Our times require VU Amsterdam

What are the role and meaning of the university? How do we remain relevant in a globalizing world, where knowledge is becoming more and more accessible and society faces complex challenges? Where science is dismissed as just “an opinion” and where it is more important than ever that we as a university explain what we do? A Broader Mind is VU Amsterdam’s response to the developments shaping the world of tomorrow, in a way that bears out our special identity.

We are Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. A broad university like many others, yet at the same time a very special one. But what actually makes the identity of VU Amsterdam? How do we view our role and responsibility as a university, beyond delivering graduates, academic publications and PhDs? To answer this question, the concept of Gross Academic Value has been developed. At the heart of this are three elements.

The substance of Gross Academic Value is nothing new. In fact, it is rooted in the profile and basic principles of VU Amsterdam. Ever since the university was founded, it has been fleshed out on a daily basis in our education and research. Through this concept, we aim to better understand and shape those topics we as VU Amsterdam consider important. This is a continuous process, inextricably linked to who we are and what we do. To find out more about Gross Academic Value, see De VU Formule.

From Gross Academic Value to A Broader Mind

Through A Broader Mind, we are giving our special identity tangible form and adding a distinctive complexion to our core tasks: education, research and valorization. A complexion tailored to VU Amsterdam’s unique characteristics, such as our diverse student population, social focus, strong interdisciplinary research and campus location in the heart of Amsterdam’s Zuidas business district. With A Broader Mind, we are zeroing in on our students, our employees and the world around us.

A Broader Mind for Science

What we as VU Amsterdam stand for must resonate in what we value and focus on as a university. The current parameters for judging scientific output emphasize academic relevance and the volume of individual production. To enrich our perspective on that output, we intend to investigate how, for example, to gauge the societal impact of our research in relation to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. We also want to create greater scope for differentiation and teamwork. Note that adding a social aspect to our output in no way means that fundamental research will not remain a key activity at VU Amsterdam, and one we give plenty of room.

A Broader Mind for Business

Within VU Amsterdam, but also beyond our walls, there is a real need for personal development, for true depth and breadth and for answers to fundamental questions of meaning and purpose. These themes also play out in the Zuidas business district, our near neighbour, albeit for people who are further advanced in their careers. VU Amsterdam wants to use A Broader Mind for Business to build bridges to Zuidas by initiating a programme touching upon these very themes. After all, A Broader Mind is relevant not only for VU Amsterdam students and staff but also for people outside the university.

A Broader Mind for Science and for Business are still under development. They will be further elaborated in the coming academic year. In this document, we now discuss A Broader Mind for Students in more detail.
A Broader Mind for Students

Why the academic, personal and social formation of students should have a natural place in education

A changing world
The challenges facing our society are growing, becoming more complex and increasingly demanding a multidisciplinary approach. Themes such as artificial intelligence, ageing populations, geopolitical tensions, the scarcity of natural resources, unequal distribution of wealth and climate change are shaping the world of today and tomorrow. In this world, there is a need for responsible leaders. Leaders able to approach complex social issues from a multidisciplinary perspective, conscious of their own moral compass. At the same time, the labour market is becoming more dynamic, jobs are changing rapidly, the value of knowledge is depreciating faster than ever and educational paths are becoming more flexible. In their future working lives, the students of today will have multiple careers in different positions and disciplines. Only 10 per cent of our graduates remain in academia; the majority build a career elsewhere. Against this backdrop, the government is encouraging students to focus on their own discipline and to graduate quickly. There is hardly any room left for greater breath or depth, let alone to reflect on their own role in society.

Why VU Amsterdam, why now?
VU Amsterdam wants to offer its students the opportunity to develop more broadly on the academic, personal and social fronts alike, to equip them to be successful and meaningful in this world. This requires that they think about who they are, how they view the world and their role in society and how they relate to others. In this programme, students learn to approach a social issue from the perspective of several different academic and scientific disciplines, using their knowledge to resolve pressing problems through Community Service Learning and in the process acquiring personal skills such as the ability to collaborate across borders, to debate frankly and incisively, to reflect on their own outlook, norms and values and to cope with pressure and stress.

A Broader Mind for Students: goals
1. Develop a university-wide A Broader Mind course, giving personal and academic development, social interaction and reflection a place in undergraduate education.
2. Expand activities in the field of Community Service Learning, incorporating a scientific perspective.
3. Develop and conduct a longitudinal study to measure the long-term effects of A Broader Mind for Students among VU Amsterdam alumni.

The diagram below shows the complete programme of A Broader Mind for Students.
1. A Broader Mind course

A course for undergraduates is to be developed as one of the three components of A Broader Mind for Students. This will be designed jointly by students and academic staff and combine online and offline activities on campus, at home and in the city. The various themes to be addressed have been given the following working titles.

- The digital condition
- Interreligious dynamics
- Rebellion
- Health and happiness
- The human body
- Sustainability
- Poverty
- Success

Students from different programmes will work together, thus learning how to approach these themes from the perspective of multiple disciplines. They tackle the themes using one personal and one social question. For example, “How important is social media for my identity?” and “How can digitization prevent loneliness in the elderly?”

Starting small

A pilot is due to begin in February 2019, with all first-year students on three selected programmes taking the course on an extracurricular basis. They will have to spend a total of about 40 hours per year on it. After completing the course, we will ask students and staff to improve and update it.

How does it work?

- **Bottom up**: the course is put together by students and staff of VU Amsterdam.
- **Students take the lead**: they play a decisive role in (a) designing, (b) conducting and (c) improving the course
- **Inclusive**: this course is not just for a small group of outstanding students but for all first-year students at VU Amsterdam, and it takes positive advantage of the diversity of our student population.
- **Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary**: students learn to approach social issues from different perspectives.
- **Blended learning**: the course consists of offline and online activities and links tackling social issues to the development of personal and academic skills
- **Learning by doing**: we start with an experimental phase with a continuous learning process, so that the course is improved in the coming years
- **Not from square one**: we connect as much as possible with existing activities and knowledge within VU Amsterdam.
- **Limited workload**: the use of external resources focuses on creating an organization which makes minimum demands on VU Amsterdam staff.
- **For everyone**: in due course, our hope is that all undergraduates will participate. The CSL component will be aimed only at a smaller group of students looking for more depth.

The course is being developed in close cooperation with the Bildung Academy. Because it relates closely to CSL, it can also be regarded as preparation for this form of learning.

Course lead of A Broader Mind is Govert Buijs, Endowed Professor of Political Philosophy and holder of the Goldschmeding Chair for Economics and Civil Society in the Faculty of Humanities.

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2. Community Service Learning

Community Service Learning (CSL) is a form of education in which students use their academic skills to resolve topical social issues, with reflection as an important part of the learning process. CSL can therefore be seen as augmenting the content of the course A Broader Mind. It is provided in close collaboration with social partners, with both they and the university benefiting from the results. CSL can take various forms, including research to generate advice on social issues, work placements in care or support services, the empowerment of school students and those entering university and consultancy services for social partners.

CSL is not new at VU Amsterdam. Numerous initiatives in this field are already up and running, such as Marieke de Hoon’s International Law Clinic and Public International Law and Policy Group and Anna Bon’s Centre for International Cooperation. But there are also many outstanding questions, too, such as what kind of CSL activities are suitable for large groups of students, what their learning curve is and how we can design CSL in such a way that it adds value for all concerned. This is why we intend the programme for A Broader Mind for Students to include the following components.

- **Identification of design principles for CSL at the societal, tutor and organizational levels, and for measuring its impact.** A literature review is being conducted for this purpose, and current activities involving student collaboration with social partners within VU Amsterdam programmes are being itemized.

- **Three pilot studies within existing VU Amsterdam programmes.** Based on a literature review, an analysis of current activities and these studies, a framework will be developed for the further elaboration of CSL activities within the university.

- **Further development of collaborations with social partners, based on the CSL framework.**

- **Development of a CSL community so that knowledge of and experience with this form of learning are shared and tutors wishing to integrate it into their teaching receive support based at least in part on practical know-how.**

For more information or questions about Community Service Learning, please contact [communityservice@vu.nl](mailto:communityservice@vu.nl). You can also find further information at VU Amsterdam’s [website](http://www.vu.nl).

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3. Longitudinal study

To equip students for the challenges of their future, we as VU Amsterdam are convinced that the role of academic, personal and social formation in education, including reflection on these factors, should be self-evident. But what effect does this approach have in the long term? To what extent is that effect sustainable? And is our education at VU Amsterdam demonstrably distinctive compared with that provided by other universities?

To help answer these questions, a longitudinal study is being launched to measure the long-term effects of A Broader Mind for Students on participants, now and as alumni. This involves a twelve-year cohort study, beginning with experiments on the students participating in the course to measure its immediate effects, and those of its various components, on their skills and results.

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Programme management

A Broader Mind for Students is coordinated by Kirstin de Boer (Programme Manager) and Nynke Rodenhuis (Administrative Affairs) and falls under the direct control of the Executive Board.

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If you have any questions or comments, feel free to contact us!