

Report theme sessions as part of the B Liberal Arts and Sciences development review at University College Utrecht (UCU)

Panel discussion date: 17 September 2024

Participants

Em. prof. dr. Ton van Haften (chair), em. prof. dr. Gerda Croiset (member), prof. dr. Jolanda Vanderwal Taylor (member), prof. UAS. dr. Irene Visscher-Voerman (member), Milan Gomes BSc (student member), dr. Irene Conradie (secretary). UCU participants included students and staff involved in teaching, tutoring and counselling.

Theme 1: Changing and Open Societies

Discussion

During the development discussion, UCU representatives and the panel centred on the promotion of an open curriculum that addresses societal challenges with a focus on sustainability, social justice and diversity. One of the key issues discussed was the tension between the narrative of excellence within the programme and the pressures it places on students and staff. Participants explored how this pressure to excel can manifest itself, through formative and summative assessment, and the impact this has on student well-being. The panel questioned the need for multiple assessment moments within such a student-centred approach, which could be seen as burdensome and contribute to feelings of pressure. It is important to provide opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them.

The participants also discussed the co-created classroom practice of Principled Spaces. This practice embodies the principles of open education and pedagogy by emphasizing co-creation, inclusivity, and respect for diverse perspectives. The process of collaboratively developing values and principles, and reflecting on the learning process itself, provides a model of how these concepts can be translated into educational practice. In the context of the narrative of excellence, Principled Spaces can help to reduce the pressures associated with the pursuit of excellence by promoting a more inclusive, reflective and holistic approach to learning and achievement.

Despite the programme's efforts to shift the narrative away from an overemphasis on excellence, the panel noted that some tensions remain. This is not only related to the UCU learning environment, but also to wider societal pressures, where students feel pressured to achieve academically and solve societal problems. The panel emphasizes the importance of continuing to challenge and reshape this narrative, allowing space for all students to learn and grow without the constant pressure to achieve an ideal of excellence. The panel found it positive that one of the students said that she felt the pressure to achieve excellence had decreased to a healthier level over the course of the programme. The panel also welcomed the focus on making Honours programmes more inclusive and pursuing different forms of excellence.

The curriculum offers many learning opportunities and students appreciate this. For example, in an advanced science course, students develop a research application with coaching from the lecturer. This was discussed as an example of an opportunity for students to develop their skills.

Theme 2: Generative Artificial Intelligence

Discussion

During the discussion, UCU representatives and the panel explored how generative AI (GenAI) could be integrated into the curriculum to enhance learning while addressing the challenges posed by its rapid

advancement. Most students are aged between 18 and 22, which is considered a critical period for developing the brain. This period allows for the teaching of higher order skills such as critical thinking, application of knowledge and interpersonal communication. These skills need to be aligned with the capabilities of AI tools to ensure that students can use and evaluate them effectively, while encouraging creative and independent thinking.

The tension between traditional assessment methods and the possibilities offered by AI was also highlighted. Participants noted the importance of rethinking how student competencies are assessed, and suggested rubrics as a way to assess skills beyond knowledge reproduction, including proficiency in using AI.

There was agreement on the need to balance the use of AI tools with the development of students' critical and creative thinking skills. AI, seen as a co-pilot, can handle routine tasks and increase efficiency, but it should not replace the fundamental processes of constructing knowledge and making informed judgements. The use of AI in tasks such as drafting and revision can complement students' learning, but UCU must ensure that students retain core academic skills.

The panel and representatives emphasized that a small group of faculty experts should take the lead in understanding and integrating AI innovations. This approach allows for gradual and informed implementation without overwhelming teaching staff. Participants stressed the need to avoid overburdening students and staff with additional workload when introducing AI focused content. The curriculum should prioritize essential skills and adapt incrementally, balancing academic goals with the realities of the workplace.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of aligning the curriculum with societal and industry needs. As AI skills are increasingly valued in the labour market, collaboration with alumni and industry stakeholders can provide insights for curriculum updates. Ethical considerations, such as the responsible use of AI and maintaining the well-being of students, were also addressed, with suggestions for incorporating privacy-compliant teaching practices. Oral exams and in-class activities were identified as effective strategies to ensure engagement and integrity.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of a balanced approach to integrating AI into the curriculum. By carefully managing its implementation, the programme can prepare students for a rapidly evolving professional landscape, while preserving core academic values and fostering a holistic, student-centred learning environment.