Outstanding and innovative lines of research

Meet these seven inspiring Vici grant researchers (see back)

Utrecht University
Flexibility

We are proud of our colleagues and students! When teaching was no longer possible on campus, it was resumed remotely at breakneck speed. We then faced the issue of finding the most effective way to organise this new academic year, with a mixture of online and physical meetings, in buildings especially equipped for that purpose. Again, everyone made maximum efforts to achieve it.

The coronavirus crisis has had a deep impact on all aspects of society, including at Utrecht University. It is a running theme throughout these Highlights, indicated by this symbol: 🌐.

Meet the Professor became Stream the Professor. Many researchers turned their attention to issues related to the coronavirus crisis. In true Utrecht University fashion, we viewed the epidemic from a multidisciplinary perspective. With our expert knowledge of One Health, the university and UMC Utrecht are uniquely placed to understand the virus and to work on medication. But that’s not all—we’ve also been exploring ways of encouraging behavioural change, developed crowd-simulation software and placed the crisis in its historical context.

Where possible, and reflecting our open science ambitions, our academics have been sharing all of this as directly and widely as possible. For example, a new medicine course was live-streamed for a wider audience with the help of Studium Generale. All of this clearly demonstrates the way we like to work.

We are a flexible catalyst for change, continually adapting to our environment, with education and research that contributes to a better world. Of course, most of the education and research was not about the subject of coronavirus. That work has also continued and has resulted in some great stories about the transition to nature-friendly dairy farming and laboratory animal-free innovation, important progress in education for professionals and recommendations to the Dutch House of Representatives on the digitalisation of society.

We hope you enjoy reading all about it.

Anton Pijpers, Annetje Ottow and Henk Kummeling
The Executive Board
For quite some time now, coronavirus has been having a huge impact on our society. Utrecht University is working across disciplines to combat the virus and on solutions for the issues in society it causes. At the same time, the university is adapting its own education and research to fit the new circumstances. Educate-it programme manager Mabelle Hernández:

"We’re benefiting from years of investment in educational innovation. The way the team is working around the clock to help teachers get their digital education up and running is to be admired." Lecturers have proved remarkably adaptable in transforming their education into online lessons, online exams and even online PhD thesis defences. Researchers have worked hard to find digital ways of ensuring they can continue their work from home. When central government offered space to make it happen, laboratory research started up first, followed by teaching from 15 June. All of this could only be achieved thanks to the huge efforts of support staff, ranging from IT specialists to facility service providers, who rolled up their sleeves to apply their vast knowledge and expertise. Even the plants in the empty buildings continued to be given the care they needed.

‘I’m proud of how quickly everyone has adapted’

Mabelle Hernández
Educate-it programme manager

One of our students emailed this to the Utrecht University Fund after she had received a donation from the emergency fund for students who are in financial distress due to the coronavirus crisis. Thanks to the donations of more than 450 donors, our university has been able to help dozens of students in need. This help included contributions to rent, livelihoods, textbooks, computers and even a second-hand desk. We anticipate, though, that more students will appeal for support in the near future. Therefore the crowdfunding campaign continues unabated. This will allow us to help those students for whom existing schemes do not offer a solution. The heart-warming reactions of donors show tremendous solidarity, and evidence a close-knit university community of students, staff, alumni, parents and other stakeholders.

‘THANK YOU VERY MUCH! I’LL NEVER FORGET YOUR TIMELY HELP’

Students practicing social distancing and other preventive measures in the lab (top) and support staff preparing for the return of life at the university (right).
Pathways to Sustainability

Contributing to a sustainable future by means of trans-disciplinary research. Researchers from the humanities, social and natural sciences work together with external partners to develop a more sustainable society.

UU.NL/SUSTAINABILITY

Floating solar panels at sea perform almost 13% better on average than panels installed on land. Researchers from Utrecht University provided policy advice to the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality on how the Netherlands can transition to more nature-inclusive dairy farming. “Our current agricultural system is based on high throughput and high production levels at the lowest possible costs. We identified five barriers to this transition,” says research leader Prof Hens Runhaar. “There is no concrete vision and there is a lack of structural rewarding. Farmers’ financial freedom is limited by high debt, the knowledge system is insufficiently attuned to farmers wanting to make the switch, and there is no coordinated lobby to set the current system in motion.”

“Floating solar panels at sea perform almost 13% better on average than panels installed on land,” explains PhD researcher Sara Golroodbari. “Solar panels benefit from lower ambient temperatures; electrical losses in the photovoltaic material are lower when it is colder. The seawater and the wind both help cool the panels.”

We need to think in terms of a fair and regenerative circular society rather than simply an eco-efficient circular economy.” This is one of the main insights from the successful Utrecht Degrowth Symposium ‘From Circular Economy to Circular Society’. Think of a degrowing circular society as a solution to the key challenges of the 21st century, such as rising inequalities and the climate emergency. Instead of focusing only on recycling, we should question what drives consumer practices and prioritise the following strategies: rethink, refuse, reduce, repair, relocalise, democratise and redistribute.

Utrecht University is one of the members of the newly founded International Universities Climate Alliance. These universities are to work together to identify the most effective ways to communicate research-based facts relating to climate change to the public. They will engage in work across climate change science, impact, mitigation strategies and adaptation. “This Alliance is a clear step in the right direction,” says Prof Maarten Hajer, Scientific Director of Utrecht University’s strategic theme Pathways to Sustainability. “We hope to enable greater engagement with policymakers, educators and business leaders looking to apply the latest research findings to accelerate climate action.”

FROM CIRCULAR ECONOMY TO CIRCULAR SOCIETY

ACCELERATING ACTION WITH INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITIES CLIMATE ALLIANCE

BARRIERS TO MORE NATURE-INCLUSIVE DAIRY FARMING

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Within this research theme, research is conducted on the formal and informal rules (institutions) of human action. Why do societies develop so divergently? And how do institutions contribute to the formation of open and sustainable societies?

In the ‘Weten Wat Werkt’ (Knowing What Works) project, Utrecht researchers spent sixteen months monitoring a large group of benefit claimants in Utrecht and Zeist, in cooperation with the municipality. Researcher Prof Stephanie Rosenkranz: “Supporting people on benefits shows potential for improvement on various fronts. Increasing people’s level of personal control, a positive focus and greater opportunities to top up earnings are all valuable initiatives that should be applied on a permanent basis.” The effects prove to be positive for participants, executive agencies and the municipality. PhD candidate Timo Verlaat: “Everyone involved would benefit from amendments to the Participation Act to that effect. We are delighted that our results can now contribute to the development of evidence-based policy.”

Because of the speed and complexity of technological and social changes, the House of Representatives sometimes seems to be ‘manoeuvring through uncharted territory’ on social issues related to digitisation. According to advice from researchers at Utrecht University, a navigation strategy to get to grips with digital advances and improve knowledge in the House of Representative could help in resolving this problem. At the request of the temporary committee on the Digital Future, the team led by Prof Albert Meijer carried out case studies into the economy, number-plate recognition and 5G networks. Meijer: “In all of these areas, choices are being made based on social values, but there is a lack of any systematic reflection on these choices. In our advisory report, we show how the use of a variety of instruments can help to gain control of digitisation, in society and within government.”

In late 2019, the Dutch House of Representatives expressed concern about the Senior Civil Service (Algemene Bestuursdienst, ABD), the group of senior managers in the central government civil service. At the request of the Ministry of the Interior, the ABD is being evaluated by the School of Governance (USBO). Project coordinator Mirko Noordegraaf, Professor of Public Management: “Incidents at the Ministry of Justice & Security and the Tax and Customs Administration, the tax allowances affair, are being directly linked to structural problems within the ABD. In our evaluation study, we’re analysing managers’ recruitment, appointment and career development, the situation with regard to mobility and knowledge, and what the effects of these are on the quality of leadership. We will present our report and recommendations at the end of 2020.”

In March 2019, the Hub – together with the Dutch Women’s Council and the Centre for Inclusive Leadership – issued advice for the Social Economic Council on diversity in senior management. A bill has now been put forward for the introduction of a statutory quota system. Its aim is to ensure that at least a third of supervisory boards members at listed companies are women by 2028 or 2029. In response to the bill, the Hub recently issued more advice: “There need to be clear criteria for the selection procedures, the public sector should also be included and enforcement of the law needs to be better regulated.”

“We’re not there yet”, says Linda Senden from the Gender & Diversity Hub about the statutory women’s quota. In March 2019, the Hub – together with the Dutch Women’s Council and the Centre for Inclusive Leadership – issued advice for the Social Economic Council on diversity in senior management. A bill has now been put forward for the introduction of a statutory quota system. Its aim is to ensure that at least a third of supervisory boards members at listed companies are women by 2028 or 2029. In response to the bill, the Hub recently issued more advice: “There need to be clear criteria for the selection procedures, the public sector should also be included and enforcement of the law needs to be better regulated.”

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Life Sciences

Striving to create sustainable solutions that improve the wellbeing of animals and humans by combining knowledge and technologies ranging from molecular level to the population level.

**RESEARCH THEME**

**Life Sciences**

**Virologists at Utrecht University have been working on coronaviruses for decades. Following the outbreak of the first SARS virus in 2002, they built up a collection of human antibodies to the virus. One of the antibodies appears to prevent the infection of cultivated cells by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. “This research builds on the earlier work on antibodies done by our groups,” says Berend Jan Bosch, associate professor at Utrecht University, who led the research for the study published in Nature Communications. “A neutralised antibody has the potential to alter the course of the infection in the infected host, help clear the virus and protect an uninfected person who is exposed to the virus.” The discovery marks a first step towards the development of a complete human antibody for treating or preventing COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2.**

**‘We must prevent animals from becoming a reservoir for coronavirus’**

We know that people can infect each other, but what role do cats or mink play in transmission? “We must prevent animals from becoming a reservoir for coronavirus,” explains Prof Arjan Stegeman. “Most importantly, we need to determine whether the new coronavirus can continue to circulate in animals and between animals and humans when human-to-human transmission has been controlled.” Stegeman is coordinating the research project ‘Fighting COVID-19 in animals and humans, a one health approach’ on behalf of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. This interdisciplinary project is a collaboration between partners in the Netherlands Centre for One Health. The project is being fully subsidised by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. The research results will form the scientific basis for the strategy adopted by policymakers, vets and animal owners, in dealing with pets during this pandemic.

**‘Providing nation-wide access to cutting-edge NMR equipment’**

The uNMR-NL consortium led by coordinator Marc Baldus has been awarded almost 18 million euro from the National Roadmap Large-Scale Research Infrastructure. With this grant, the NMR facility based at the Utrecht Science Park will be turned into a nationwide grid, linking all Dutch high-field NMR centres. “Our aim is to provide nation-wide, open access to cutting-edge NMR equipment and analysis, across scientific disciplines and industrial research,” says Baldus, Professor of Structural Biology. “I think this is the first instance in the world where a whole country has made such a coherent and widespread plan to coordinate national NMR/MRI research to maximise output and use for Dutch society and beyond.”

**‘We kept SARS-CoV-2 antibodies in the freezer for years’**

Berend Jan Bosch
Associate Professor Biomolecular Health

We kept SARS-CoV-2 antibodies in the freezer for years’
Dynamics of Youth

Researchers from different disciplines integrate their expertise to answer crucial questions for future generations. How can we help our children develop into balanced individuals, that are able to function successfully in a rapidly changing environment?

UU.NL/YOUTH

RESEARCH THEME

As coronavirus made an appearance, children stayed at home. Possibly more than ever before, parents began to wonder what they should do about their children’s intensive screen usage. Youth researcher Ina Koning is doing research into young people’s behaviour online. The research, part of the Digital Family project, is still in its very early days. Despite this, Koning was already able to give some tips to parents: “There are some indications that the application of clear parental rules, for example allowing young people no longer than three hours per day online, is effective in preventing problematic social media use, at least in girls.”

What are the common trends and determining factors for health, happiness and social inclusion for 21st-century children? These and other questions were discussed at the OECD 21st Century Children Expert Meeting, an event organised by the Utrecht University Dynamics of Youth team in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. At the two-day expert meeting, some fourteen experts from eleven countries (representing neurosciences, medicine, psychology, risk management, computer science and education) explored a wide range of issues and gave presentations. Dynamics of Youth programme director Catrin Finkenauer featured as one of the speakers. She gave a presentation about changing family structures and their influence on child development.

PARENTS AND THEIR SCREEN-OBSESSED CHILDREN

‘Young Dutch people are extremely happy’

Gonneke Stevens
Associate Professor Social and Behavioural Sciences

In May 2020, youth researcher Gonneke Stevens spoke to all of the national media about her research into the health and well-being of Dutch children. “Compared to their European counterparts, Dutch young people have been extremely satisfied with their level of social embeddedness – contact with parents, friends and classmates – for almost two decades. The picture for 2017/2018 even seems to be slightly more positive than in previous years.” Stevens reached this conclusion after contributing to and analysing the international HBSC report, which examines how young people across Europe are doing. For the first time ever, figures on young people’s social media use were also available: “The percentage of young people who can be said to be problem users of social media is lower in the Netherlands than in any other country.”
In order to continue to innovate and improve education, Utrecht University makes available €2 million every year for innovative projects that contribute to the development of academic education. Of this, €1 million is spent on small-scale, faculty projects. The other €1 million is available for larger innovation projects that involve collaboration between two or more faculties. Manon Kluijtmans, Director of the Centre for Academic Teaching: “By providing this funding, the university is enabling lecturers to actually invest time in innovation for their teaching.” Six cross faculty projects have been selected. They focus on inclusivity, assessment quality, virtual reality, the Sustainable Development Goals and research ethics.

The Executive Board is making 1.37 million available for 2020-2022 to continue the development of education aimed at professionals. The goal for 2025 is for education for professionals to be embedded in the DNA of Utrecht University. The way initial education is. To underline this decision, professional education and lifelong learning is also part of the university’s new Strategic Plan. Utrecht University was the first Dutch university to define education for professionals as part of their core business. This is visible in various programmes for professionals, like Leadership in Culture (LiC). Wieger Bakker, dean of LifeLong Learning: “LiC shows that by combining our own research and knowledge with the practical expertise of parties in the field we can help professionals grow and find solutions to social issues.”

At the annual Education Parade on Thursday, 5 March, the winners of the prestigious Teacher Awards were announced. Gerda Andringa, lecturer in Liberal Arts & Sciences at University College Roosevelt, won the Teacher of the Year 2020 award. Her students had this to say: “Dr Andringa’s classes don’t feel like lectures, but rather like a dialogue between teacher and students.” Lorena De Vita, lecturer in History, won the award for Teaching Talent of the year 2020. The students who nominated her say: “Lorena creates an open and comfortable atmosphere in the classroom where even the shyest student isn’t afraid to speak up.” The judging panel chose the winners for their inspirational approach to teaching and their ability to bring out the best in their students.

Students on the university-wide ‘Da Vinci Project’ programme are working with companies, such as BASF, on issues related to sustainability. “The diversity of the student team was noticeable from the outset,” says Jim Brandts from BASF. “Not only in terms of their degree programmes, but also their personalities. This ensures that the students approach our issue from several perspectives and apply different skills. It’s very inspiring.” The Da Vinci Project is teaching the young people to have the confidence to fail and start again. Student Brandon Whitley: “It’s encouraging me to step out of my comfort zone, to persevere and not be afraid to make mistakes. It has shown me the freedom one achieves by dropping assumptions and exploring new perspectives, ideas, and possibilities.”
CHANGE-MAKING

Utrecht University fully endorses the importance of actively working in our university to combat systematic exclusion and discrimination. "As a university, we have an essential role to play in this," says Vice-chair Annetje Ottow. "If we want to achieve change within our university and elsewhere in society, we need to stand up for each other and speak out when we witness racism, discrimination or any other form of inequality." The Diversity & Inclusion Taskforce plays a leading role in this. Taskforce Chair and Dean of the Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance, Janneke Plantenga: "We believe in the power of diversity and inclusion. Racism and discrimination are completely at odds with that. It is our shared responsibility to ensure that students and staff do not have to face racism and discrimination and to support them when they do."

SCHOLARSHIP TO SUPPORT ‘FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS’

First-generation students (those whose parents did not go to university) are significantly more likely to drop out than their second-generation counterparts. They feel less at home at university. Under the motto ‘Here is where I belong’, Jeroen Janssen (Associate Professor, Education and Pedagogy) is set to develop an intervention aimed at helping the students to feel at home at university more quickly. To do this, he was awarded a Comenius grant. Anneriek Oosterwegel (Assistant Professor, Developmental Psychology) was also awarded a similar grant for her project that aims to enable students to experience control over their academic career by gradually indicating in concrete terms how they can organise themselves and their experiences in such a way that they feel autonomous and resilient.

OCEAN CURRENT MODELS TO CLEAR UP MILLIONS OF TONNES OF PLASTIC

Erik van Sebille is developing software that models ocean currents, charting the journey that plastic makes through the oceans. Van Sebille: "It could prove useful in efforts to clear up the millions of tonnes of plastic that end up in the oceans every year." In presence of Margot van Sluis-Barten, Anton Pijpers, members of the jury and other nominees, Van Sebille received the third Agnites Vrolik Award. The judging panel: "Erik is an outstanding scientist. His scientific output combined with his broad social engagement deserve admiration." Van Sebille wins €25,000 for extra-curricular research.

‘Supporting students and staff who face racism’

Janneke Plantenga
Chair Taskforce Diversity & Inclusion

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Instead of professors cycling to a primary school, they stepped in front of their webcams. This spring, the Utrecht Science Education Hub (Wetenschapsknooppunt Utrecht) organised a weekly live stream on YouTube featuring a Utrecht University professor. All of the faculties were represented. Rather than ‘Meet the Professor’, this year it was a case of ‘Stream the Professor’. School pupils were able to ask the professor questions using the chat box on the side of the screen. “After the live stream, I had a digital classroom discussion about it. Everyone gained at least something from it”, explains primary school teacher Marielle Roks-Evers. “While one pupil was interested in the origin of the virus, another wanted to understand why all the measures are important. One of the pupils will definitely go on to become a virologist!”

Mid-May saw the launch of a new public-private platform, the Healthy Urban Living Data and Knowledge Hub, in which Utrecht University is collaborating with public organisations, innovative companies and local residents. According to Erik Gerritsen, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Public Health in the webinar that launched the Hub, the urban environment “can affect health both negatively – exposure to air pollution, noise or heat, for example – and positively, for example by providing space to play, exercise and meet each other.” One example of the action taken: large numbers of bikes in the region are being fitted with sensors enabling residents to collect data on air quality, fine particulates, air humidity, temperature or potholes in the road. These data can be used to identify patterns on which to base recommendations for a healthier, alternative cycling route.
Seven researchers from Utrecht University, UMC Utrecht and the Hubrecht Institute have each received a Vici grant from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research NWO. The prestigious 1.5 million euro awards are intended for experienced researchers and enable them to develop their own innovative lines of research. Four of the winning research lines are from the strategic theme Life Sciences.

Eva van Rooij, group leader at the Hubrecht Institute and Professor of Molecular Cardiology at UMC Utrecht, will be using the grant to study the mechanism of heart failure and its role in genetic heart diseases. “Genetic heart diseases are caused by a mistake in your DNA and are characterised by several disease driving changes in the heart that contribute to the progression of the disease. To date very little is known about the exact mechanisms that drive these changes”, says Van Rooij.

The three other Vici Life Science grants were awarded to José Borghans, Associate Professor of Immunology at UMC Utrecht (for unraveling how long-term immunological memory is maintained by immune cells throughout the body), Professor Saskia van Mil of the Center for Molecular Medicine (for research into liver failure) and Nina van Sorge, Associate Professor of Medical Microbiology at UMC Utrecht (for research on the ‘sugar coats’ of bacteria as a key factor in immune defence and for the development of new antibiotics and vaccines).

Prof Elma Blom of the Faculty of Social Sciences is set to explore whether a mixed offering of languages aids or hinders children’s language development. Prof Tine de Moor received the grant for the project UNICA: Building a Unified theory for the development and resilience of Institutions for Collective Action for Europe in the past millennium.

Finally, Thomas Grimm, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Science, proposes that the mysterious properties of our universe known as dark energy can only be understood by using a quantum theory of gravity. This would lead to a new description for the evolution of our universe.