axis.
- VU actively recruits outside of Europe, taking into consideration student demographics worldwide.
- VU actively engages with its international alumni.

#### Enhancement of third cycle

VU increases the international accessibility of its PhD programs. By introducing more structure, more transparency and better communications PhD candidates are better targeted and informed.

- VU caters for career development and research capacities of international PhD candidates through integrative and comprehensive portfolio of bridging and predoc programs.
- VU invests in inter-institutional cooperation in doctoral education. Mobility is a key component of the research enterprise. VU aims to stimulate mobility of PhD candidates thus enhancing their opportunities for securing jobs in rapidly changing academic and industrial markets.

#### Glocalization

VU takes up the challenge to reconcile a global outlook with local impact, here and around the world. At home, VU specifically focusses on combatting crowding out effects, dealing with language issues, fighting student housing shortages, offering career services and improving labor readiness for all students.

- VU brings together people from different backgrounds and disciplines to explore and study the global challenges and to contribute to innovative solutions.
- VU is locally embedded and entertains a network of stakeholders from government, industry, educational institutes, non-profits and the community to make a local impact.

### **4.2 Lobby agenda**

These strategic objectives cannot be fully realized by VU on its own but need the support and collaboration from other parties (local/national government, VSNU etc.). Items for the lobby agenda of VU from the perspective of internationalization are:

- attention for the quality of language proficiency of VWO graduates;
- changing the national university financing system to prevent perverse effects such as a general race to the bottom in the battle for marketshare;
- EU funding lobby;
- legal possibilities for curbing international enrolments