

Teaching and Learning in Times of Covid-19

Statement of the Utrecht Young Academy (UYA) prepared by the Education Committee

As a diverse group of early-career teachers and researchers from a broad range of disciplines across the University, the members of the Utrecht Young Academy (UYA) are acutely aware of the significant changes and challenges to university teaching brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Teaching professionals and support staff at Utrecht University have done a wonderful job of responding to this unprecedented situation. As teachers, we are grateful for the support that we have been given in order to continue providing high-quality education to our students. Nevertheless, during this time of uncertainty there are important points for teachers to keep in mind as we near the end of this academic year and prepare for the next. We at UYA believe that there are five areas in particular that merit immediate and concerted attention:

1: Online teaching is not a substitute

At the moment we are all discovering, many of us for the first time, the range of digital tools available for distance learning. Thanks in large part to the dedication and ingenuity of our teaching staff, the sudden transition to online teaching and learning has been remarkably smooth. Nevertheless, we should think carefully about which aspects of online teaching are worth keeping, and which are merely mitigation measures. Even though we should take this as an opportunity to reflect on traditional forms of teaching and how we might change these in the future, it is important to recognize that there can be no substitute for face-to-face interactions and in-person teaching. Not all intended learning outcomes are related to the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Rather, many critical skills centre around social engagement and participating within a community and online teaching cannot adequately provide this. Critical and honest reflection, together with colleagues and students, on the new ways of teaching is crucial when discussing how we can best move forward in the coming period.

2: Listening to students' needs should be a priority

One of our main priorities should be to listen to the needs and interests of students. How are students experiencing this shift to online teaching and how do they want to continue? It is vital that we consider the vast diversity of our students, who have different motivations, backgrounds, living environments, access to social and economic resources, and so on. Many of them will be facing familial, economic, and medical situations that will make it difficult for them to focus on their studies. In addition, not everyone will have a computer of their own, they may not have access to a quiet space to study, or may have limited internet access. The needs and perspectives of our students should take centre stage and it is more important than ever that we be lenient and understanding when it comes to deadlines, requirements, assessments, and so forth.

3: Safeguarding the quality of our programmes is crucial

Nevertheless, it is also important that we maintain certain standards of academic rigor and comprehensiveness in the education that we provide. This means that we have to think carefully about the kinds of learning outcomes that are meaningful and realistic under these circumstances. It is clear that the learning activities we have now organized for our students are not always aligned with the intended learning outcomes. This is particularly so when it comes to courses that would have taken place in site-specific environments, such as hospitals, labs, archives or outdoor field sites. These are environments in which learning is intertwined with research and professional practice. As such, they form the context in which we give shape not just to knowledge acquisition (i.e., qualification), but also to socialization and personal development. If students are not achieving these intended learning outcomes, we need to consider how we can maintain them at program level. In many cases this may require a realignment of our teaching.

4: Addressing growing inequalities in academia

It is critical that we think about inequalities in academia, both for students and teachers. From the students' perspective, it is important to keep in mind that some students are financially vulnerable (such as limited funding, temporary scholarships, students' loans, and visa restrictions). And from a teacher's perspective, it is imperative to recognize and discuss the disparate impact of the changes on those with larger teaching responsibilities, temporary contracts, greater home and care responsibilities, and those who have stepped in to help colleagues. These discussions need to tackle a range of issues, including concrete ways to preserve healthy work-life balance in a situation where everyone is working from home; being pro-active when it comes to preventing burn-out, stress, "zoom-fatigue", etc.; how performance will be evaluated (including student course evaluations) and what the consequences will be; how teaching responsibilities can be restructured across teams in a more equitable manner; how we can stimulate collegiality and teamwork; and how the current workload will impact other responsibilities and tasks, such as research duties and leadership roles.

5: Taking steps now to prepare for the near future

Although some of the measures restricting social interaction will likely have been lifted by the time the new academic year begins, others will no doubt still be in place. It is therefore imperative that we start thinking about how to organize teaching and learning activities that may need to conform to new rules of social distancing, especially when it comes to larger classes. This may mean smaller groups, which will in turn translate into fewer contact hours between teachers and students, and more working hours for teachers. It may also mean more blended learning environments entailing a mix of online and in-class activities. This is especially important if we think about international students who may not be in the country and may not be able to return to the Netherlands.

If you are interested in engaging further on these issues, please contact the Utrecht Young Academy at uya@uu.nl and find us on twitter: [@UYA_Utrecht](https://twitter.com/UYA_Utrecht).