



Strategy 2025 - 2029

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1. Mission and vision

Human beings have an enormous capacity to learn and this lies at the heart of who we are and what we do. Learning takes place throughout the entire lifespan: at home, in daycare, at school, at college and at work. Unfortunately, not everyone is given the opportunities to learn optimally and acquire the skills to do well in life and function in society; sometimes people are faced with unfavorable conditions and contexts or suffer from developmental biological barriers for learning. **LEARN! envisions to better understand and contribute to the conditions which allow children, youth and adults to reach their full potential and flourish, and thereby to contribute to a flourishing, fair and socially cohesive society.**

Our **vision** aligns with UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #4 to build towards inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, and touches upon SDG3 for promoting well-being for all at all ages.

Our **mission** is to contribute to these goals by studying development, learning, and education in all of their complexity; in other words, within the micro- to macrolevel dynamic and interactive contexts in which they take place (see Figure 1):

- The **Micro context** of development, learning and education of children, adolescents and adults (including parents/ caregivers, teachers, principals); this includes parent-child, teacher-child and peer relations, and the cognitive, emotional, motivational and biological processes that underlie learning and development.
- The **Meso context** of learning, such as and the interconnections between families, daycare centres, schools, and school organisations; this includes for example educational partnerships between families and schools.
- The **Macro context** of learning, including the coordination and governance of learning by school boards, local and national governance, and the cultural and institutional context of learning (norms, values, social blueprint; legal, financial and policy context).



Figure 1. LEARN! mission and programs across Bronfenbrenner's micro, meso, and macrolevels of developmental contexts.

To reach our mission, our **ambitions** are 1) to be a leading research institute and go-to point, both locally and (inter)nationally, for research on development, learning, and education; 2) to conduct interdisciplinary and societally relevant scientific research of high quality and integrity, and 3) actively engage with stakeholders and academic colleagues locally and (inter)nationally when designing and implementing our research.

The research we do to implement our mission and ambitions is organized across **five programmes of work** (see section 2, page 5-6): child rearing, educational neuroscience, learning sciences, motivation for lifelong learning, and educational governance. Across these programmes, we bring together colleagues from the Faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences (FBMS; host faculty), Faculty of Religion and Theology, Faculty of Humanities and the Amsterdam University Medical Center (UMC), location VU. In 2024, LEARN! had 171 members across the 5 programmes, working across the behavioural, psychological, philosophical, biological, social, medical and educational sciences allowing us to use an interdisciplinary approach to generate new insights on development, learning, and education. See **Appendix 1** for more information about the participating departments and the structure of the institute. More information about members, projects and events can be found in our [annual reports](#).

Complex contemporary issues in learning and education ask for interdisciplinary approaches. Across our five programmes, LEARN!'s strength lies in **connecting perspectives, disciplines and approaches** to be able to understand and study education as a complex ecosystem where the micro-to-macro levels interact in fostering, preventing or shaping opportunities to learn and develop. **Bringing together research at the micro, meso, and macro levels, and collaborating with non-academic partners, is therefore essential.** The five programmes approach overlapping themes from different angles and by focusing on different levels. Through collaboration and learning from each other, answers to the often complex issues related to development, learning and education can be found (see Strategy 1). Moreover, across the different programmes we jointly have collaborations with diverse non-academic networks, representing stakeholders across the micro-to-macro levels, ranging from children, parents/caregivers and teachers to schoolboards/principals and policymakers (see Table 1).

Table 1. Societal stakeholder contacts across programs spanning the three contexts of our work

	Local stakeholders	National stakeholders	International stakeholders
The Micro context of learning of children and adults (including teachers, principals)	Teachers, students, parents, schools	Ouders en Onderwijs, NKD (Nederlands Kwaliteits Instituut Dyslexie) Teacher associations, Ed tech companies, Oudervereniging BALANS Samenwerkingsverband Amsterdam ROC Amsterdam	International Mind Brain and Education Society (IMBES), International research and educational associations (e.g., AMEE: International Association for Health Professions Education) Ed Tech companies
The Meso context of learning, such as the classroom, school organisation, day-care centers, work-based settings or adult colleges in which people learn and develop	Schools, school boards (regular and special education), day-care centers	Organizations for youth and long term care	International research and educational associations (ICSEI)
The Macro context of learning; e.g. the coordination and governance of learning by school boards, local and national	City of Amsterdam	Ministry of Education, Inspectorate of Education, PO/VO-raad,	OECD World Bank UNICEF UNESCO- MGIEP

governance (e.g. through marketization, network governance, hierarchical coordination), including the cultural and institutional context of learning (norms, values, social blueprint; legal, financial and policy context).		Onderwijsraad, VSNU NJI, VGN, NVO, BOiNK VWS, Jeugdzorg Nederland Trimbos Institute	UNESCO-IIEP International research and educational associations (ICSEI) EU network for inclusive education
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2. Our research programmes

Child rearing

Programme leader: Prof. dr. Carlo Schuengel

The programme Child Rearing focuses on parenting, attachment, and self-determination in family settings. The main question we aim to answer is how parents, teachers, and other formal and informal educators can help children find their place within society and become the persons they want to be. Broadly speaking, parents and educators provide control and protection, guidance of children's learning, entry within peer groups, and a nurturing family and school climate. This program views socialization, character building, and child rearing through the lens of socioemotional development. One line of work under this theme focuses on parenting, attachment, and self-determination in family settings. Another focuses on nurturing social relationships in formal educational and care settings.

Educational neuroscience: brain, learning and development

Programme leader: Prof. dr. Nienke van Atteveldt

How can developmental and biological perspectives help us understand learning and behaviour of children and adolescents in educational contexts? Our research focuses on social-emotional, motivational and meta-cognitive factors to understand what is needed for children to do well and feel well in school. In addition to child factors, our program generates novel insights into how individual development is influenced by the environment, such as the peer context in the classroom, and gene-environment interplay. Throughout our work we use and further develop research approaches which are ecologically valid (i.e., situated and implemented in real-life settings, rather than lab environments) to ensure our findings have direct relevance for education.

Learning sciences

Programme leaders: Prof. dr. Martijn Meeter

How can learning processes be optimised in various contexts? The research in Learning Sciences is aimed at facilitating educational improvements with scientific insights in collaboration with practice. Gaining insight into the learning processes at an individual and group level makes it possible to better equip the instructor with teaching methods and skills that promote the learning of the individual. The aim is to ensure that learning processes are optimised for each individual according to his or her characteristics, in line with the educational context. Moreover, insights gained are applied within teacher education, as teacher education programs for both primary and secondary schools are carried by members of the Learning Sciences program.

Motivation for lifelong learning: developing students for life

Programme leader: Prof. dr. Rashmi Kusurkar

How can we motivate students and professionals to become lifelong learners, particularly in healthcare? Our research group aims to understand how we can develop "students for life" who are intrinsically motivated learners and who constantly interact with their environment, integrate learning and practice, and are dedicated to investing in continuing professional development. Within our research programme we have two major research lines: a) Motivation and factors associated with motivation (e.g. professional identity, performance, etc.), and b) Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), and access.

Educational governance, identity and diversity

Programme leaders: Prof. dr. Melanie Ehren and Prof. dr. Johannes Drerup

The research on “Educational governance, identity and diversity,” chaired by Professor dr. Melanie Ehren and Professor Johannes Drerup, spans educational governance of schools and systems in the widest sense including leadership and management of schools, functioning of school boards and educational networks, their accountability, and how performance, innovation and improvement of schools are coordinated through various types of governance (e.g. market-based, hierarchical steering, network governance). We also study and explore questions about which educational practices best facilitate the development of children into adults who are able to live in and contribute to a society that is culturally and religiously diverse. We combine insights from philosophy of education and public administration to study the functioning of schools and school systems.

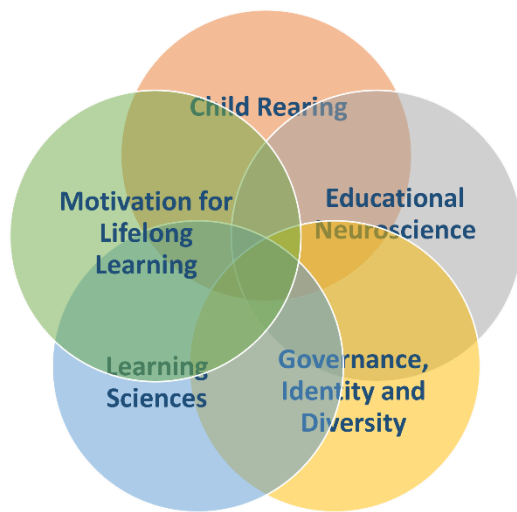


Figure 2. Our five programmes of work: many interests are shared, but each have their own complementary focus and methodological skill sets. LEARN! knowledge exchange and collaboration activities (e.g., Strategies 1 and 2) facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration across programs.

3. Our joint themes of research

Although our interdisciplinary research is essentially broad in scope, for the period of 2025-2029 we will focus on specific issues that are especially urgent, to increase our effectiveness in promoting collaboration and achieving impact, and joint funding acquisition to address these issues (see Strategy 2). Based on recent stakeholder-driven research- and policy agendas ([NRO Kennis Agenda](#), [NWA Kennisagenda Jeugd](#), [NWA NeurolabNL-Onderwijs](#), [Kenniscoalitie voor mensen met een beperking](#), and UNESCO's [International Scientific Evidence-based Education \(ISEE\) Assessment](#)), and after deliberation with the program leaders, senior LEARN! members and the advisory board, we have selected 6 themes as both urgent and aligning with our expertise. The following criteria were used: 1) the theme relates to an urgent and relevant societal and policy issue, 2) we provide cross-program expertise, 3) themes are strategic with regard to external funding opportunities. **For the 2025-2029 period, the focus themes where LEARN! will strategically position itself are:**

- 1. Performance pressure and resilience.** Current trends in declining school-related mental wellbeing in youth and perceived pressure to perform (across all ages) are alarming. Interdisciplinary research questions include how we, as a society, may redefine 'success' and 'performance', or whether we need to change existing structures around testing and performance indicators (at individual and school levels), and if yes, how. Moreover, it urges rethinking development and learning as cognitive-social-emotional processes that need to be understood and supported holistically to foster resilience.
Examples of ongoing research across our programmes: the Educational Neuroscience program studies this theme from the microlevel of the individual learner and their relations (e.g., the protective effect of mindsets and positive social relations, physiology around exam/performance stress). The Educational Governance program addresses more macro-level questions such as where does pressure come from and how is it created through processes of norm-setting, policy interventions and accountability? How do actors in a system (school leaders, teachers, parents) create or mitigate pressure? The role of different assessment types is also studied across our programs (Motivation for Lifelong Learning, Educational Neuroscience), as well as the role of parenting (Educational Neuroscience, Child Rearing).
- 2. Digitalization of life, work and education.** What are the opportunities and threats of digitalization for children and youth? How can teachers, parents, and policymakers be supported around these opportunities and threats?
Examples of ongoing research across our programmes: Child Rearing studies what interventions may be effective for which youth across the domains of digital citizenship, and how users and policymakers can be supported in choosing wisely among the many interventions. What risks/opportunities should be addressed at which level (family, school, care organization, local government, national government, EU)? The Learning Sciences program complements this research by studying the efficacy of Education Technology.
- 3. Persistent declines in achievement and motivation.** This theme includes interdisciplinary questions around how to turn around the declining academic achievements and motivation in children, adolescents and students, and how to nurture motivated learners for life. This theme encompasses different trends, from declining reading skills and motivation across all ages, to specific declines in educational outcomes in vocational education (VMBO).
Examples of ongoing research across our programmes: Educational Neuroscience includes research on gene-environment interplay in (reading) motivation and achievement and motivation-performance cycles in students of different ages (collaboration with Learning Sciences). Learning Sciences complements this with large-scale test score analyses and educational intervention research. Motivation for Lifelong Learning

focuses on motivation, learning and achievement in health professions education and how can be designed to stimulate autonomous motivation and active learning. Child Rearing further zooms out to study the relation between trends in health and lifestyle with academic declines.

4. **Participation and inclusion of diverse learners.** Participation and inclusion of diverse learners in education (including higher education) and work. This is timely both given the shifting landscape of special education, youth- and long term care, as well as the need for more inclusive higher education.

Examples of ongoing research across our programmes: Motivation for lifelong learning studies how students with minority ethnic background experience their learning environment, and what effect this has on their learning and performance. Aligned to the first theme, they also study how minority students experience performance pressure due to bias from teachers. Focusing on educators, they study how the VU Mixed Model can be used to stimulate participation and inclusion of diverse learners and how educators can transform diversity discomfort to instil inclusion. Educational Governance complements this research from a more macro level by looking at networks and policies for inclusive education, inclusive school culture and leadership (including inspection frameworks, supporting policies), and network governance. Child Rearing focuses on neurodivergent youth and the opportunities and risks of home schooling.

5. **Wellbeing, autonomy and competence of teachers, educators and caregivers in times of shortages.** Teacher shortages remain an urgent problem at the core of many challenges in education. Questions within this theme include the role of stress and workload, and how teachers can acquire the skills and knowledge to feel competence in making the right choices in a complex and changing school environment.

Examples of ongoing research across our programmes: the Learning Sciences program has a strong research line on teacher learning using the teacher education programs of VU and HvA. Educational Governance works with the 'lerarenlab' and analyses policy interventions to reduce teacher shortages, including how to reorganize the school day and strategic personnel policies. Child Rearing takes a broader approach including other educators and professional caregivers in the lives of children and adults with support needs.

6. **The use of evidence in policy-making.** In a changing political landscape, how can we safeguard the correct and transparent use of evidence in educational policymaking?

Examples of ongoing research across our programmes: this is a main focus of the Educational Governance programme, addressing questions such as what is evidence and how to use evidence in policymaking and the conditions that enable evidence-informed policy (knowledge infrastructure, relations and networks). Learning Sciences complements this with educational intervention research and theoretical work on evidence-based education and the role of education science therein. The Motivation for lifelong learning programme investigates policy-making in equity, diversity and inclusion, aligning this theme with theme 4. Child Rearing studies how quality instruments (e.g., guidelines) can become a more effective mechanism of evidence-based decision-making and knowledge-activity programming, based on the success of this approach in the medical domain.

In addition to the selected focus themes above, LEARN! researchers across programmes find and complement each other on many other topics and methods as well (see Figure 3). These topics include, but are not limited to: attachment, parenting and child care, (adolescent) mental health, intellectual disability, parent-child interaction, social-emotional development, higher education, inclusion, privatization, teacher professionalization, teacher-child relations, social dynamics in the classroom, gene-environment interplay on learning, accountability of interorganizational networks, cognitive interventions, impact of digital media and

technology, monitoring of learning programs, teacher identity, flexibilization, children's self-view development, citizenship, religious education, sustainability education, curiosity and wonder.

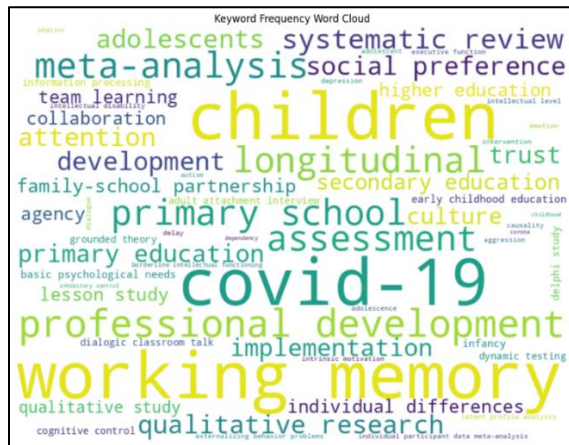


Figure 3. Representation of research topics within LEARN!. This word cloud is based on the 60 most frequently used keywords in publications across programs since 2020.

In terms of **methodological approaches**, LEARN! provides added value in bringing together complementary methodological expertise. LEARN! accommodates both quantitative and qualitative expertise, and methods to address questions related to learning and education at different levels including (neuro)biological, social relations, or policy. Methodological expertise includes, but is not limited to: longitudinal modeling, mixed methods, quantitative analysis, twin modeling, polygenic scores, intervention, computational modeling, observation studies, experimental studies, secondary data analysis, AI, interviews, surveys, literature review, design-based, action research, realist approaches, regression discontinuity, econometrics, machine learning, fMRI, EEG, physiology, and philosophical research. This diversity of methods expertise is a strength, which we utilize in our [methodology helpdesk](#) (see Strategy 1).

4. Our strategy

Our values

Across the five programmes we strive for high quality, interdisciplinary research which addresses pressing societal issues related to development, learning and education. We seek to actively engage with non-academic stakeholders and academic colleagues locally, nationally and internationally in designing and implementing our research. We recognize the pressure from traditional academic performance indicators (e.g., publication in high impact journals). These should however never take priority over our ambition for innovative research of value for the educational practice and policymaking. We acknowledge that interdisciplinary research of high quality and integrity requires working in teams, taking risks, persistence, dedication and patience and learning from failure. Our institute provides a safe environment to explore, test and develop novel ideas where we hold each other to high quality and ethical standards in our scientific work and our work with societal stakeholders.

How we work is informed by the codes of conduct of Dutch universities (VSNU) and [the VU](#). External engagement with the academic community and other stakeholders closely aligns to the principles of ‘open science’, defined as “the practice of science in such a way that others can collaborate and contribute, where research data, lab notes and other research processes are freely available, under terms that enable reuse, redistribution and reproduction of the research and its underlying data and methods” ([Foster Open Science](#)). We strive for all publications being open access and research data to be FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) whenever possible. Open Science may increase the societal impact of research not only by enhancing its soundness and credibility, but also by promoting reuse of methods and data and reducing research waste. We align our work to the Open Science policy of the Faculty and make use of their infrastructure and training programme. Support at the faculty level is provided by the Research and Policy Support (REPS) Team. LEARN!’s Strategic Plan and [annual reports](#) are publicly available on our website. Having an open, transparent and inclusive culture allows us to be open to new ideas, engage with internal colleagues and external stakeholders who have different perspectives from ours.

These values underpin our work and are at the forefront of our culture and how LEARN! members work. We promote these values in our internal communication and ensure they become the underpinning norm of how we work. The LEARN! director and programme leaders function as role models and facilitators in setting the norms of what we expect from our researchers, in connecting people across disciplines, and being open to other approaches and perspectives. LEARN! provides support and professional development opportunities, such as dialogue trainings and other relevant workshops, e.g. during our conferences.

Our added value

LEARN! is essentially a network institute. Our values outlined above enable optimising our *added value*: bringing together scientists who study development, learning and/or education, above and beyond their close colleagues within their own groups, sections and department, and beyond the university. This is needed to achieve our mission of studying development, learning, and education across the micro- to macrolevel dynamic and interactive contexts in which these happen. By providing a backbone for this network of researchers across the VU and Amsterdam UMC, LEARN! connects **perspectives, disciplines and approaches**. This serves two different, but strongly interrelated goals:

- 1) **Internal: connecting researchers.** LEARN! provides a community for VU/Amsterdam-UMC scientists studying development, learning and/or education by providing visibility of research across the different

programmes, and by facilitating exchange of ideas, methods and collaborations (e.g., to acquire joint funding or to engage in societal dialogues).



- 2) **External: enable societally relevant, available and visible research; become go-to point.** LEARN! strives to be an externally visible institute, to facilitate long-term collaborations with societal partners and to facilitate dialogue around societal themes. This enables combining expertise and perspectives to address questions from policy and practice, increasing the impact of our work above and beyond what single researchers or labs can achieve.

NB: the internal goals directly or indirectly enable reaching the external goals (represented by the arrow). Both goals need to be pursued to be able to provide evidence-based answers to the complex problems and questions we are asking about education systems and individual developmental paths.

Our strategic activities

LEARN!'s internal structure is one of a network: we connect researchers, but their relations are informal and based on the added value of sharing knowledge and collaborating. Neither programme leaders nor the institute's director have formal line management authority over members. Such line management is organized separately within sections and departments in faculties, and our strategic activities are complementary to those implemented at the departmental and faculty level. LEARN!'s added value lies in connecting researchers *beyond these line management units*, to jointly reach our mission and address complex issues in education.

A general strategy for the 2025-2029 period is to **advance collaboration and impact across our 2025-2029 focus themes**. As demonstrated by the examples of cross-program research per focus theme in section 3, our different programmes provide complementary expertise and stakeholder networks, along these themes. The main goals of this overall strategy are 1) to advance collaborations across LEARN! programmes to enable more interdisciplinary research around these complex issues, 2) to facilitate obtaining external funding around these current themes, and 3) to invigorate stakeholder engagement, e.g. by combining our networks across programs. Our planned approach is to begin with jointly writing a white paper per theme, combined with obtaining stakeholder input to also look ahead: what challenges are they currently facing, and which do they foresee to face in the future? We will start with one theme in 2025, and when successful, write one white paper per year. Per theme, 2-3 program leaders will lead the drafting of the white paper and organize stakeholder engagement events (see Strategy 5 below). These white papers will serve the goal of increasing the visibility of our work along these themes within and outside of academia, serving our external goal above to sharpen our profile as go-to point for these topics/issues. In addition, we will aim to publish the paper(s) in a journal. Towards the end of the 2025-2029 period, we will map the progress we made within the focus themes and look ahead towards the next period. Furthermore, we will facilitate obtaining external funding, e.g. by awarding seed grants (see Strategy 2 below for more details).

In addition to this focus on the strategic themes, we will implement strategic activities aimed at:

1. LEARN! community building and knowledge exchange
2. Facilitating researchers to collaborate and apply for consortia grants
3. Supporting and connecting members of our PhD community
4. Collaborating with VU's Center for Teaching and Learning
5. Increasing external visibility and stakeholder engagement
6. Quality assurance and external review to improve our work

Below we will elaborate on each of these strategies.

Strategy 1: LEARN! community building and knowledge exchange

The breadth of disciplines within our institute is our key selling point and allows us to study complex problems and find answers and solutions that make a difference. Our collegial culture and way in which we work and share our knowledge and networks across the institute allows us to approach contemporary issues in new and novel ways. We are committed to exchange ideas and approaches and collaborating with each other, to cross disciplinary boundaries and to challenge our own thinking in order to better understand and progress the fields in which we work. Our focus on innovation builds on our commitment to progress science and society and we do so from a culture which appreciates a multiplicity of perspectives and identities in the workplace, promoting openness, safety and inclusivity.

LEARN! adds value by bringing colleagues from interdisciplinary backgrounds together and by combining mutually reinforcing interests. Examples are where colleagues work on a shared interest (e.g. performance pressure, academic motivation) and bring different perspectives and stakeholder networks to the table to develop a research proposal and/or implement the research. LEARN! members need to feel connected to the institute, and to know each other to be able to establish such collaborations and knowledge exchange.

To fulfil this important prerequisite, we will further strengthen our internal community and provide the infrastructure to support such knowledge sharing and bottom-up collaboration between colleagues through the following activities:

- LEARN! research seminars with social drinks afterwards. We have formed a Seminar Committee with members from different research programmes to select and schedule speakers. These can be LEARN! researchers showcasing ongoing work, or external speakers presenting recent work on relevant themes that are of interest to LEARN members across the different programmes. For example, in 2024, we had seminars by prof Gonneke Stevens (UU), dr. Patricia Burch (USC), and prof. Thijs Bol (UvA). Our seminar series is also open to hosting more impromptu talks by visiting international researchers. Importantly, we always organize drinks and snacks after the seminar, for more informal social and scientific exchange among LEARN! members and with the invited speaker.
- LEARN! Conference. This annual conference provides a platform for sharing of work between programmes and with external stakeholders. This is also a means to attract VU researchers beyond the currently involved departments and faculties. The 2025 annual conference has the theme “LEARN! to do transdisciplinary research” and includes an interactive keynote lecture, microtalks around our focus themes, showcasing our own interdisciplinary work and workshops on dialogue skills and establishing interdisciplinary collaborations.
- Bi-monthly newsletter. This communication outlet includes news, highlights and blogs by LEARN! researchers, summaries and pictures of recent LEARN! events such as the research seminars, announcements of upcoming events as well as funding calls and output. The contributions to the newsletters are edited for quality and accessibility for a wider audience (the newsletter is also published on our website and LinkedIn, and distributed to a wider group of stakeholders and collaborators).
- LinkedIn and website. We are increasingly using [LinkedIn](#) for internal as well as external communication (see Strategy 5). We post summaries and pictures of all the research seminars, as well as invitations to upcoming events, and we re-post interesting items from LEARN! program leaders and members. Our followers have grown in 2024 to >750 and we aim to reach >1000 by the end of 2025. [LEARN's website](#) is still in revision and we will finish this in 2025, to provide an up to date overview of the institute's research, members and events.

- Introduction sessions. Twice a year, new members are invited to an introduction session with the director, where more information about the institute is given, new members can get to know each other, and questions can be asked. Moreover, these sessions serve as input (ideas, suggestions) for the director.
- Social events. We aim to organize at least one social event per year open to all LEARN! members, to allow members to meet and discover shared interest in an informal setting. In 2024, we held a successful end-of-the-year dinner, attended by >30 members from all programs and seniorities.
- Methodology helpdesk. This [helpdesk](#) facilitates LEARN! researchers to support each other based on their methodological expertise and spur collaborations. Members of the helpdesk are offered to follow courses to further develop their expertise and skills, supported by LEARN!.
- PURE. We ensure that this VU database of researchers is up to date: that LEARN! members are linked to the appropriate programme and their publications, networks and ongoing projects is regularly updated. The database includes pictures of people, enabling colleagues to find others with relevant expertise.

Strategy 2: Facilitating researchers to collaborate and apply for consortia grants

We aim to facilitate LEARN! colleagues in starting new collaborations and successfully acquiring external research funding, particularly where this allows them to lead large research consortia (e.g., funded by EU, NWO/NRO/NWA grants). Being part of a research institute allows individual researchers to be more successful in applying for, and leading large research consortia as the available infrastructure and reputation of the institute adds credibility to such proposals. At the same time, researcher can make use of each other's networks for obtaining more specific external funding, e.g. from ministries. For this purpose, we aim to undertake the following activities:

- We publish calls for funding in our newsletter. To be up to date on new calls, we will closely collaborate with the VU grants desk and IXA, and the FBMS impact board.
- We support the formation of consortia, such as by connecting LEARN! members to each other (see Strategy 1) and to their respective relevant stakeholders (see table 1) for initiating new (large-scale) proposals. This happens during the activities under Strategy 1, and also by the seed grants:
- We offer seed grants for new collaborations and/or establishing consortia. The seed grants have two main goals: facilitate more systematic collaboration across the five programmes, and support successful grant acquisition in consortia. LEARN! members can apply for such a seed grant for 1) travel and subsistence costs for a working group/consortium meetings, 2) costs of pilot data acquisition or existing data mining for the purpose of starting a new collaboration or a grant proposal, e.g. participant payment or a student-assistant 3) grant writing support from external grant consultancy or editing/language services. For these seed grants, priority will be given to proposals in which LEARN! members across different programmes work together on one of the 2025-2029 strategic themes. Proposals around other themes will be considered as well, if budget allows. The 2025 budget for seed grants is €25K (from 2026 onwards, this depends on available budget).
- We organize activities around the launch of large calls (e.g., from NRO, NWO, NWA, ZonMW and HORIZON) to help LEARN researchers find each other and explore joint grant applications.

Strategy 3: Supporting and connecting members of our PhD and postdoc community

PhD students and postdocs make up more than one third of our members. We highly value our community of Early Career Researchers and aim to provide them with a rich exposure to different perspectives and approaches to study learning and education from the micro-to macro levels. PhD supervision and training is organized and quality assured by the graduate school of the faculty. All PhD students have to register in the PhD management system Hora Finita and meet doctoral regulations of the VU.

The added value of LEARN! for PhD students and postdocs is to embed them in a larger community, increasing the opportunities that they can interact with others who do research on similar topics using similar as well as complementary methods, also outside of their own research groups. Embedding within a larger community also has the advantage of feeling socially connected and belonging. Especially for a specific group of PhD students this is very important: the external PhD students working with us on a guest appointment in addition to another professional role, such as being a teacher. These students are working part-time and not working at the VU on a day to day basis and therefore may feel more loosely connected. We acknowledge the value of these PhD students in the work experience they bring and in their societal and/or international connections and networks that are also relevant for other LEARN! members. We aim to provide a more supportive environment for this group of PhD students. In sum, we aim to stimulate a strongly coherent PhD community or internal and external PhD students within the institute by:

- PhD/postdoc events: we have established a PhD committee of three members from different research programmes. This committee serves as a bridge between the PhD/postdoc community and the LEARN! staff, as well as PhD advisors of the departments. The committee retrieves feedback and input from the PhD/postdoc community, and organizes events based on this input. LEARN! supports these events, which take place 2-3 times a year and range from lunches/drinks to writing afternoons or workshops on outreach. The committee also reaches out to the PhD community to encourage them to join other events (such as the research seminars and annual conference), and provide input for conference and seminar programming to align these events to the needs of PhD students in the institute. A kick-off PhD event in fall 2024 was well-attended and appreciated, and resulted in input for follow-up events in 2025 and beyond, which will also be open to postdocs.
- During the annual conference, there are always sessions organized for and by the PhD community such as interactive poster sessions with poster awards, flash talks or workshops.
- Our bi-monthly newsletter (see Strategy 1) provides visibility and knowledge valorization possibilities for our PhD students.
- PhD training courses: LEARN! can provide support for graduate training courses in case there are no other funds available (if budget allows).

Strategy 4: Collaborating with VU's Center for Teaching and Learning

A natural partner for LEARN! is the VU's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL; formerly known as LEARN! Academy). CTL offers professional development and training of teachers in higher education (BKO, SKO and LOL qualifications), including on various aspects of teaching in, and quality assurance of higher education. CTL is a company with a strong position within and outside the VU, which fulfills a bridging function between educational research and practice and thus forms a source of inspiration for education professionals working in higher education in and around Amsterdam.

Based on the common interest in contributing to learning and development in higher education, LEARN! research institute and CTL aim to collaborate on:

- Joint development of evidence-based principles for learning by professionals
- Further development of research capacity within CTL
- Active collaboration between the LEARN! program Motivation for lifelong learning and CTL. Program leader professor Rashmi Kusurkar has a parttime appointment at the CTL to support their research and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) activities, and prepares joint grant proposals. SoTL has become very important in the last two years. Grants for SoTL projects are offered yearly by the VU (€10K) and by NWO (€25K).

- The possibilities for valorisation of research on the theme of learning and development in higher education through the workshops, external networks and activities of CTL.

Strategy 5: Increasing external visibility and stakeholder engagement

Engagement with local, national and international stakeholders and the academic community in doing our research is at the heart of who we are. Our commitment lies in generating new knowledge to advance our academic field and equally to contribute to improving learning, development and education within society. We strive to make our work available to, and interact with, the public and all those that support us by working in partnerships with our stakeholders, as well as through our external engagement both offline (e.g., annual conference and research seminars are open to everyone) and online (LinkedIn, newsletters, website). Through our continuous interaction with our stakeholders we aim to add value to the development of the communities we work with, as well as enrich us with their questions and insights and thereby improving the societal relevance and quality of our work. We work with relevant stakeholders in all of our research projects (see table 1 for our main stakeholder contacts), while actively communicating the outcomes of our work to them through e.g. our newsletters, and LinkedIn updates. Our specific set of activities to implement this strategic point are:

- Use (social) media to enhance external visibility. This is achieved through our activity on LinkedIn, regularly updating our website, sharing our newsletter more broadly (putting our program leaders and members in the spotlights to gain more attention for the work that we do). Furthermore, we are currently re-organizing our YouTube channel to share recordings of research seminars and other relevant videos (e.g. from the Wetenschapsknooppunt Amsterdam (WKA)).
- Sharing our annual reports and Strategic plan with our extended network. Sharing these reports in which the institute's members, research strategy, achievements and events are showcased increases visibility of the institute within and outside of the VU.
- We promote participating in scientific and practice-oriented conferences. Our visibility at scientific as well as more practice-oriented conferences is enhanced by encouraging LEARN! members to use our logo on all posters, presentations and products.
- Write blogs and participate in podcasts. In 2025, we will start exploring a feasible plan to make our research accessible for societal stakeholders by writing blogs and one-pagers. Now, this already happens occasionally, and we publish these blogs in our newsletter and [website](#). We aim to organize our blog writing more systematically, by rotating which program is responsible for writing a blog, explainer or one-pager for the general public or a specific stakeholder group (e.g. policymakers). We will boost this by organizing public writing trainings/one-to-one editorial support and starting collaboration with national and international blogs (e.g., BOLD.expert) and podcast series (e.g., NVO podcast), to increase exposure, which benefits LEARN's as well as the authoring researcher's visibility.
- Enabling long-term partnerships with societal partners. External engagement of societal stakeholders requires a reciprocal relation where partners are part of our research process from the start, and not just positioned as outlets for dissemination at the end stage of research (co-creation). Here, LEARN! has several successful examples, such as the Academic Collaborative Centers (Academische werkplaatsen) within the Child Rearing program, that can set the example for others who wish to engage in long-term partnerships with societal partners. Furthermore, we offer trainings on skills needed to establish long-term collaborations (e.g. during the annual conferences).
- Participate in Science-Policy fellowships. Within the government, there is a direct need for knowledge to inform policy in response to societal developments. However, this is often not straightforward. At the same time, scientists often lack the knowledge and contacts to realize policy impact based on their research. As more bi-directional exchange of knowledge and skills thus seems essential, LEARN! actively

participates in shaping a new OCW initiative, the Science Fellowships, in collaboration with our Faculty's impact board.

- Responding to questions from policy/practice. The network structure of LEARN! allows us to flexibly respond to opportunities and pressing societal questions that require high quality interdisciplinary research to come up with rigorous and innovative answers and solutions. This is essential for becoming a local/national/international go-to-point. An example was our [rapid response network](#) of school leaders and policy-makers at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to collaboratively develop new knowledge on the consequences of school closures, and a subsequent large-scale programme of work to study the effectiveness of catch-up programmes in primary and secondary education for the Dutch research council and the Ministry of Education. On the longer term, we aim to connect as much as possible to existing infrastructures to answer stakeholder questions, e.g. by participating in the NRO Kennisrotonde.
- Organize dialogue events around current societal issues. Related to the activities above, we aim to organize events for dialogue around societal (and scientific) themes by bringing different perspectives together (for example, around our strategic focus themes, section 3). This will be a new type of LEARN! events that we hope to launch in 2025/2026 to complement our research seminars with more reflective dialogues on societal issues. For this, we will also:
- Intensify collaboration with the Athena Institute and VU Science-in-Dialogue network. To further our strategy of co-creation and stakeholder engagement we will also intensify our collaboration with our VU colleagues at the Athena Institute (Faculty of Science) and the new network Science in Dialogue. Athena's mission is to develop methodologies (principles and heuristics) that can guide inclusive multi-stakeholder innovation processes, as well as strategies that can sustain and upscale such processes, methodologies to monitor and evaluate such innovation processes and develop programmes to train students and professionals in these methodologies. Our collaboration has already resulted in joint publication and use of methodologies to involve stakeholders, such as in the use of the 'responsible innovation approach'. The approach was developed to be reflexive and responsive to stakeholders' needs and values and is an example of how we aim to use state of the art methods for stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, we will strengthen our collaboration with the new [Dialogue coordinator at the VU](#). Both Athena and the Dialogue network will give a workshop during our 2025 annual conference.

Strategy 6: Quality assurance and external review to improve our work

Quality assurance of the institute through interactions with our advisory board, external audits and internal reviews is crucial to ensure we progress towards becoming a nationally and internationally recognized research institute in learning and development and improve our work. Furthermore, the focus and viability of our research programmes will be monitored, and adjusted if needed.

- Internal grant review support. We organize peer review of proposals for medium to large grants. Programme leaders will emphasize the relevance for internal review to colleagues working on new proposals and act as brokers to request internal review by other program leaders or (senior) members. This peer review support system improves the quality of grant proposals, but also enriches our collaborative culture.
- Advisory board. Our [advisory board](#) (see page 20) is comprised of external colleagues from academia, practice and policy, representing the various programmes in our institute as well as the micro, meso and macro perspectives of our research. They provide us with valuable guidance on the overall strategy of the research institute, including strategic themes of research, the viability of existing research programs or the need for new research programs. Their strategic advice and scrutiny of our work provides an important mechanism to improve our work and incorporating relevant external stakeholder perspectives and needs in meeting our ambitions. We also aim to have ongoing communication throughout the year for more

informal advice and collaboration, where we will invite board members for research seminars and our annual conference.

- Annual report. We publish an annual report of the institute's members, research, achievements, events and budget. These reports are [publicly available on the website](#) and circulated among members and the extended network.
- LEARN! governance structure. Currently, programme leaders (board members) are appointed by the institute's director and there is no pre-defined ending term. In 2025, a start will be made to formalize this structure by defining terms of reference and appointment procedures and terms for program leaders. This will address one of the recommendations of the UTC based on the 2022 external audit (see below), namely the vulnerability of limited staff which requires 'voluntary' efforts from programme leaders, committee members, and other active members. To keep this voluntary effort energized and manageable, a more formal structure with a period of appointment (4 years, one extension possible) for (co-) programme leaders will be defined and gradually implemented.
- External review. All VU research institutes, including LEARN! are audited once every six years by an external committee, according to the SEP (Strategy Evaluation Protocol) of the Association of Dutch Universities (VSNU). The most recent audit took place in November 2022, and the (positive) evaluation report and recommendations were received in spring 2023. The University's Assessment Committee (UTC; Universitaire Toetsingscommissie) has reviewed the audit report and recommended a course of action for the institute to the University's senior management team on May 5, 2023. The UTC summarized the positive points in the evaluation report by highlighting the high quality and societal relevance of LEARN!'s research, the interdisciplinarity and diversity of our output, and our strong collaborations with societal stakeholders. The most pressing recommendations for the coming years and how we respond to them in this strategic plan are listed below:
 - Because the institute's small (paid) staff and limited budget can be a vulnerability, the panel recommends a more formal structure of the institute (implemented in Strategy 6), and focusing on the strong informal network role of the institute (implemented in Strategy 1 and 6)
 - More systematic collaborations across the five research programs (implemented in Strategies 1-3)
 - Make goal of collaborating with societal stakeholders more explicit (implemented in Strategies 4-5) and better align the strategic actions with the institute's aims and profile (implemented by defining focus themes and throughout the current strategic plan).

4. Implementation

The six strategies described in this strategic plan will be implemented through the list of activities in the table below. These form our agenda for 2025 (and beyond).

Strategy	Activity	Who is responsible
General strategy to advance collaboration and impact across our 2025-2029 focus themes	1. Write white paper per theme (we aim at one per year) 2. Obtain stakeholder input about current/future challenges per theme 3. Map progress	Two program leaders responsible per theme (and/or other members from their programme)
1. Community building and knowledge exchange	1. Organize research seminars incl social drinks/LinkedIn post of highlights 2. LEARN! conference 3. Bi-monthly newsletter 4. LinkedIn and website 5. Introduction sessions new members and welcome email 6. Social events (e.g. annual dinner) 7. Methodology helpdesk 8. PURE updates and member admin	1. Seminar committee, communication officer (CO), secretariat 2. Director, secretariat & CO, volunteer members/program leads 3. CO & Director, program leads provide/gather content 4. CO & Director 5. Director & secretariat 6. CO & secretariat 7. Director and helpdesk methods experts 8. Secretariat
2. Facilitating researchers to collaborate and apply for consortia grants	1. Publish funding calls in newsletter 2. Seed grants for new collaborations/ consortia along our focus themes 3. Organize activities around grant calls	1. Director & CO (in collaboration with grants office) 2. Director and program leads 3. Director and program leads, secretariat icw grants office
3. Supporting and connecting our PhD community	1. LEARN PhD (and postdoc) events 2. Activities and workshops during annual conference	1. PhD committee, director, secretariat 2. Director icw PhD committee
4. Collaborating with VU's Center for Teaching and Learning	1. Active collaboration with Motivation for Lifelong Learning program	1. Program leader Motivation for Lifelong Learning
5. External visibility and stakeholder engagement	1. Social media (LinkedIn, website, YouTube), sharing newsletter 2. Sharing annual report and strategy with extended network 3. Visibility during conferences (logo etc)	1. CO, director, secretariat 2. Director 3. Program leads, members 4. Program leads (incl encouraging members)

	4. Write blogs and participate in podcasts 5. Promoting and facilitating long-term partnerships with societal partners 6. Promote participating in science-policy fellowships 7. Responding to questions from policy/practice 8. Organize dialogue events around societal issues	
6. Quality assurance and external review to improve our work	1. Internal grant review support 2. Consulting our advisory board 3. Annual report 4. External review (audit)	1. Director & program leads 2. Director & program leads 3. Director, program leads & secretariat 4. LEARN! board & FBMS board

Appendix 1. Budget 2025 and institute's structure

Budget 2025

The income of LEARN! comes from the faculty of Behavioral and Movement Sciences (FBMS) and is based on the number of researchers (according to fte) working in LEARN!. The budget is set once every six years, however, with regard to the upcoming budget cuts, decisions about the budget of our institute after 2025 still have to be made. The budget after 2025 is therefore uncertain, and a reduction of 25% to be expected.

	2025
Income	114.000
Staff costs	
Director (0.20 fte)	68.000
Administrative support (0.25 fte); Communication Officer (student-assistant, 0.4 fte)	
Other costs	
Seed grants for collaboration/grant acquisition across programs, around the strategic focus themes; 5 grants per year	25.000
Annual conference and support of member-initiated other relevant conferences/events	7.500
Research seminars: 8x catering, 4x dinner with external speaker	2.000
PhD events	2.000
Lunches and dinners other (e.g., societal dialogue lunch, social dinner)	3.000
Communication (Annual report/VU design studio, newsletter and other subscriptions)	2.500
Kohnstamm lecture 2025	3.000
Other (materials, unforeseen)	1.000
Total	114.000

Institute infrastructure

The LEARN! daily management, including strategy planning and implementation, is executed by the Board Team. The Board Team is formed by the scientific director and the (co-) program leaders (board members). The (co-) programme leaders are each in charge of one of the five research programmes of the institute and researchers working within each programme. The board is responsible for the overarching strategy of the institute, as well as the external audit of the institute. The board team is supported by a management assistant (1 day a week) and a communication officer (2 days a week, student-assistant). Programme leaders are selected by the board team and appointed by the Faculty. See Figure 4 for the organogram of LEARN!.

The board team once a year reports to the Board of Governance, formed by the (vice-) deans of the contributing faculties (Faculty of Behavioral and movement Science: FBMS/FGB, Faculty of Social Sciences: FGW/FRT, Faculty of Medicine, Amsterdam UMC, location VUmc).

The board team is advised by the external advisory board, consisting of academic and non-academic (policy, practice) leading experts. A meeting with the advisory board and Board Team is planned twice a year to discuss LEARN!'s strategic planning and progress toward the institute's aims.

Finally, the Board Team collaborates with several LEARN! committees, formed by members from different programs, organize events and facilitate in community building. Currently, LEARN! has a research Seminar Committee who select speakers based on member input and organize the (bi-) monthly seminars and related social events, and a PhD committee who organize events for the PhD/postdoc community within LEARN! and for a bridge between the Early Career Researchers and the Board Team.

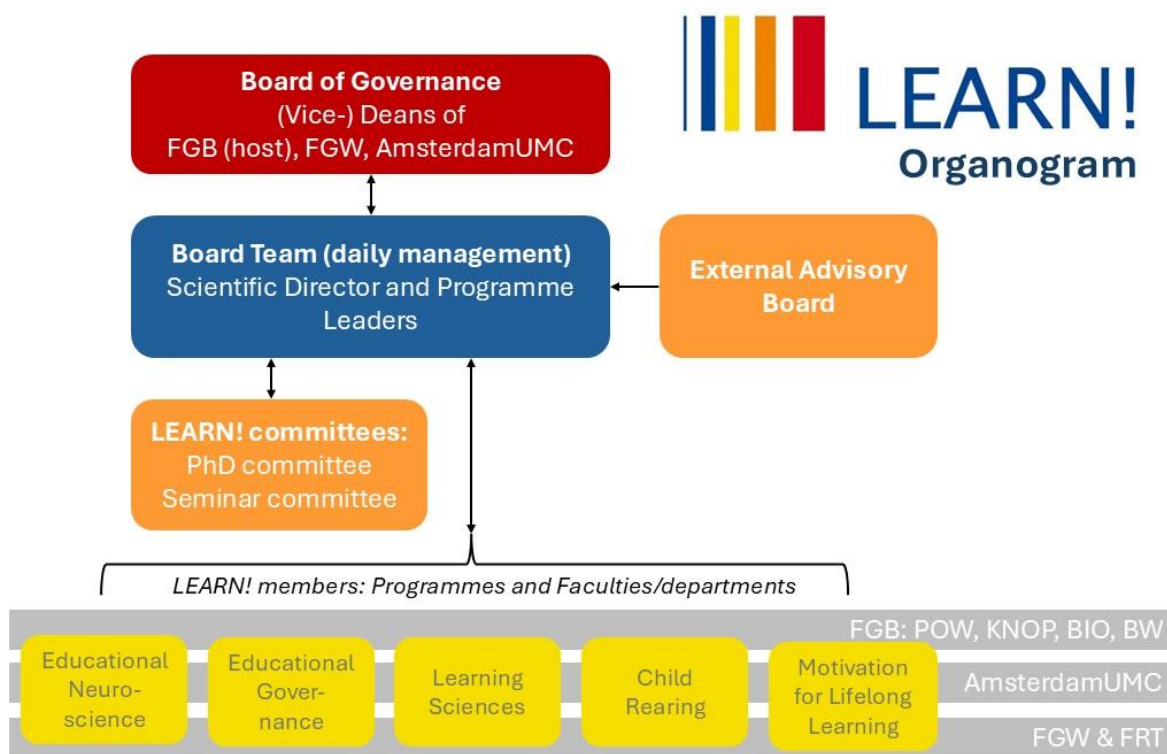


Figure 4. Organogram of LEARN!

Overview of current LEARN! Board Team and Board of Governance

Board Team (daily management)	- Prof. dr. Nienke van Atteveldt (Scientific Director and program leader Educational Neuroscience) - Prof. dr. Carlo Schuengel (program leader Child Rearing) - Prof. dr. Martijn Meeter (program leader Learning Sciences) - Prof. dr. Melanie Ehren (program leader Educational Governance) - Prof. dr. Rashmi Kusurkar (program leader Motivation for Lifelong Learning)
LEARN! Board of Governance	- Prof. dr. Maurits van Tulder, Dean of the Faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences - Prof. dr. Martine de Bruijne, Vice Dean of Education, Faculty of Medicine - Prof. dr. Gregor Halff, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences

Overview of current LEARN! Committees

Research Seminar Committee	- Dr. TuongVan Vu (Educational Neuroscience) - Dr. Helene Vos (Learning Sciences) - Vacancy
PhD committee	- Elise van Triest (Educational Neuroscience) - Tisja Korthals-Altes (Educational Governance) - Mayke Nollet (Learning Sciences)
Support Staff	- Management Assistant (Barbara Goudriaan, Aisha Wiersma) - Communication Officer (Zuzanna Zboś)

LEARN! members

In 2024, LEARN! had 171 members, 65 of whom were PhD students. More information about members, projects and events can be found in our [annual reports](#). Members per programme: 53 in child rearing (23 PhD students), 36 in educational neuroscience (14 PhD students), 51 in learning sciences (16 PhD students), 17 in motivation for lifelong learning (7 PhD students), and 14 in educational governance (5 PhD students).

New member registration: new employees in the Educational and Family Studies department (POW) are automatically also LEARN! members; members from other faculties/departments are registered in consultation with the program leader where the new member will belong to, and registered by informing Barbara Goudriaan through the program leader (or with the program leader in cc). New members get an introduction email with information about the institute and are invited to one of the introduction sessions.

The faculties and departments where LEARN! members are located, according to programme, are listed in the table below.

Faculty	Department	LEARN! programme
VU: Faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences (FBMS; host faculty)	Educational and Family Studies (POW)	• Child rearing (Professor Schuengel) • Learning Sciences (professor Martijn Meeter) • Educational governance (Professor Melanie Ehren)
	Clinical, Neuro and developmental Psychology (KNOP)	• Educational Neuroscience (Professor Nienke van Atteveldt)
	Biological Psychology	• Members within Educational Neuroscience
	Movement Sciences	• Members within Learning Sciences
Amsterdam UMC, location VUmc	Team Research in Education	• Motivation for lifelong learning: Developing students for life (Prof. Rashmi Kusurkar)
VU: Faculty of Religion and Theology		• Members within Educational Governance
VU: Faculty of Humanities		• Members within Learning Sciences

Stakeholders and advisory board

Our stakeholder collaborations are given in Table 1 (page 3). In addition, relevant stakeholders across the micro, meso- and macro contexts and our five research programmes are other international research centers, and particularly those to which we already have strong links (e.g., through our advisory board or personal networks): the Trimbos Institute, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), CEPO (Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities at UCL), Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development and Centre for Educational Neuroscience, Birkbeck, University of London. One important means to reach stakeholder groups is through our advisory board:

Advisory board LEARN!, 2024-2028

Gernanda Schutte	Voorzitter College van Bestuur Agora, basisscholen Zaanstreek (PO)
Emily Yeomans	Co-CEO of the Education Endowment Foundation UK
Rien Rouw	Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and advisor to the OECD
Iroise Dumontheil	Professor of Psychology, School of Psychological Sciences at the University of Melbourne
Jo van Herwegen	Professor of Developmental Psychology and Education, Academic Head of Research for Psychology and Human Development, UCL
Sabine Peters	Senior Researcher Youth Mental Health, Trimbos Institute