

STRATEGY DOCUMENT UCU 2015 - 2019

University College Utrecht: Excellent and Innovative by Tradition

Utrecht, April 2015

Introduction

At the time of its foundation in 1998 UCU was unique in many respects. Being a Liberal Arts & Sciences college it broke away from the supply driven disciplinary tradition. Its concept was demand drive instead, giving students the freedom to explore and further develop their own interest across different disciplines. By being small scale and residential it counteracted the trend of anonymous mass education of the end of the 20th century. By being selective it paved the way for fostering excellence. By using English as the unique language of instruction, by synchronizing with international semester rhythms and offering an international outlook in course content it lifted internationalization to a different standard. And while the Bologna agreement was still to be signed and implemented, it already was the first “lone-standing” bachelor program in the Netherlands.

Now, seventeen years later, UCU has proven to be a great success, but much of what was unique and innovative in 1998 has become more common in Dutch higher education and beyond. Most Dutch universities have opened a University College. Bachelor programs in general are slowly but surely developing a broader separate mission of general academic foundation as opposed to specialization in the master phase. Honors programs stimulating excellence are everywhere and in spite of successive budget cuts, class size and numbers of contact hours are on the governance agenda everywhere, as indicators of the intensity of class interaction.

Although UCU has by no means been overtaken by these developments it is clear that UCU needs to redefine and strengthen its own profile in order to maintain its pioneer and quality benchmark position.

UCU profile

The three components of the slogan – tradition, excellence, and innovation – contain all the elements of UCU's profile.

TRADITION primarily refers to the tradition of liberal education. UCU stands in the tradition of liberal education, as is well explained in UCU's educational philosophy statement. UCU has a **Liberal Arts and Sciences** curriculum and students' pathways through this curriculum are largely **demand driven**, based on their individual academic passions and interests. The **liberal arts vision** emphasizes development of skills such as critical (self-) reflection and expression, and the ability to make critical connections: abilities that are crucial for academic, personal, and social development. UCU is a closely-knit academic and social **community**, a community of learners and of scholarship. The holistic goals of UCU imply that UCU has a strong **mentoring** system, as well as a tradition in **community engagement**. The **diversity** of the community in terms of nationalities and cultures is a rich context for conversation and learning. As **the first** University College in the Netherlands, UCU has not only taken its inspiration from this tradition, but has also become part of it, inspiring others to develop similar programs.

UCU wants to keep all components of a good liberal education intact and improve them where possible. UCU will *not* develop a thematic profile (such as for example AUC's 'science' profile or LUC's 'global challenges' profile, or a pedagogical profile (such as UCM's and EUC's 'problem-based

learning' profile). Diversity in academic offerings as well as in classroom pedagogies is UCU's trademark; UCU firmly believes that such a rich diversity only benefits the opportunities for and autonomy of teachers as well as students. Diversity and balance in the curriculum can only be maintained through ongoing critical conversation on campus: about breadth and depth, multi-versus inter-disciplinarity, student demand versus curricular balance, and the like. Rooted in the liberal arts tradition, we want to be focused on foundational skills, but with an open eye for and adaptive to changing requirements for graduate study and in the labor market.

Keeping the strengths of the tradition alive in practice requires constant attention. The academic world is changing rapidly. New domains of multi- or interdisciplinary research and teaching emerge. Information and communication technology create new opportunities for teaching and learning. Knowledge institutions are increasingly assessed on the basis of the role they play in wider society. Developments like these must be considered in the ongoing adjustment of UCU practices.

EXCELLENCE is the target level of all aspects of UCU performance. UCU aspires to remain a benchmark of excellence. In the context of increased competition and a more demanding societal environment this means that standards for all aspects remain high: quality and performance of students, teachers, and support staff; curriculum; classroom facilities; administrative processes; room and board arrangement; campus facilities; quality assurance; the UCU built environment. UCU has a track record of **student excellence** in terms of success rates, high percentage of degrees with honors, extracurricular achievement, international relations and international study option for its students, admissions to prestigious graduate programs, and professional careers. Course evaluations, tutor evaluations, as well as high level of satisfaction about admission procedures, study abroad options, or student support demonstrate the high quality of **teachers and support staff**. The downside of this culture of excellence is a rather widespread feeling among student the level of competitiveness and the workload are too high, and an equally widespread feeling among faculty that excellent teachers have very limited opportunity for promotion or diversification (including research).

The beautiful and spacious **campus** impresses visitors, but at closer inspection there remains a lot to be desired in terms of UCU's built environment, facilities for students, faculty and staff, overall state of maintenance, and classroom facilities. The annual General Survey shows that students are very positive about the **residential concept** of UCU, although we face many complaints about value for money with regard to catering. UCU also strives for excellence in its **client orientation** towards applicants, students, employees, and external parties. All surveys, including the UU Employee Survey, demonstrate that UCU is doing relatively very well in this respect. But there is always room for improvement in the harmonization of administrative systems and streamlining of procedures. Also this point is high on UCU's agenda.

INNOVATION is the best word to describe the founding of UCU in 1998. As mentioned in the introduction, UCU was radically new and different in the Dutch higher education landscape. UCU's success was a source of **inspiration** for most other Dutch research universities: all general universities except Radboud University Nijmegen now have a University College. Throughout the seventeen years of its existence, UCU remained a place of experimentation and innovation. UCU has seen many **curricular innovations**, such as student-designed honors classes, the UCU in Africa program, undergraduate research projects with external partners, a double degree program with Law, a writing and skills center, interdepartmental new courses, just to mention a few. UCU's **practices and procedures** for mentoring, admissions, study abroad, course registration, and many other, were further developed and fine-tuned over the years and have served as examples for UC's

and other programs. UCU has also been innovative in **outreach and community service** and now has an impressive track record of initiatives that serve communities locally as well in other parts of the world.

It is UCU's ambition to remain at the forefront of educational innovation, in a way that strengthens liberal education practice in 21st century context and in a spirit of sharing the outcomes of innovation within the wider academic community. UCU is well positioned for experimenting with blended learning: combining the benefits of ICT and of small-scale interactive classroom settings. UCU wants to create a 'connected' curriculum and study experience, with open and functional working relations with alumni, graduate schools, research groups, and the labor market and wider society (the Connect project). We believe that such a connected curriculum will not only benefit the curriculum and students' career orientation, but also help them to develop the attitudes and skills that are currently required. UCU also wants to implement instruments that help students to become more reflective about their performance, progress, and ambitions (portfolio). And we are in the process of strengthening and deepening relationships with our over 2500 alumni, also with the longer-term ambition to raise funds, particularly for scholarships.

By definition, innovation cannot be planned. Innovation requires an open culture of diversity, communication, and experimentation. What is also required is awareness of broader trends in education, academia, and society. It is important for UCU to maintain this culture and to remain open and connected to its environment, at UU and beyond.

Agenda 2015-2019

The three elements of tradition, excellence and innovation are closely related to each other. The action categories listed below all cut across the three elements.

A. A balanced and connected curriculum and state-of-the-art teaching and learning facilities

Priority action points:

A1. Ongoing conversation on campus, involving the entire UCU community as well as voices from outside, about how exactly we define and develop the core foundational component of liberal education and a balanced curriculum at UCU, taking into account the rich tradition of Liberal Arts and Sciences and in the context of rapid change in academia and society at large.

A2. Investment in (natural) science facilities and courses, such as an on-campus IT supported simulation and modeling lab, new science-oriented summer courses, and broader offerings of off-campus lab courses.

A3. A place for external perspectives in all UCU tracks, through the involvement of alumni and others (representing graduate study and diverse sectors of society) as guest lecturers, off-campus activities in courses, and the like.

A4. Further development of a culture of research-based learning and teaching, in classroom and course activities, through undergraduate research activities, and with a solid longitudinal and support structure throughout the three years of study that facilitates students to develop relevant skills.

A5. Development of blended learning where appropriate; update classrooms according to current educational technology standards; a wireless campus; an attractive and well-equipped auditorium for large group events; development of scattered small-scale group-work spaces; considering the development of a language lab.

A6. Further development of support services for students in response to their needs, in cooperation with external parties where relevant, in particular for time management and study skills, writing and skills support, and well-being.

B. A diverse and connected community

Priority action points:

B1. Stimulate diversity, in all aspects, of a student community of around 850 students, through diversity-aware admissions policy and active fundraising for the UCU scholarship fund.

B2. Stimulate diversity, particularly in terms of nationalities, of UCU's group of teachers, tutors and members of the support staff.

B3. An inclusive policy towards alumni, inviting them to remain active members of the UCU community, through alumni newsletters, on-campus and off-campus alumni events, facilities for the alumni organization on campus, and involvement of alumni in the curriculum, career advice for students, and recruitment of student internships.

B4. Developing stronger and more structural "town and gown" relationships between the UCU community and the local and regional community, through volunteer work, internships, local orientation activities for foreign UCU students, and by involving local and regional experts in UCU education as guest speakers.

B5. A professional and welcoming attitude towards all guests (prospective students, political or higher education delegations, et cetera) and a positive and professional attitude towards cooperation with relevant external parties, such as the network of Dutch University Colleges or universities and other partners in the Netherlands as well as abroad.

C. High quality campus as a work and living environment

Priority action points:

C1. Transformation of the room and board regime for students, particularly the Dining Hall system, in close collaboration with Utrecht University's real estate division and housing corporation Lekstede, with active participation in planning and design of UCU students, and with a focus on affordability of campus fees.

C2. Creation of attractive social spaces for UCU residents, in addition to the current UCU bar, that cater for conversation, reading, and consumption of non-alcoholic beverages, with the active participation in planning and design of UCU students; upgrading of art spaces and recreational / sports facilities for UCU residents.

C3. Renovation of the administrative building College Hall, with active participation in planning and design of UCU staff; creation of a common room for UCU faculty.

C4. Strengthening UCU's quality as a green and attractively designed space, with more opportunities for sitting outside; improve and expand the student garden; implement measures that will make UCU a sustainable campus.

D. High quality organization

Priority action points:

D1. Further development of high professional and client-oriented standards in all administrative processes and also for all internal and external communication; this includes many aspects, including the streamlining administrative systems, rethinking our labor-intensive admissions procedures, and a continued aspiration for transparency and participation in UCU governance.

D2. A continued focus on strong and inclusive quality assurance of UCU education, with a good balance between formal requirements (written evaluations and policy cycle) on the one hand and informal conversations (such as student-organized focus groups or track meetings of teachers) on the other hand, at the levels of courses, disciplinary tracks and the curriculum as a whole, and with clear roles of all involved (students, teachers, tutors, fellows, heads of department, support staff).

D3. Commitment to a transparent and tailor-made approach in faculty and staff development, well integrated with the annual performance and development (B&O) cycle, with the intention to support professional growth and development of UCU employees, including the facilitation of steps towards job mobility.

D4. Exploring all options for developing a research culture among UCU appointed members of faculty; this involves stimulating research seminars, facilitating UU-UCU relationships along disciplinary lines, further development of undergraduate research, and safeguarding teaching-related research time.

E. Continuing and strengthening our role within and for Utrecht University as a place for innovation, experimentation, and agenda setting with regard to high-quality undergraduate education

E1. A short-term innovative focus on mentoring, developing reflective skills among students, writing and skills support, honors education, undergraduate research, community outreach, professional development for faculty, and connecting the curriculum and study experience to the outside world.

E2. Sharing experiences and good practices within (and beyond) Utrecht University, not only for current domains of experimentation and innovation, but also with regard to more generic aspects of UCU such as internationalization, admissions procedures, student life support, flexible curricula, and so forth.

E3. Strengthen professional development and networking opportunities for those UCU teachers who are appointed in one of UCU's Faculties, by inviting them to UCU's professional development activities and offering coaching when needed, in a way that may also benefit their teaching at the home Faculty.