Universiteit Utrecht

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Executive Board

To the academic community of Utrecht University

Visiting address
Heidelberglaan 8, Utrecht

Your reference	
Our reference	UIT-2025-2345
E-mail	[redacted]
Website	www.uu.nl
Date	July 9, 2025
Subject	Response to Open Letter: Advancing Digital Autonomy at Utrecht University

Dear prof. Van Dijck and prof. Meijer,

We thank you for bringing forward this important petition, signed by members of our academic community and co-signed by academics from all Dutch universities.

The Executive Board has carefully reviewed your open letter regarding our university's digital dependencies and the call for enhanced digital autonomy. We acknowledge and share the concerns you have raised about our increasing reliance on Big Tech and its implications for academic freedom, institutional independence, and our public mission.

Your letter articulates important challenges that resonate deeply with us and with broader discussions within the Dutch higher education sector. These concerns also build upon the collective warning issued by Dutch university rectors in 2019 (pay-walled article in De Volkskrant). The risks you highlight are indeed pressing: geopolitical vulnerabilities, privacy concerns about the US CLOUD Act where our communications and sensitive data could be accessed without transparency (even when hosted in Europe), and the fundamental tension between commercial priorities and academic values of freedom, independence, autonomy, and equality. We recognize your concern that universities risk transforming from sources of innovation into mere consumers of services, potentially allowing commercial companies to shape research conditions and agendas rather than academic interests.
We share your commitment to digital autonomy. This priority is reflected in our Digitalisation Strategy (only accessible to users with a Solis ID), the upcoming Strategic Plan 2030, the UU architecture principles (only accessible to users with a Solis ID) and our adoption of the SURF value compass. However, we recognize that these commitments must translate into more concrete actions.

While we embrace the direction outlined in your letter, we advocate for a measured, risk-based transition. As Albert Meijer noted during the presentation of the petition, this requires *"a strategic approach with specific action lines at UU."* The complexity of this challenge demands careful weighing of trade-offs between digital autonomy and factors such as costs, user experience, and service quality. Alternative solutions might provide less user-friendly experiences, transitioning requires significant additional technical expertise, viable alternatives

do not always exist for some critical services, and implementation will require substantial financial investment that may result in service reductions in some areas. We propose a lifecycle-based approach, replacing systems strategically as they reach renewal points while prioritizing areas with the highest risks.

To address these challenges systematically, we will launch a digital autonomy initiative to establish the foundation for our journey toward greater digital independence. The goal is to reduce our dependence on Big Tech as much as possible. This will begin with establishing the point on the horizon - defining our strategic vision for digital autonomy - and then working backwards to develop our strategy, guardrails and roadmap. We will map our current dependencies using our business capability model (only accessible to users with a Solis ID) and conduct risk assessments focusing on vendor lock-in and geopolitical exposure. We will then refine our digital autonomy principles into more concrete guidelines, develop procurement criteria that prioritize academic values and data sovereignty, and create and use a transparent trade-off canvas for balancing autonomy with usability, cost, and sustainability. Finally, we will develop a multi-year transformation roadmap and launch pilot projects in high-dependency areas **to guide our continuous efforts toward digital autonomy.**

This initiative will be governed through a digitalisation board currently in development for strategic oversight, and we propose establishing an academic advisory council for the digital autonomy project with representatives from the academic community, including an invitation to petition signatories, to ensure academic perspectives remain central.

Recognizing that individual institutions cannot address these challenges alone, we are committed to sector-wide collaboration. This will require joint actions with other universities via SURF and UNL, working on (for example) reliable cloud services and Identity and Access Management systems. Utrecht University is already contributing as one of the frontrunners in initiatives like the development of EduID, and we were among the first to incorporate public value requirements in our Learning Management System tender (only accessible to users with a Solis ID). We will continue to actively contribute to UNL and SURF-wide initiatives for developing alternative infrastructure.

Your petition has provided valuable momentum for addressing these challenges. The alternatives to Big Tech offerings based on non-profit motives, public values and transparency do indeed exist, and as you rightly point out, the less we use these alternatives, the more our reliance becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We are committed to breaking this cycle through strategic action, contributing to greater technological self-determination, resilience and public innovation for universities across Europe.

We invite the signatories and broader academic community to participate actively in shaping this initiative. Together, we can work toward a future where Utrecht University exemplifies how public institutions can maintain their independence and values in an increasingly digital world. We look forward to continuing this important dialogue and to your engagement in the collaborative effort ahead.

Sincerely,

Margot van der Starre
Vice President of the Executive Board
Utrecht University