

EDUCATIONAL VISION

VRIJE  
UNIVERSITEIT  
BRUSSEL



VRIJE  
UNIVERSITEIT  
BRUSSEL

## VUB AS AN URBAN ENGAGED UNIVERSITY

### WHAT DO WE AIM FOR WITH OUR STUDENTS?

#### 5 CORNERSTONES:



**Open-minded (“redelijk eigenzinnig”)**



**Commitment**



**Citizens of the world**



**Attitude of free inquiry**



**Ready for a professional career**

### HOW DO WE SHAPE OUR EDUCATION?

#### 7 INGREDIENTS:



**Research-informed didactics**



**Student ownership**



**Interdisciplinarity**



**Thoughtful blend**



**Multilingualism**



**Open and co-creative education**



**Lifelong learning**



# THE BASIS OF OUR EDUCATIONAL VISION: VUB AS AN URBAN ENGAGED UNIVERSITY

---

Our educational vision is rooted in the three fundamental principles that define VUB. These three words embody our mission, our purpose, and our unique profile: VUB? That is **URBAN ENGAGED UNIVERSITY**

---

First and foremost, we are a **UNIVERSITY** where academic education is based on the principle of **FREE INQUIRY** ('Vrij onderzoek')

Our education is primarily built upon outstanding scientific research. It inspires new research and shapes research competent students. In translating research into education, VUB specifically emphasizes the principle of "**Free Inquiry**": **the pursuit of knowledge based on (personal) experiences and rational arguments, unaffected by influences of ideological, political, philosophical, or scientific dogmas.** We operate from humanistic values such as freedom, equality, and interconnectedness: placing human worth at the centre. We emphasize education, reason and rationality, global citizenship, personal growth, autonomy, responsibility, social engagement, critical thinking, equality, inclusivity, openness, and tolerance.

Rooted in this humanistic worldview, our goal is to address current and future societal questions and challenges through research, education, and service.

## Being an engaged university located in the city of Brussels, we are also distinctly **URBAN**:

Our student population increasingly mirrors the urban reality, and we embrace this as VUB: **urban engagement means that we, as an institution, acknowledge the diversity within our urban student population.** This diversity encompasses various backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, languages, residency statuses, beliefs, gender identities, physical abilities, study paths, and learning styles. Actively working with this diversity and finding ways to design inclusive curricula so that encountering these diverse backgrounds and profiles enriches the learning experience and maximizes learning opportunities for each student, is seen as the driving force for a sustainable implementation of the different components of the Urban Engaged University.

The programme offer of the Urban Engaged University also embraces the opportunities of **Brussels as a metropolitan 'lab'** where reality presents itself in all its complexity. Interaction with Brussels as a cosmopolitan, multicultural, multilingual, socially layered global city and a hub for international networks provides strong stimuli for our students' development as responsible citizens. The connection with our metropolitan capital offers tangible opportunities to establish learning and research strategies where global and local dynamics converge. Education is harnessed as a tool for sustainable societal progress.

## As a university, we explicitly differentiate ourselves through our **ENGAGEMENT**:

The VUB as an 'Urban Engaged University' explicitly bridges the gap between education, research, and social engagement. Our research aims to contribute meaningfully to local resilience and sustainability with global responsibility and involvement. Leveraging our expertise and strategic position in the heart of Europe, we aim to be a partner in research and education with social, economic, and cultural impact, both locally and internationally. Our social engagement is reflected in our slogan "**The world needs you**" and is inspired by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations.

Education is focused on shaping students as holistic individuals, equipped with the knowledge, skills, insights, and attitudes necessary to function as responsible and engaged individuals with an open minded perspective in a complex society. Education should encourage students to take on commitments where they use their knowledge for the benefit of others, effecting change through dialogue, co-creation, and collaboration. Our education aims to train students as self- and socially aware global citizens, skilled and creative professionals who think globally and engage locally.

# What do we aim for with our **STUDENTS.**

Our position as an **URBAN ENGAGED UNIVERSITY** translates into five commitments to our students, **five cornerstones** that substantiate our educational content:

## 1. Students develop into **open-minded** (‘redelijk eigenzinnige’) members of society

VUB wants students to learn to find their own way, with an open mind and free of prejudices. This pathway to self-knowledge, one’s own field of study and society is travelled through creative thinking, critical examination and confrontation of sources, the stimulation and freedom to take the initiative, express one’s own opinions and reflectively deal with oneself and with solutions. The goal of this personal development is to make students feel free to express their individuality, ideas and ambitions and have the courage to defend them.

Such individual development is facilitated thanks to the low threshold and openness offered at VUB. It is reflected in the approach of teachers, assistants, and supervisors, in which the diversity of interests and talents of the individual student is made manifest.



Students are given the space they need to profile themselves by providing a high degree of independence in their choice of projects. Students go through their study programmes with the support of personal feedback and an increasing autonomy over the course of their programmes.



## 2. **Students commit themselves** to a sustainable humanist society

VUB wants students to dedicate themselves to society on the basis of humanist values and in line with their personal development. This requires them to consider the needs of others along with their own. Students must assume their personal responsibility with a view to sustainable social welfare. In doing this, they must make the right choices and decisions for the sake of future generations.

The social commitment of students is stimulated at VUB through the offer of socially relevant projects and learning activities. In these activities, they are challenged through a well thought-out sequence of learning tasks to apply their knowledge and skills while systematically reflecting on social sustainability. Through guidance their understanding is deepened.



### 3. Students are shaped into citizens of the world

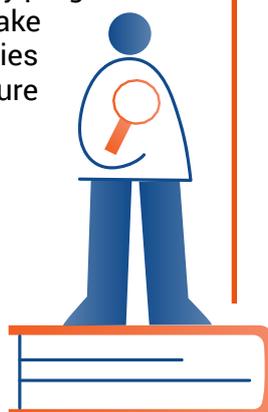
VUB aims to shape students into global citizens who can address current and future challenges in a globalizing society. To respond to constantly changing circumstances, students must navigate complex situations with flexibility. This flexibility is characterized by a growing ability for critical and independent thinking. Students become equipped to respond to today's and tomorrow's world, defined by interactions between languages, cultures, life experiences, ideas, and ways of working.

The cosmopolitan city of Brussels is the perfect place to learn how to deal with an ever-changing globalising society. Over the course of different learning activities, students are exposed to the international, multilingual, and multicultural character of Brussels. The cosmopolitan, socially stratified city of Brussels offers them a view of the world. Additionally, this view can be broadened even further through international exchange.

### 4. Students develop an attitude of free inquiry

VUB wants students to learn and, where possible, also apply a critical, inquisitive attitude to socially relevant themes. This entails applying the principle of free inquiry: the pursuit of knowledge based on one's own experiences and rational arguments, free from the influence of denominational, political, philosophical, or scientific dogma. At the same time, students learn to assess the social implications of research and subsequently make ethical assessments and decisions. This enables them to develop a consistently inquisitive and ethical attitude, regardless of the research topic.

An inquisitive attitude presupposes that students are invited to approach the supply of knowledge critically throughout the entire study programme. From the outset, they increasingly take an active part in research activities and get to know the research culture in a particular scientific field.



### 5. Students are prepared for their professional careers



VUB wants students to be thoroughly prepared for a future career in which they can quickly take on responsibility. To this end, students acquire broadly applicable professional competencies as well through their academic competencies. Practical skills, communicative skills, a forward-looking and entrepreneurial attitude, the ability to work together in a multidisciplinary team, to innovate, and problem-solving oriented reasoning and action are competencies that students acquire at VUB. The envisaged goal is a confident, successful start to their career.

Professional competencies are acquired at VUB through a wide range of practice-oriented course units and internships in which students carry out authentic assignments independently or in groups. Both the result of the assignment and the process toward achieving this result are assessed and, if necessary, adjusted. Feedback from the teacher, fellow students/team members and the professional field is an important aspect for the development of those competencies.

# How do we **SHAPE** our education?

The URBAN ENGAGED UNIVERSITY also reflects in the design of our education: seven (didactic) principles serve as guidelines, **seven VUB-specific ingredients** with which we season our curricula:



## 1. Research-informed didactics

Within VUB, we strive for a culture where lecturers and educational teams design education based on research and data, critically evaluate this evidence, and incorporate it into their practices whenever possible. Research-informed didactics also encompass the aspiration that university education is not solely based on scientific research within the discipline but is also informed by scientific research on the didactics of that discipline, specifically how to best structure this education to achieve maximum learning gain for all students.

## 2. Student ownership

Students drive their own learning process. They gain autonomy in navigating their program and are encouraged to develop towards increased skills of self-regulation. Autonomy can be realized through offering choice of content within a course or curriculum and, more importantly, through providing opportunities for students to find their own path to learning objectives. The integration of blended learning and mobility windows are excellent means to achieve this.



## 3. Interdisciplinarity

Many complex contemporary issues transcend existing disciplines and no longer allow solutions to be sought within just one discipline. By incorporating interdisciplinary education into our curricula, for example through thematic modules and learning paths focusing on broad societal challenges and opportunities, students acquire competencies to understand and tackle this complexity. It also allows for a shift in the purpose of studying from the “what?” question to the “why?” question. The border between different disciplines and perspectives presents immense learning potential. It’s a space that fosters the co-creation of new knowledge and stimulates critical and systemic thinking, along with an open-minded outlook towards diverse viewpoints.



## 4. Thoughtful blend

VUB is not, nor becoming a fully digital university. Instead, we are moving towards integrating synchronous and asynchronous learning activities in a thoughtful and sustainable blend. The 'blend' in blended learning for VUB doesn't just refer to the integration of technology (online vs. offline education), but also to the balance between synchronous and asynchronous components and the balance between guidance and autonomy. VUB's uniqueness becomes particularly evident in the blend with Brussels, both on and off campus. Face-to-face education continues to play a crucial role in achieving our educational goals and meet the objectives of the university on socializing, networking, and inclusivity. Teaching teams always start from the perspective of how to enhance the quality of face-to-face education with digital support and why classroom interaction with and between students is essential. Blended education also offers an excellent opportunity to shape internationalization, both through physical mobility (of students and lecturers) and through integrating (virtual) internationalisation@home components.



## 5. Multilingualism

Throughout all our programs, VUB aims to embrace the multilingualism of its students. As a university embedded in the European capital, with a diverse range of cultures and international institutions, multilingualism is in our DNA. Focusing on multilingualism also presents an opportunity to create a learning environment that values diversity. Multilingualism and language proficiency serve as important inclusive tools, opening doors to various cultures.



## 6. Open, co-creative education

VUB expands on the concept of "Open Higher Education," in line with the educational goals of EUTOPIA. Open and co-creative education brings students, lecturers, educational support staff, and the professional field together to develop learning materials, learning activities, and to work on educational design and development. Each stakeholder contributes to the learning process based on their expertise, experience, and ambition. Our educational content is made available in a similar fashion to how Wikipedia has revolutionized the encyclopaedia industry. This goes beyond merely sharing material: we aim to involve students and stakeholders in the collaborative creation and experience of education. Students learn by doing, and 'crowdsourcing' new themes and methods is facilitated by involving all relevant stakeholders in the creation of new course materials and curricula. This movement is part of a larger trend in academia where educational materials are shared to maximize inclusivity and the efficiency of education.



## 7. Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning refers to the ongoing and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for personal or professional development. Unlike traditional schooling, which usually ends after obtaining a diploma, lifelong learning is an ongoing process that can occur at any stage of life. As a university, we want to embrace and facilitate a culture of lifelong learning. On the one hand, by providing students with the necessary competencies to engage in lifelong learning, and on the other hand, by opening up our curricula further to (re)entrants from all life stages. Lifelong learning helps to keep up with the ever-evolving landscape of one's chosen field. As technology, industries, and society continually evolve, acquiring new skills and knowledge is crucial. By systematically encouraging lifelong learning, VUB aims to foster a sense of community and provide ongoing support to students and alumni in their academic and professional endeavours.

