

Open in Connection: Utrecht University Public Engagement Plan 2021–2025

1. Introduction

In the dialogue and interaction between academia and society, Utrecht University addresses the major present-day challenges. Utrecht University believes that knowledge should be shared. An investment in engaging a wide audience in academic endeavours is in line with that ambition. The *Openly Connected: Utrecht University Public Engagement Plan 2021–2025* builds on earlier programmes and activities and ties in with Utrecht University's Strategic Plan 2021–2025.

2. The interplay between academia and society

Utrecht University contributes to the sustainable improvement of our society through research and education. To be able to do this, the university needs to share not only the results of academic research, but also engage with and invite society to participate.

We aim to do this by:

- connecting the university and society through interaction and dialogue;
- increasing social interaction awareness, knowledge and competences among Utrecht University staff;
- developing, implementing and evaluating new public engagement initiatives together with academics for, in cooperation with, and on the initiative of diverse audiences in various contexts.

The academic contributions to society, and vice versa, require cooperation and dialogue – not only among academics, but also with various social partners. Different working methods and skills apply to each type of partner. A university that considers societal impact important fosters as well as facilitates a broad academic dialogue about its own social responsibility and impact. Students, staff and other stakeholders engage in dialogue with each other about Open Science, the public value of academic endeavours, the various ways in which this can be achieved and the implications for teaching, research and operational management.

Everyone can be a partner

In order to identify relevant challenges and potential solutions, academics also need partners who stand to benefit from the solution to such a challenge. Everyone could be such a partner – even those for whom the relevance of academic endeavours is not self-evident because they have little knowledge of academia, because they are not yet interested in it, because they are sceptical about it or perhaps because they have more confidence in other methods or sources of knowledge



acquisition. Utrecht University will therefore also invest in engaging a wide and diverse audience in academic endeavours, which is often described by the term ‘public engagement’¹.

It is advisable to inform as many people as possible about what academic research is and what academics do in a manner that is appropriate to their social environment and interests. This might include the application of research in society as well as fundamental questions. This requires of academics the ability to think in terms of social needs and personal interests, rather than only in terms of the autonomy (or the intrinsic value) of academic research.

Public engagement can therefore contribute in various ways to a fruitful relationship between academia and society:

- People who are familiar with academia will be able to obtain a clearer picture of its value – not just of the results, but also of the methods and underlying theories and ways of thinking. It will enable them to make more informed decisions and to make choices about important social challenges. In this way, the university also contributes to civic development for both the general public and its own academic community, including students.
- The perspectives of non-academic and social partners and the general public can provide academics with new insights, motivate them and stimulate their creativity.
- Involving citizens in solutions to social challenges and research aimed at finding such solutions increases the likelihood of solutions that better meet social priorities, needs and wishes.

3. How does this tie in with Utrecht University’s objectives?

Mission

Utrecht University is working to create a better world. Making a difference in the world outside the university (impact) forms part of the university’s core tasks of teaching and research.

Communication about academic endeavours and public activities can make a significant contribution in this area.

In the region

In addition to contributing to solutions to major global challenges, Utrecht University also wants to be relevant to people in its immediate vicinity. Public activities enable the university to connect with the city and the region. This also requires the university to reach groups that usually have little affinity with the university, such as those with a non-academic educational background, children, senior citizens and people with a migration background. As such, these activities tie in with another important Utrecht University objective: diversity and inclusivity.

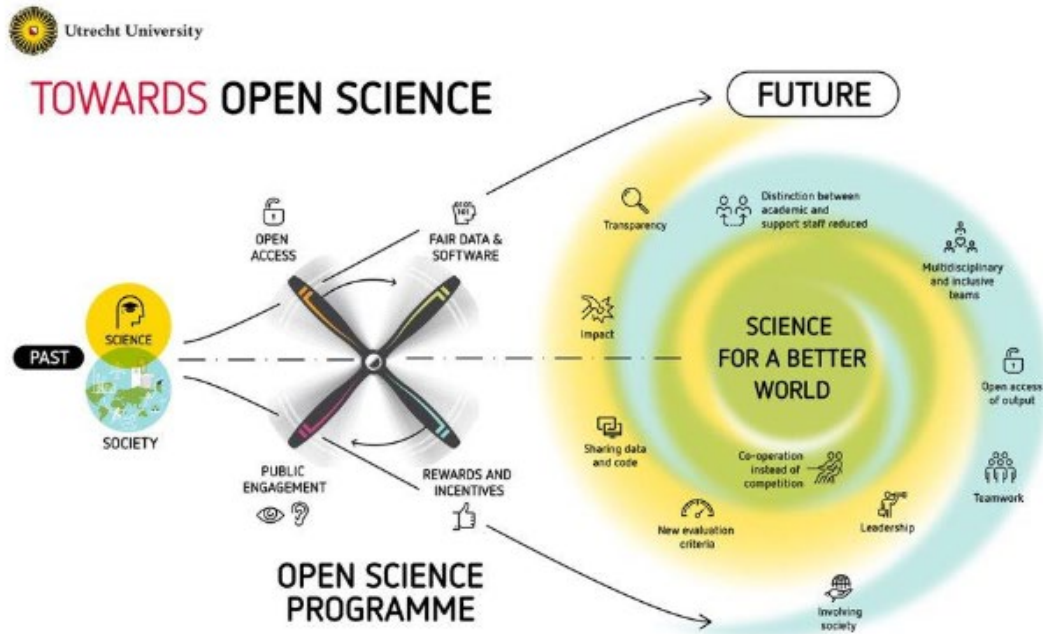
Embedment in the university’s structure and culture

Public engagement is one of the four pillars of Utrecht University’s Open Science programme, launched in 2019. This makes sense, because the Open Science movement stems from the

¹ ‘Public engagement’ is a term that is commonly used in national and international academia, but not in communications with the general public.



conviction that academic research can contribute more to solutions to complex social challenges if knowledge and data are shared as much as possible with diverse social partners. The objective is that they will be involved not just in applying but also in developing knowledge, and in putting research questions relevant to them on the agenda.



This movement calls for a major system and culture change at universities that includes a broad academic dialogue on the public values of academic research and teaching at universities and on their operational management. Teamwork and other ways of recognising and rewarding the work of academics are a prerequisite for achieving these ambitions. This includes recognition for activities that contribute to, and creating conditions for, social interaction. There should also be coherence with other Utrecht University impact routes. This public engagement plan therefore forms a link in a larger framework? and a component of a complex culture change programme.

Interaction between research and the public at Utrecht University

The faculties, those engaged in the strategic themes and the hubs are developing numerous initiatives, often in association with partners from outside and within the university, such as departments of the Centre for Science Communication and Culture (CWC): Studium Generale, the University Museum, the Parnassos cultural centre and the Utrecht Science Hub.

For examples, please visit <https://www.uu.nl/en/organisation/public-engagement-at-utrecht-university> and <https://www.uu.nl/en/publicengagement/closeup>.

The CWC is staffed by professionals with expertise in science education, culture and public engagement programmes. They develop these programmes by identifying which issues are current in society and by seeking perspectives derived from academia that tie in with them. In so doing, they raise awareness for academic research among a wide, inclusive and diverse audience. The CWC also



organises training courses and knowledge-sharing initiatives in this area for academics and support staff.

Utrecht University will present itself on new platforms more often in the future to meet a new audience in new contexts. Examples are primary, secondary, and vocational schools, HKU University of the Arts, HU University of Applied Sciences, TivoliVredenburg music complex, the public library on the Neude, community labs, district libraries, the Botanical Gardens and other public spaces. The objective is to build a wide, increasingly diverse and engaged audience that is keen to get acquainted with academia and actively participate in it. We would also like to deploy this expertise for the internal dialogue on Open Science and the public values of the university within the wider academic community.

A small-scale exploratory and promotional Public Engagement programme (2017–2020) led by the CWC concluded that while Utrecht University offered a fertile breeding ground for public activities, implementation into tactical plans and support often lagged behind. The following important lessons were drawn from this exploratory programme:

- Increasing interdisciplinary cooperation between academics requires integral cooperation between the various service departments.
- The programme included the popular Public Engagement Seed Fund, which drives small projects initiated by academics. It is important to develop the fund further.
- Public engagement forms part of a culture change. This calls for a dialogue on the public values of academia within the wider academic community and the world outside, in association with faculties, those engaged in the strategic themes and the hubs.
- It is difficult to reach members of the public who have little affinity with academia and the university has inadequate knowledge and expertise in this area. Utrecht University has a civic duty to foster relations and engage in dialogue with these people as well.

Initiatives and activities centring on social interaction can contribute to raising the university's public visibility, social reputation and profile if they are presented in a more coherent manner. We are seeing both a national and international trend that is moving away from the strong focus on the excellence of individual academics and towards the relevance of academic research for society. The policy aimed at increasing societal impact is gaining ground². The conditions that enable academic research to generate societal impact are improving.

4. The Utrecht University Public Engagement Plan

In September 2019, the Executive Board of Utrecht University tasked the CWC with developing a follow-up plan for the Public Engagement programme (2017–2020). The Open Science programme, those engaged in the strategic themes and their hubs and research focus areas are the key drivers of societal impact in this follow-up plan. This will also apply to teaching in the years ahead, with programmes such as Community-Engaged Learning and Lifelong Learning.

² *Wetenschapsbeleid voor de samenleving. Het publieke belang van kennis* (Academic policy for society: the public importance of knowledge), Rathenau Institute, May 2019



We already have considerable experience in creating educational programmes around academic research, forging special ties with diverse audiences and developing cultural-academic programmes. Utrecht University aims to expand this further by putting academic research into new, and in some cases more accessible, contexts; developing inspiring concepts together with researchers; assisting them in engaging citizens; and developing creative-academic programmes.

The CWC is evolving into a university-wide hub for public engagement that provides study programmes, advice, training courses and secondary support facilities to both academic and support staff. The CWC will coordinate the university-wide Public Engagement Plan, which will be fully implemented across the faculties, strategic themes, hubs, research focus areas, the Open Science programme, the Communications and Marketing Office, the Student and Academic Affairs Office and other service departments. This calls for a shared vision on public engagement and a shared commitment to implement that vision in marketing and communication activities, the development of research and teaching and training activities.

Objectives

1. Safeguarding the results of the earlier programme and ensuring a structural continuation of successes.
2. Utilising opportunities and challenges for the structural and strategic deployment of public engagement and integrating it into Utrecht University's societal impact policy.

By:

- tying in with Utrecht University's Strategic Plan 2021–2025, the Open Science programme and fostering ties with various actors within and outside the university;
- making contributions, from the university's social responsibility perspective, to the public visibility and social reputation of Utrecht University as a (discussion) partner for people and organisations in the city, region and beyond.

Action and programme plan 2021–2025

Line of action 1: contribution to the Open Science programme

The CWC will supervise and implement the public engagement track of the Open Science programme as follows:

1. Further development of the dialogue and the network for Open Science and the public engagement of academic and support and management staff, in consultation with the faculties, those engaged in the strategic themes, the hubs and the research focus areas
 - Set up a network of public engagement fellows.
 - Continue, deepen and expand the network for the corporate offices, the C&M and RSO offices and other faculty departments in the area of public engagement.
 - Pilot the project 'Dialogue on open science and the public values of the university' within the wider academic community.
 - Foster closer ties with and obtain a strong commitment from managers, academics and those fulfilling new roles, such as business developers and impact officers.



2. Further development of the Public Engagement Seed Fund
 - Work together with other small seed funds within the university, such as those of the strategic themes, with a view to limiting the pressure on researchers to submit grant applications and increasing the number of grant awards.
 - Create room to be able to allocate larger amounts of €10,000 to more ambitious interdisciplinary projects, in addition to the current small amounts of €2,000.
 - Work with the Utrecht University Fund to develop expertise in the area of cultural funds.
3. Organisation of a research team/academic expertise group on the effectiveness of public engagement activities

What are the desired effects of public engagement activities? Utrecht University wants to obtain a greater insight into these effects in view of its pursuit of excellence in public engagement: focusing only on quality activities that work well. A scientific basis must be developed for this purpose. The research will be embedded in the Open Science programme in cooperation with active academics and other academic partners, such as the Freudenthal Institute, Utrecht Young Academy, the Descartes Centre and others.

Line of action 2: innovation and professional support for a university-wide public engagement programme for a wide audience

1. Innovation and professionalisation of the existing successful programme, promotion of and support for new initiatives
 - Promote and support new university public engagement initiatives from the faculties, those engaged in the four strategic themes and the hubs and various initiatives focused on education.
 - In the next two years, the University Museum will develop a new and unique museum concept focusing on 'inquiry-based learning' and 'academic literacy'.
 - Parnassos and UUnited are working on broad academic development for Utrecht University students, staff and alumni. Parnassos will set out details of this project and the development of academic skills in a broader programme focusing on social and cultural themes.
 - The Studium Generale and its Betweterfestival will develop their successful programme further and revitalise target groups and platforms with structural partners in the city.
 - The Utrecht Science Hub brings together parties with considerable knowledge of science education. The hub will develop new programmes to link up with the Primary and Secondary Education Knowledge Coalition and to innovate in parallel with them to permanently embed knowledge of academia in the curricula.

2. Development of a programme office

The Public Engagement programme 2017–2020 worked on building a network, providing advice, education and training, sharing knowledge and developing a number of innovative university-wide public engagement activities. The public engagement desk, project management structure and support office for the whole of Utrecht University that evolved from these activities will be expanded and professionalised further. Furthermore, fund-raising activities and cultural entrepreneurship will be organised centrally and more broadly.

3. Strengthening and professionalisation of the organisation of the support function

More project-based cooperation and knowledge sharing is required to achieve the public engagement ambition.



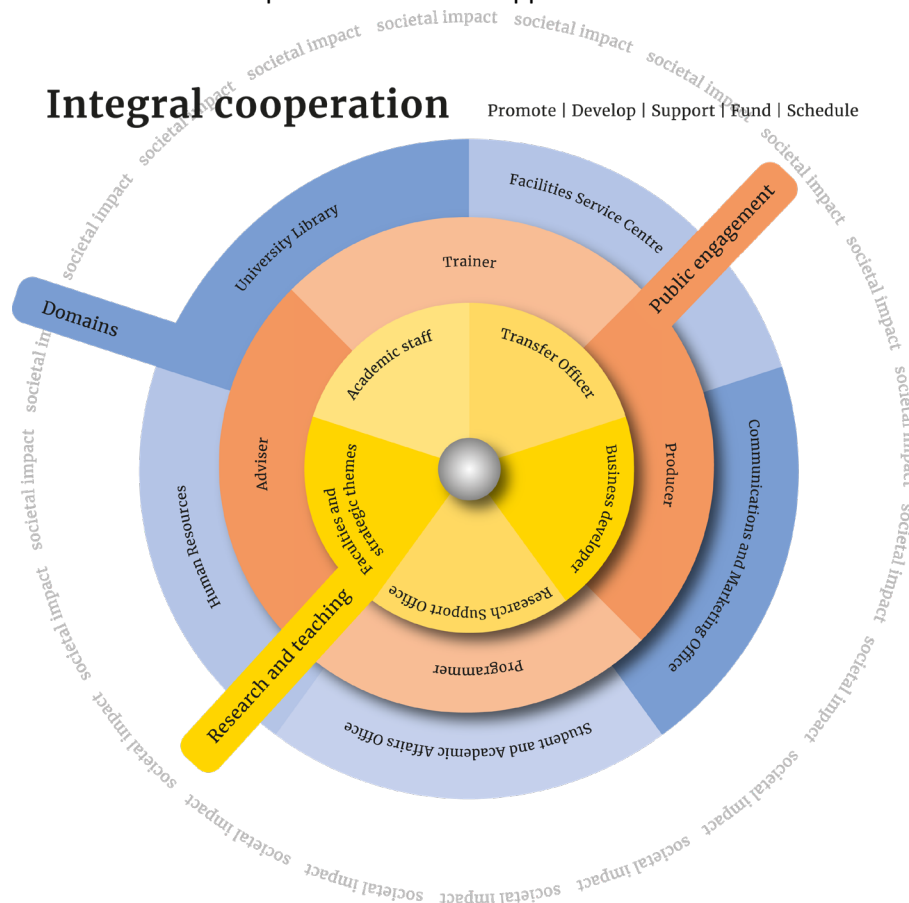
Line of action 3: development of the 'Engage and Storytelling Academy' (education and training for academic and support and management staff)

The training and development programmes currently offered on science communication and public engagement are provided by the CWC, the Communications and Marketing Office, the Student and Academic Affairs Office, Parnassos and the faculties. The range of programmes is fragmented, not accessible to everyone and often difficult to find. The programmes on offer are insufficiently coordinated. The service departments involved will develop an Engage and Storytelling Academy (working title) in cooperation with HR.

Line of action 4: development of an integral vision on societal impact and cooperation

It is Utrecht University's ambition to contribute to the sustainable improvement of our society through research and teaching. To obtain a clear picture of the various impact routes, three of the service departments involved will initiate a survey to obtain insight into the various impact routes within Utrecht University together with the faculties and those engaged in the strategic themes. Based on the results, they will formulate an ambition for the university's societal impact task in line with the Strategic Plan 2021–2025.

This is contingent on good support and cooperation, both from researchers who have their own ideas and networks to achieve their plans, and from academics who are keen to cooperate but still need advice and assistance. The support should consist of inspiring, mobilising and equipping researchers (with funds, manpower, expertise, platforms, audiences, leadership and evaluation) and alleviating their workloads, so that they can concentrate on their own contribution. Attention should also be paid to organising support for researchers, specifically support aimed at improving coordination and cooperation between support staff from the faculties and service departments.





Intended results

1. Sustainably connecting the university and society through interaction and dialogue:
 - Achieving a higher³ number of visits and visitors to public engagement activities and platforms within this plan.
 - Further developing an impact measurement tool that was piloted in the earlier public engagement programme.
2. Increasing societal impact awareness, knowledge and competences among Utrecht University staff (academic and support and management staff):
 - a. The Open Science programme will perform a baseline measurement in 2020. This will include questions about the experience, recognition and rewards for public engagement activities carried out by academics. Based on those results, an ambition will be formulated.
 - b. Increasing and galvanising the public engagement network of academic and support and management staff with regard to knowledge sharing and training.
 - c. Embedding public engagement as an active impact route in the policy of the faculties, strategic themes and hubs.
 - d. Making the range of education and training programmes on public engagement visible to academic and support and management staff, (Engage and Storytelling Academy) and expanding it if necessary.
3. Developing, implementing and evaluating new public engagement initiatives together with academics for, in cooperation with, and on the initiative of diverse audiences in diverse contexts:
 - a. Expanding the current target groups reached within secondary education, such as preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO) and senior secondary vocational education (MBO).
 - b. Ensuring greater visibility of the university and the dialogue with academics in the districts of the city of Utrecht and in the region.
 - c. Expanding platforms in the region, in cooperation with socio-cultural organisations, and in public spaces.

³ In view of the University Museum's closure for two years from April 2020, it is unrealistic to use 2019 as the baseline measurement for the next two years.