



CASE STUDIES

Utrecht University: Alignment for impact ¹

ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY, PEOPLE AND INCENTIVES

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What is this case study about?

The University of Utrecht, founded in 1636, has taken concrete actions to change internal systems, and research approach and increase its societal impact. These actions have changed and rationalised the University's approach to research in four broad themes - Dynamics of Youth, Institutions for Open Societies, Life Sciences, Sustainability - that are used to co-ordinate across the University activities including the specific aspects of value creation and societal impact. In its 2012-2016 strategic plan, the University of Utrecht expressed the ambition to improve its position from one of the best universities in the Netherlands to one of the best universities in Europe. In current strategic plan this has been articulated as 'a global player with regional embedding', but the vision remains the same. At the same time, the University of Utrecht streamlined its approach to recruitment and professorial development to align with creating deeper and more sustainable societal impact.

The University of Utrecht is an international research university and is recognised as one of the best universities in the Netherlands. Many of the activities, reported in this case, are presented as part of a university mission to become more entrepreneurial, but the focus on valorisation and societal impact has a deep enterprise effect. The impact is in many cases deeper and more sustainable effect than would be achieved under an 'entrepreneurship' agenda, as the activities are recognised as being valuable for everyone, whether they have an interest in enterprise, or not.

Link to HEInnovate dimensions

The actions taken by the university align with 4 of the 5 objectives identified in the HEInnovate guidance notes on Organisational Capacity, People and Incentives and show the impact of reconsidering internal approaches and procedures.

The specific HEInnovate objectives relating to this case are:

- The HEI has the capacity and culture to build new relationships and synergies across the institution
- The HEI is open to engaging and recruiting individuals with entrepreneurial attitudes, behaviours and experience.
- The HEI invests staff development to support its entrepreneurial agenda
- Incentives and rewards are given to staff who actively support the entrepreneurial agenda.

Building strategic themes through participation, reflection and honest appraisal

Around 2011, the University of Utrecht took an objective look at itself and its European and global rankings. The university recognised that it was a sound research university with a long and established pedigree, it had excellent researchers and limited funds. It was in competition globally with universities with very different circumstances, different levels of resources and different access to resources. It was decided that it was time to honestly appraise the university's position and ambition and decide what to do.

'We realised that we did not have the funds necessary to be a world player in every scientific area. We had to ask ourselves 'are we prepared to make choices to be a world player in a few select areas?'
Esther Stiekema, Programme Manager Research

The University of Utrecht is orientated towards societal impact. There was a clear understanding in the University that ‘We are here to solve the world’s big problems’, it became obvious that if the University wanted to be true to its values, the key question was whether the university was prepared to focus, and narrow its research approach, or not? In terms of assessing the necessary resources, there were two core questions

1. Can we collaborate to do this?

1. Where can we find partners?

Four strategic themes were identified through a university-wide participatory consultation process:

1. **Dynamics of Youth** [<https://www.uu.nl/en/research/dynamics-of-youth>] researches the development of young people in a rapidly changing society. Who is at risk and how can we ensure the optimal conditions for individual and social development?
2. Central to **Institutions for Open Societies** [<https://www.uu.nl/en/research/institutions-for-open-societies>] are research questions around “How do institutions – the formal and informal rules of human action – contribute to long-term prosperity, equality and democracy?”
3. **Life Sciences** [<https://www.uu.nl/en/research/life-sciences>]. Research seeks to investigate causes, impacts and solutions for of infectious diseases, including those transmitted from animals to humans, and chronic diseases such as cancer and cardiovascular diseases, which pose major social problems that demand new medicines and technologies.
4. With the research activities on **Sustainability** [<https://www.uu.nl/en/research/sustainability>], the University of Utrecht makes an active contribution to a sustainable society by sharing academic knowledge and by providing an inspirational example for others.

Each theme had to have enough breadth to accommodate several research areas and cut across disciplines. The themes had to have scope for creating real societal impact that could be identified and was valued in society.

‘Initially impact was considered as a separate research strategy, now it is an integral part of the strategy of our themes. The four research themes provide focus for many of our activities, e.g. marketing uses the four research themes as a focus for designing marketing activities, our life-long learning activities focus on the themes.’
Esther Stiekema, Programme Manager Research

In identifying the four themes, inspiration was drawn from collaboration between The Faculty of Medicine of Utrecht University and the University Medical Centre (UMC) where practice and research work in active collaboration. There were internal discussions within the executive board and the deans. From the answers, societal themes emerged that allowed for inclusiveness and interdisciplinarity. The questions asked included:

- If you had a budget of 27 million euros, over three years, what would you do?
- What new initiatives would you take?
- How would you make a significant difference?

In 2011, there were 15 research themes in the university, these were consolidated to four core research themes.

These research themes have been in place for four years, and during that time, the University has succeeded in: making new connections, increased quality of research (evidenced by increased funding, increased numbers of top journal articles, improved peer reviews), and new interdisciplinary communities have been established, but it is recognised that more needs to be done in raising awareness.

'The new themes, and interdisciplinary approach is valued by the staff because they are seen to be collaborative and have the prestige of doing consultancy for governmental organisations.'
Aletta Huizenga, Director Human Resource Management

So far, the efforts have been internally focused on deciding direction and getting revised systems in place. It is recognised that the next step is to actively build the university's external reputation and establish partnerships. The external community needs to know about and understand the university's new focus and how to engage with the university. The next phase thus centres on developing plans for 'Hubs'. The University is creating network partnerships for knowledge exchange that are commercial and have societal impact. There is increased communication with the University's extended publics.

Strengthening collaboration

In different subject disciplines, the cultures and methodological approaches can be very different, despite this the themes are used across the University. This creates active discussions and communications. Initially, humanities researchers felt less acknowledged and included, but the institution theme is very broad and provides scope for their active involvement.

'At times, this approach can be harder to adopt in science and in competitive communities, because the normal evaluation criteria are so different.'Together, professors, staff and researchers have faced the challenges, trusted the process and reached new levels of achievement.
Esther Stiekema, Programme Manager Research

1. The value of focusing on the four themes was not immediately obvious to all staff. The breadth of the themes and the requirement for interdisciplinary teams is making people look at their research differently, to see new value and connections. The University is now actively attracting researchers who want to be involved. The themes allow for new and different perspectives to be explored on established issues, this allows opportunities for new young researchers to get involved simply because they are looking at the issues with the insight of a new generation, (Dynamics of Youth and Institutions for Open Societies) and new social norms, and it allows for established professors, who may have multiple interests to find research angles that embrace the breadth of their interests in new ways. This allows for research outside a specific discipline e.g. geographers or historians to engage in future orientated entrepreneurial themes.

'It is surprising and pleasing to see their enthusiasm. Young researchers were initially sceptical of the value of the themes, but in review they say that 'this is fantastic'. This is very pleasing and indicates that there is value in these broad themes.'
Esther Stiekema, Programme Manager Research

Economic development, governmental studies, social economic history, law, the role of institutions in society are all relevant to the institution theme Institutions for Open Societies". An

example of cross collaboration which included humanities researchers was at the end of 2015, when economics, governmental studies, sociology and law worked together and wrote a white paper 'Analysis and Advice in developments in the labour market'. They went on to create a symposium and conference around this white paper aimed at corporates.

'It was a challenge to get very different discipline perspectives together and write a paper that balanced the different scientific contributions with the expectations that stakeholders had. It took a lot of time to get it right, but our stakeholders were enthusiastic about the end result. Also, we learnt a lot about engaging with stakeholders during the process.'

Esther Stiekema, Programme Manager Research

There is now a much larger proposal to bring together more organisations in so called hubs. The outcomes of this new approach have stimulated surprise and interest. Historically the University has had a long history of interdisciplinary collaboration. People are asking 'why have these new themes made such a difference?' Part of the answer may be that the four strategic themes are enablers for building excellent leadership. The themes give vision and direction, projects are for higher good and on purpose. The University has streamlined its policy on professors and career track appointments. Professors and researchers are stimulated to look and consider issues beyond their area.

'At Utrecht, it is very important we talk to each other to be developmental in a creative not a corrective way - recognising the real value of interdisciplinary collaboration and research. Internally, university knowledge exchange happens naturally through collaboration.'

Aletta Huizenga, Director Human Resource Management

Interdisciplinary discussions are underway about the differences between 'laying bricks, building a wall or building a cathedral'. It has become apparent that small research groups of five people, plus an administrative co-ordinator, have had massive impact. The strategic themes are sufficiently broad to allow for new approaches to old issues or allow someone to look at an established area with the methodology of a different discipline - so breaking out of 'subject' silos.

Reviewing pathways for staff

Some academic staff can deliver academic and societal impact. However, the question is "is the expectation that every scientist is to be good at everything, including societal impact? Or is this expectation directed at the research team rather than the individual level in order to allow more space for people to play to their individual strengths? Allowing for professors to play to their strengths and be fully acknowledged for their specific contribution adds to career diversity as they find their unique voice and contribution.

The vision of the former 2012-2016 strategic plan to improve The University of Utrecht's position from one of the best universities in the Netherlands to one of the best universities in Europe triggered a review of policy on staff recruitment and development. It was recognised that to achieve this ambition, the policies for the appointment, and development, of academic staff, especially professors needed to be re-evaluated. Professors are key not only in teaching and research and the organisation of these activities but also the overall attitude and culture of the University. Where professors are enthusiastic, and performing well, then one finds enthusiasm and good performance in the researchers and students. This makes it important to appoint, support and develop professors in a way that aligns with the University's identity – 'creating social impact and solving the world's big problems'. According to an internal University of Utrecht document addressing the issues of a career in education, the general feeling is that research achievements largely dictate successful careers whilst educational achievements pale into insignificance. The argument put forward in many cases is that

educational achievements are difficult to measure whereas publications make it relatively easy to properly assess research achievements.

'The initial conversations were around resources and how to get industry funding. This has moved and developed now it is more about societal impact and collaboration and less about getting money out of industry.'
Aletta Huizenga, Director Human Resource Management

This approach allows young academics to have more of a contribution to make - fresh eyes and approaches count to link to a theme rather than just building on a subject and staying within discipline rules. The rigour is still needed but the range that can be selected from is wider.

From a human resource management perspective, the following are core issues with regard to providing incentives, guidance and support for creating societal impact.

- How can the impact (positive or negative) of external work on academic output be proved?
- What about the impact of external work on academic output?
- How to create fair guidelines? (Different research areas work on different time scales. Depending on the discipline it takes different time, input and processes to deliver meaningful research outcomes.)
- Can staff on the track to professor ask for earning capacity (outside their salary?)

Reflecting upon these questions, a revised policy for the specification and appointment of professors was introduced in March 2015. The policy document covered types of chairs, appointment procedures, open international recruitment and career track (internal recruitment), faculty plans for professorial positions, promotion and emeritus professor policy. The University appraised the effectiveness of past initiatives and produced revised guidance and systems to streamline and increase the transparency of professorial appointment and career track assessment. Additionally because there are clear guidelines, it is easier for young researchers to find a way to build a career.

The four components are educational leadership, portfolio, career track and professorship and are based on existing elements that created a clear-cut pathway to both employee and the relevant Dean. This allows for specialism in the design and delivery of subject programmes, publications are required at the same level as a for a discipline specialist but the focus can be on educational innovation and professional development, so broadening opportunities for career progression aligned with personal orientation. The teaching component of the career track includes peer review and external orientation, that is, learning from external institutions and bringing that expertise back to Utrecht.

With this approach Utrecht University was the first Dutch university to create a differentiation framework for professors also offering scope for professors with a specialised remit in education. The new policy recommendations were systematically implemented through clear professor profiling documentation covering both teaching and research.

Step by step plan for career track or tenure track appointments are in place with firm criteria are recurring every three to five years. All candidates are required to obtain a senior teaching

qualification² as well as a senior researcher qualification. Furthermore, they are required to obtain a good score in the 360-feedback assessment with respect to leadership skills. A development assessment form may be a part of the procedure. Candidates are evaluated annually based on the Utrecht University-wide and specific (faculty) criteria, which include societal impact.

The responsibility at professorial level of dissemination of academic knowledge and insights was extended to include, where possible, the government and corporate world. The internal assessment and the development interview reflection and report forms for all staff were created to include a specific section on research and valorisation and impact. The University has been actively searching for pioneers who are aligned with this approach.

It was recognised that both the faculties and University share responsibility for achieving these objectives. Externally, the Faculty Board initiates candidate recruitment and selection procedure, ensuring candidates meet the right quality level and are encouraged to actively scouting for talent. Internally, the Faculty Board who are responsible for the conferral of Doctoral Degrees and the Executive board have a role in imminent professorial appointments on the career track

The policy recognised four types of professors – faculty professor and university distinguished professor, endowed chairs, professors by special appointment and visiting professors. The most typical form of professorship is faculty professor. University distinguished professors are appointed by the executive board in recognition of excellent academic staff whose vision and reputation transcends disciplinary boundaries. University distinguished professors are given the freedom to initiate innovative methods of teaching and research. Distinguished professors are appointed for a 5-year term.

Endowed chairs are sponsored by external organisations and can be named after the external organisation. Endowed chairs are intended to promote the name and reputation of the external organisation and the same time manifest Utrecht University's commitment to working closely with regional partners. The University establishes endowed chairs in areas that exemplify facets of its profile (e.g. strategic themes, focus areas, faculty core research areas). The external organisation covers salary costs, and budget for research covering, for example, the position of a PhD student. The appointments are temporary for a maximum of five years with the option of temporary re-appointment.

Emeritus professorships fall under the category professors by special appointment and create the possibility of continuing engagement following retirement. The aim is to recruit more international top-level talent, retain top-level talent, and to strive for sufficient diversity among the professorial body.

Key learnings from the case study

1. Creating cross discipline themes, as a focus, can provide a way to develop high impact and deeper collaboration, even where resources are restricted. The strategic themes are sufficiently broad that they allow for new approached to old issues or allow someone to look at an established area with the methodology of a different discipline - so breaking out of 'subject' silos.

² Utrecht University has a long tradition of placing emphasis on lecturer quality and professionalism and is regarded as a role model in this area by other universities. In 1990's Utrecht University was the first university in the Netherlands to introduce a Basic and Senior Teaching Qualification, which has now been adopted by all other Dutch universities. In 2000, the University founded its Center for Excellence in University Teaching launching the Education Leadership training programme, which other Dutch universities now participate in.

2. Professors determine much of the culture and actual values and behaviour in a university, therefore it is valuable to paying attention to the recruitment and development of professors, beyond their publication record. Once you have decided the vision and culture that you want to achieve, there is value in writing this into human resource management to provide a standard for the whole institution.
3. Clear guidelines and support for career development, as in the case of the University of Utrecht, allow young academics to have more of a contribution to make - fresh eyes and approaches count and professors who are a bit different have the chance to link to a theme rather than just building on a subject and staying within discipline rules. It is about bringing expertise to a real problem rather than adding to the expertise on a specific narrow field built on the established prior knowledge and culture of that field.