Report theme sessions as part of the B Liberal Arts and Sciences development review at University College Roosevelt (UCR)

Panel discussion date: 19 September 2024

Participants
Em. prof. dr. Ton van Haaften (chair), em. prof. dr. Gerda Croiset (member), prof. dr. Jolanda Vanderwal Taylor (member), prof. UAS. dr. Irene Visscher-Voerman (member), Milan Gomes BSc (student member), dr. Irene Conradie (secretary). UCR participants included the Director of Education and faculty involved in the three strategic themes.

Strategic themes

During the development review, the panel and programme representatives explored three strategic themes at UCR: Educational Innovation, Data Science and AI, and Sustainability. These themes are intended to guide curriculum development, administrative processes and research activities, and to foster greater collaboration.

Theme 1: Educational Innovation

The sub-theme of Personal and Professional Development (PPD) was identified as a priority. Participants emphasized its role in promoting student retention, well-being and civic engagement. The panel commended the focus on integrating PPD learning activities across the curriculum, ensuring that all students develop essential skills during their three years of study, moving from personal and professional to civic development. Students reflect on these skills in workshops and this becomes part of their portfolio. Workshops on topics such as emotional regulation, leadership and resilience were identified as effective tools for personal and professional development. However, the panel advised careful consideration of the frequency of reflection and emphasized that reflection should not be confused with self-evaluation. The panel welcomed the increasing use of student input in PPD plans.

Reflection was recognized as a cornerstone of the PPD framework, with a focus on embedding reflective practice within the curriculum rather than relegating it to extra-curricular activities. The panel emphasized the importance of structured, scaffolded reflection to enhance students' ability to critically evaluate their strengths, weaknesses and societal roles over time. Civic engagement emerged as an integral component, fostering respect for diverse perspectives and equipping students with the collaborative skills needed to engage effectively with community partners. Examples, such as a Community-Engaged Learning (CEL) course combining public speaking and service learning in marginalised communities, illustrated how these goals could be achieved while developing adaptability, critical thinking and practical skills.

The panel wondered about the sustainability of CEL initiatives, asking whether they were institutionally embedded or overly reliant on individual contributions. The UCR representatives noted that while the development of CEL courses requires significant initial efforts and social and flexible instructors, these courses can be designed for sustainable scaling, ensuring integration into the curriculum and equipping each student with essential civic and professional competencies.

Theme 2: Data Science and AI

The UCR Data Centre plays a central role in integrating data literacy into education by facilitating 'data encounters' that introduce students to data-driven work in different disciplinary contexts, with an emphasis on reproducible workflows and open research software. It provides data science workshops and assignments, resources and support to the UCR community, while student fellows contribute through internships, gaining hands-on experience and mentorship. The panel found that these strategies effectively

bridge theory and practice, enabling students to develop projects, co-teach and build relevant skills. It emphasized that the role of data cannot be overestimated, and that teaching students how to integrate AI tools ethically and responsibly is of great importance.

The panel emphasized the importance of aligning with emerging regulations, such as the EU AI Act, while expressing enthusiasm for UCR's approach to preparing students for data-driven careers. The panel noted that these initiatives position the curriculum ahead of traditional programmes and increase its relevance.

Theme 3: Sustainability

The third theme, on how to integrate sustainability into the liberal arts and sciences curriculum, was discussed only briefly. The establishment of the Delta Climate Centre and collaborations with institutions such as UU and HZ were seen as valuable steps in promoting transdisciplinary research and practical applications in areas such as sustainable food, water and circularity. The panel mentioned that at some universities, a joint position for professors in companies helps to integrate academia and industry and to secure internships. Sustainability encounters were suggested as a means of embedding this theme into the curriculum, providing students with opportunities to engage with pressing global challenges at both local and wider levels.

Conclusion

The discussion concluded with reflections on the interconnectedness of these issues. By embedding PPD, data science and sustainability into the curriculum, UCR aims to produce civically engaged, reflective and skilled graduates. These initiatives, while demanding in terms of preparation and resources, are seen as highly relevant to aligning the liberal arts and sciences programme with (future) societal and professional demands.