

Utrecht Young Academy

Strategic Themes

19 November 2020



Utrecht University

Utrecht Young Academy

Why this meeting?

- Input for a report addressed to the rector magnificus about blue sky/fundamental research and Strategic Themes
- Share the enthusiasm and concerns of young scholars

Mixed Opinions within UYA

"If the question is to keep a structure with strategic themes versus a structure with faculties, I'd choose strategic themes still."

"I like being connected to a strategic theme and would miss it if it is gone [...] it was a reason I was attracted to coming here."

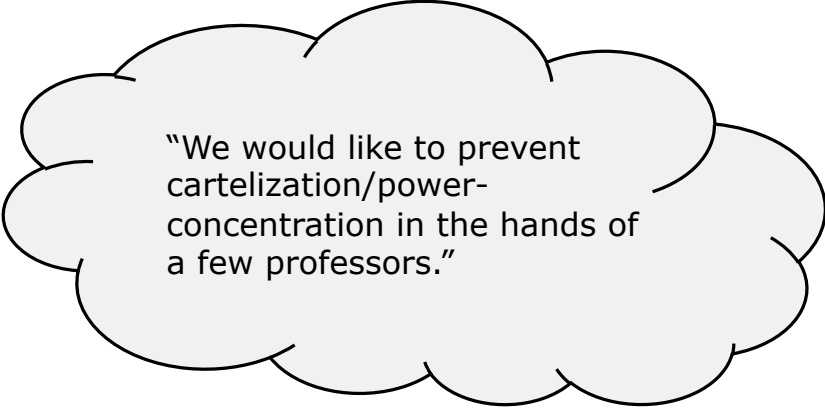
"I've found the strategic theme Pathways to Sustainability to be very valuable as a way to integrate across the university."

"The UU is really taking the idea of the strategic themes very strongly now -- I honestly see a threat for research that does not fit in the future."

"I'm worried about the bureaucracy and loss of energy."

"I appreciate the idea of collecting expertise in the form of strategic themes, but I fear that people who do not fit within will be excluded/not appreciated and that themes are not very inclusive."

Mixed Opinions within UYA:



"We would like to prevent cartelization/power-concentration in the hands of a few professors."

Concerns:

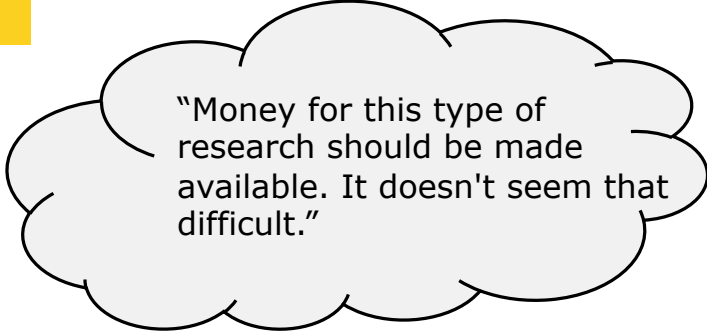
- If we do not join the Strategic Themes, what are the consequences in the long run?
- Strategic Themes and Hubs are not inclusive and fluid enough, especially for early career academics

How can the Strategic Themes create space for fundamental and blue sky research?

Working definitions

- Fundamental research is *experimental or theoretical* works mainly performed to obtain new knowledge on the basics of observable phenomena or facts, **without prior consideration** that it will result in any practical application or use (Official Journal of the European Union, 2006).
- Blue sky research implies a freedom to carry out **flexible, curiosity-driven** research that leads to **outcomes not envisaged** at the outset (Linden, 2008).

Opinions vary, but if we assume blue sky/fundamental research should be included, how should we proceed?



"Money for this type of research should be made available. It doesn't seem that difficult."



"I am in favor of more blue-skies research, but the strategic themes are not the most natural platform for this in my opinion because of their ambition to be organized at the science-society interface."

How can Strategic Themes create space for fundamental and blue sky research?

- **Inclusivity and fluidity** to bring fundamental/blue sky research more to the forefront with **early and mid career academics** involved. How can we do this?

How can Strategic Themes create space for fundamental and blue sky research?

1. Invent new types of calls and funding possibilities

- Encourage intergenerational collaborations
- Create more funding possibilities than grants only

"I think we should give more freedom to researchers and not see grants as a goal in itself. They are a means to an end, and there are more ways to reach those ends than via grants. We could also just give people some own money they can spend themselves."

"We should not organise seed money funding entirely along the lines of hubs and STs. Earmark a certain amount of money and design a procedure that allows for the development of new transdisciplinary ideas for research and teaching."

"Instead of only funding multi- inter- and/or transdisciplinary collaborations, also create possibilities to form intergenerational collaborations - on themes related to Strategic Themes *within* disciplines, with a focus on collaboration with diversity in career stage"

How can Strategic Themes create space for fundamental and blue sky research?

For example: Centre for Unusual Collaborations
(interdisciplinary, fundamental and bottom-up research)

"Fellowship programs for 0.5-1 day a week with relatively long appointments (e.g. 1-2 years). Tasks: emphasis on searching for interdisciplinary collaborations, setting research agendas and writing proposals. CUCo can be an inspiration here in terms of how to organise, but important to stay away from seed money logic."

"They could endorse and use the framework of CUCo for 'spark grants' or fund research within UU community."



How can Strategic Themes stir more fundamental and blue sky research?

2. At the level of leadership and strategy:

- Create fluidity/inclusion in Strategic Themes and hubs by setting transparent sunset dates.
- More democratic and transparent processes
- Involve early career academics in governance structures

"Why do institutes need to survive for decades? Think about the Max Planck Institute system in Germany, where institutes have sunset dates."

'More transparent governance; more turnover of members (e.g. programme board). More early-career academics in governance structures.'

'Make it more open on the level of strategy, leadership and agenda'

How can Strategic Themes stir more fundamental and blue-sky research?

3. At the level of education:

- Include young academics in the setup of broad minors related to the Strategic Themes (on applied as well as fundamental/blue sky research)
- PhD education as a platform for connecting young academics with similar interests across disciplines

“Graduate education provides the possibility to connect young researchers and to showcase their research to PhDs and master students”

General ideals to become more agile and inclusive

I would advise to first inventorize what the patterns are of exclusion. Who are not included, is this person-based, topic-based etc. and to what extent is this due to process (way of attracting new members into the themes; way of setting up the hubs etc.) or content? In other words, gain clarity on what the problems are and then think about how to address those.

Stop with focus areas and organize hubs more like focus area's: fixed time, bottom-up initiative

Look at rewards and recognition support staff get for interdisciplinary collaboration in the context of STs: they can be great barriers and enablers of interdisciplinary themes

Do not stop financing departmental research at the benefit of strategic themes; at least not before the themes are a well reflection of the diversity of departments at Utrecht University.

General ideals to become more agile and inclusive

I think it is much more fruitful if we remove the veil of this discussion and talk about the underlying arguments: some of them are: - who should have a say how the 1st money stream is spent? - who controls if that money is spent wisely - what is a fair distribution of resources at the university and who has the right to how much?

Improve communication/tuning between the Strategic Themes. Include more transparent and uniform funding possibilities. There appears to be substantial differences in approach and focus between the themes.

As you can tell, the Utrecht Young Academy is full of ideas. If you would like to continue the conversation, please reach out via uya@uu.nl.

Thank you for listening!

