

The Rise of University Colleges in Europe: A New Future for Liberal Arts & Sciences in the Twenty-First Century?

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Starting in the late 1990s, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of liberal arts and science colleges in the Netherlands. Primarily international and

embedded in strong research universities, and having ample financial support and

Liberal arts and science (LAS) was presented as a curriculum model that al-

The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) had already launched this idea in 1995, but with no follow-up.⁵ It seemed that the status quo had become stale. But Utrecht set a leading example by launching it bottom-up, while followers such as Maastricht University and Utrecht University were facilitated by the Bologna reforms (implemented in Dutch higher-education law in 2002).

The idea of university colleges thus became popular as they would contribute to the aims and expectations of the time: namely, internationalization and interdisciplinarity of the curriculum, the development of “twenty-first-century skills,” more selectivity (excellence), and differentiation at the system level. Their introduction in the Netherlands continued with the establishment of university colleges by Maastricht University (2002), a second one by Utrecht University (2004), and Amsterdam University College (2009), followed by university colleges established by the universities of Leiden (2010), Rotterdam (2013), Twente (2013), Groningen (2014), and Tilburg (2016).⁶

A successful journey showed UCs as standalone structures within a larger research university, benefiting from available resources and infrastructure. But like all innovations, the new model did not fit existing regulatory, organizational, and cultural frameworks. Skepticism regarding elitism and the value of the LAS degree for employment and graduate study remained. Reluctance to reforming the disciplinary organization of universities persisted by creating UCs as standalone structures, which left the mainstream mostly unchanged. Hence the hurdles and resistance that I experienced as the founding dean of Amsterdam University College.

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city with two universities (with multiple science faculties), increasing the number of students majoring in science was becoming urgent. Competition between the universities was pointless. Collaboration was stimulated by the Amsterdam city government and its business community in the context of the development of the Amsterdam Science Park.

With a view to these parameters, Amsterdam University College (AUC) thus had to combine excellence with diversity, be open to and engage with the city around it, develop a strong science profile (able to attract at least half of its stu-

In building broad institutional support, I had to become (and stay) friends with some twenty faculty deans who were concerned that AUC would attract their best faculty, which would be systematically confirmed. Luckily, I was free to choose my own core team from across the two universities and outside, thus composing an interdisciplinary, international, creative, and resilient group. There is a lot of fun but little luxury in a start-up, especially one in the public sector, for which an endless amount of red tape needed to be overcome. In the hierarchy of obstruction, administrators were more reluctant than academics. Advisory committees had to be overruled. The students were my best advocates in these processes and convinced the university councils and even the minister to side with our goals at critical moments.

The largest multimillion-euro grant was finally won in national competition from the Ministry of Education and Science's initiative for stimulating excellence in university programs. AUC's long-term financial sustainability was ensured by negotiating a higher funding level for

Snow was right. There are many great crises or challenges facing the world: food, energy, climate, pandemics, all driven by globalization. Science and technology might have been part of the cause of these problems, they are also absolutely key to the solutions. A complete education should be a multidimensional experience, since students, teachers, schools, and research are all multidimensional. It is a challenge for universities to offer such an environment and be a proper reflection of the talents of its inhabitants.¹¹

AUC's academic success in this respect was confirmed by then-president of the European Research Council and member of the AUC International Advisory Board Helga Nowotny, who observed in 2012 that AUC

seeks to link the parts of our *globus intellectualis* that seem to have become separated, much like oceans dividing the continents...reconnecting the natural sciences—physics, chemistry, and the life sciences—with the humanities and social sciences. These innovative features of the AUC curriculum are supported by an emphasis on “big questions” and how to approach them, namely through a research-oriented style of inquiry.¹²

But the social positioning of AUC had more substantial challenges. As mentioned before, Amsterdam's global outlook, the diversity of its population, as well as its international business community were important parameters for AUC's mission, expressed in its motto, “Excellence and Diversity in a Global City,” and based on the belief that both excellence and diversity matter, as both competition and cooperation are key to success in a globalized world. Leadership does not only require excellence, but also the understanding and valuing of diversity.

As dean, I explained multiple times to different stakeholders that AUC's motto actually meant, “AUC shall never be a white middle-class college in an otherwise half Black city.” I felt the task was to position AUC as a collective of “the winners and losers” of globalization, who are well represented in global cities like Amsterdam, though often living quite separately in almost parallel universes.¹³

Among the greatest challenges in this area was the difference between UvA and VU in recognizing diversity as an important dimension. Most support came from the VU

also among those from international schools around the world. Fifty percent of the student body was international, a cosmopolitan global elite, but far less diverse in economic and cultural terms. Attracting local minority students, often equally talented but with significantly lower social and cultural capital, proved more challenging. Setting up a special outreach program for students who attend

cult to implement in teaching. Stifling requirements for accreditation and access to graduate programs, especially in professional fields such as law, are impeding factors.

- *Selectivity*: Excellence may have been embraced as a principle for more differentiation, since selective admission of students has been adopted in legislation for these kind of programs, and though the option to select undergraduate students was established in the Higher Education and Research Act, few undergraduate programs other than UCs have opted to implement it.¹⁷ While selective admission to graduate programs has become more common, there is still some reluctance surrounding such practices in undergraduate programs because it is seen as “elite” and runs counter to the idea(l)s of equal access and widening participation.
- *Internationalization*: Internationalized curricula and international classrooms became mainstreamed in both legislation and accreditation, and teaching in English became broadly popular in Dutch research universities in around one-third of undergraduate programs and three-quarters of graduate programs. However, the use of English should not be attributed to the UC model. Rather, internationalization has been encouraged since the early 1990s, and was spurred by the implementation of the Bologna Declaration. Brexit further increased the number of international students in the Netherlands, up to 40 percent of first-year students in research universities.¹⁸ This is a contested trend due to funding and housing issues, resulting in a political pushback on teaching in English and international recruitment.

With their special legal status, higher student funding level, and residential housing, UCs seem to be well protected against these and other pushbacks that may occur. The impact of the UC model on the European higher-education scene has also been limited. Some liberal arts colleges already existed in Eastern Europe (accredited by CEES (in 1990s) and also (as training division) controlled by CEES/CEEB/TEM32 BD tion

American universities can draw three lessons from the European UC experience. First, liberal arts and science education can be offered as a more affordable model. Even though U.S. students pay full fees in Dutch UCs, the

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- ²⁰ Johanna Witte, Marijk C. van der Wende, and Jeroen Huisman, “Blurring Boundaries: Bologna and the Relationship between Types of Higher Education Institutions in Germany, the Netherlands and France,” *Studies in Higher Education* 33 (3) (2008): 217–231.
- ²¹ Marijk C. van der Wende, “Trends towards Global Excellence in Undergraduate Education: Taking the Liberal Arts Experience into the 21st Century,” *International Journal of Chinese Education* 2 (2013): 289–307.
- ²² Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- ²³ William C. Kirby and Marijk C. van der Wende, eds., *Experiences in Liberal Arts and Science Education from America, Europe, and Asia: A Dialogue across Continents* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- ²⁴ Marijk C. van der Wende, “Neo-Nationalism and Universities in Europe,” in *Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Global Perspectives on Politics and Policy and the Future of Higher Education*, ed. J. Douglass (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 117–140.
- ²⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022).
- ²⁶ The mission for higher education to “instill patriotism in young people” was part of the statement published in early March 2022 by Russian rectors backing up Putin’s invasion in Ukraine.
- ²⁷ Michael Ignatieff, “The Geopolitics of Academic Freedom: Universities, Democracy & the Authoritarian Challenge,” *Dædalus* 153 (2) (Spring 2024): 194–206, <https://www>