

Research Strategy **2023-2033**

**Research
that matters**



Together
for a
better
world



The VU Research Strategy is an internal VU policy document and part of the 2020-2025 VU Strategy framework. It elaborates on the ambitions for research for the next ten years.

VU Amsterdam research strategy working group (Elco van Burg, Jacqueliën van Stekelenburg, Cees Kleverlaan, Philipp Pattberg, Lidewij Henneman and Gert-Jan Burgers) and Andreas Daffertshofer (chairman of the VU Amsterdam Consultative Meeting for Research) integrated the input from various representatives of the VU research community including the vice deans research, the Amsterdam Young Academy, URC and ERC professors, the graduate schools, the PhD council and students, the Student and Staff Council, leads of the profile themes and VU Amsterdam's priority areas, and the Chief Impact Officer.



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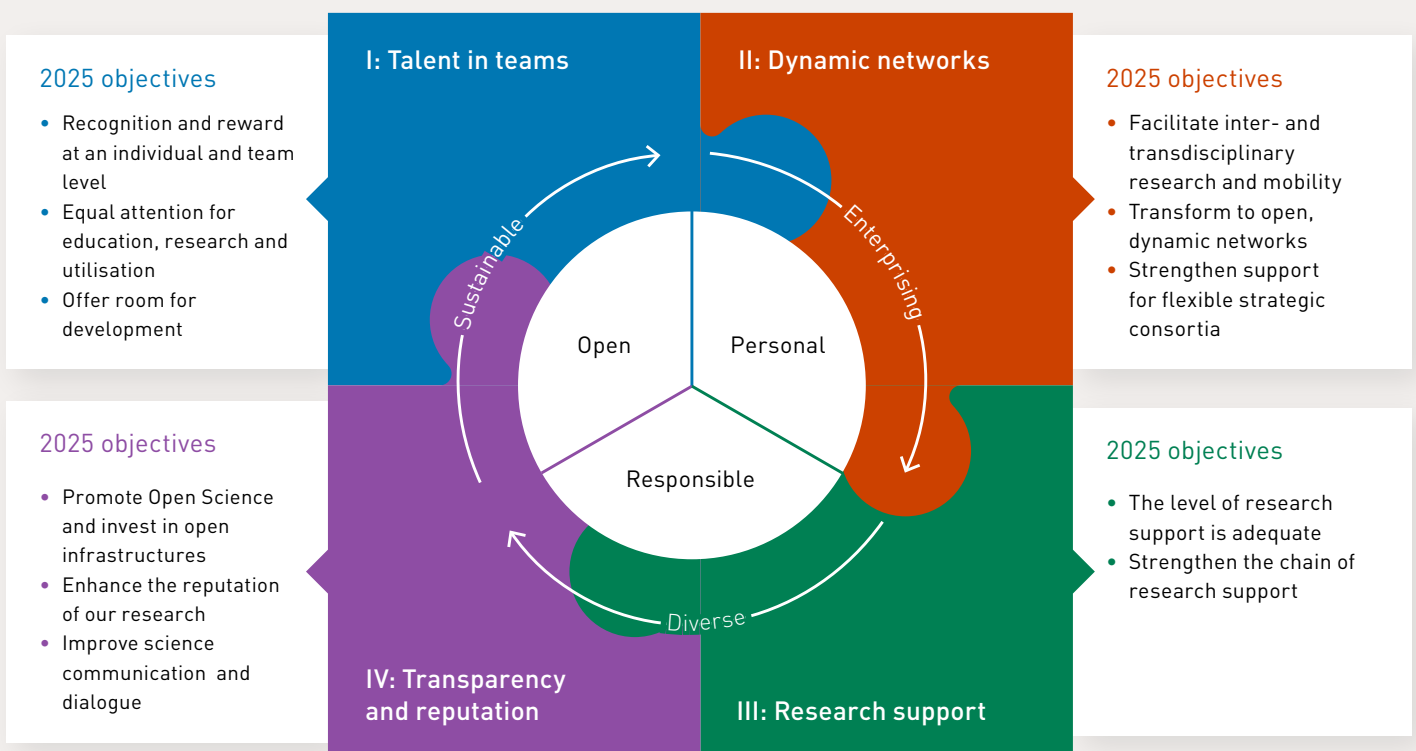
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Summary

VU Amsterdam operates in a rapidly changing world. Society is facing social challenges with major impacts on our daily lives. Science can make valuable contributions toward understanding these challenges and providing solutions. The complexity of issues calls for cooperation, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, and an openness to other perspectives. That is what our strategy is committed to.

This research strategy sets out activities for 2024-2025 ensuing from the VU Strategy for 2020-2025. It links ongoing strategic programmes with new initiatives to strengthen inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration in open, dynamic networks. We encourage and support VU academics to engage in dialogue with society. We can jointly develop solutions and contribute to the future of humanity and our planet.

Along four strategic themes, we link ongoing programmes, such as the Recognition and Reward, *Broader Mind*, Open Science, and Team Science programmes, and respond to external developments, including the increasing complexity of societal issues and international competition for talent.





Foreword

VU Amsterdam is unique because, since its founding in 1880, it has stood for free and responsible science, an ideal still relevant today. There are major societal challenges calling for academics to conduct reliable and relevant scientific research. This is our contribution to the progress of science and the common good. For this to be possible, a university must offer the scope for fundamental and independent science, challenging academics to be mindful of what society needs.

VU Amsterdam is a community that shares three core values - *Responsible*, *Open* and *Personally engaged* - on which we build pioneering research of the highest standard. With an inter- and transdisciplinary approach, the university takes its responsibility for the future of humanity and the planet seriously. VU Amsterdam's three priority areas - *Diverse*, *Sustainable* and *Enterprising* - guide our actions and the nature of our research. For instance, we conduct fundamental research on climate change, examine the shape the energy transition is taking, and consider the impact of digitalisation on our democratic system and human health and well-being.

The practice of free and responsible science demands open and reflective attitudes from its practitioners. Therefore, this research strategy focuses on the attitudes of VU academics and dynamic inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration. VU Amsterdam attracts free thinkers with a *broader mind*: academics and support staff who are conscious of their own personality, values, and motivations and are open to those of others. We recognise that the university is increasingly asked to provide answers to rapidly changing complex questions. The university can address them best via dynamic networks of academics and societal partners in conjunction with teaching and corresponding support.

This integrated research strategy sets out the direction for the next decade. Our strategic research aspirations require the combined efforts of the entire VU research community. We have worked out the specific details of these actions for the next two years in preparation for the new institutional plan. Our vision emphasises flexibility, and we aim to be able to constantly respond to new developments. Therefore, we adopt an adaptive approach, allowing us to learn which approaches work well and which do not and to make joint decisions about what is needed to address problem areas or respond to new developments. This is how we make space for groundbreaking research and value creation for a better world based on scientific knowledge.

Rector Magnificus and vice deans research of the faculties



1 Research vision and strategic priorities

Based on new knowledge, science can contribute to understanding urgent societal problems and finding solutions.

Society is facing challenges with massive impacts on our daily lives. Climate change demonstrates that we have reached the limits of a liveable and healthy planet. Natural resources are being depleted, and the energy transition must be accelerated. The demand for healthcare is rising, and healthcare finance and staff availability are huge areas for concern. Social inequality, escalating anti-institutionalism, and dwindling trust in politics, the media, and science are eroding social cohesion and threatening democracy. Based on new knowledge, science can contribute to understanding these problems and finding solutions. The complexity of the issues requires inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration and being open to other perspectives. For these reasons, we prioritise an open attitude, collaboration, transparency, and research support, ensuring academics interact responsively and learn and develop specific solutions in dynamic networks with other partners.

Achieving an open attitude and the conditions for conducting pioneering research for a better world requires an integrated approach. An essential part is a clear but flexible strategy for research. In doing so, VU Amsterdam is creating a coordinating framework that links the various research-related ambitions and programmes. The research policy will enable focus on improving research collaboration and support and provide an inspiring research environment where sustainability, diversity, and an enterprising attitude are the guiding principles. Our research already meets the highest standards, epitomised by its societal relevance, and this strategy contributes to raising our profile.

1.1 Our mission and vision

VU Amsterdam's mission for its research is to take responsibility for the future of humanity and the planet based on fundamental and applied scientific research. Our research is excellent; it pushes scientific frontiers and has a major impact on society.

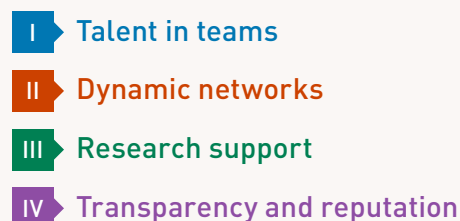
Our vision is that, by 2033, the VU Amsterdam will be an open and inclusive academic community. Dynamic networks of academics can respond to pressing questions to which they can make a fundamental contribution. In dialogue with society, VU academics are working towards a sustainable and liveable planet, meaningful digital and global connections, an inclusive, just and safe society, and health and wellbeing for everybody. Free and critical thinkers at VU Amsterdam have a *broader mind* and are aware of their own values and the things that motivate them while, at the same time, being open to those of others.

1.2 Our priorities for 2024-2025 and strategic goals for 2033

To realise our vision for research, our commitment over the next decade will be to free and responsible science for a better world. The strategy builds on VU Amsterdam's unique tradition with its identity, core values, and priority areas, guiding VU academics in terms of who they are and how they conduct research and structure the research environment.

An integral part of our strategy is to promote and reinforce a broader mind attitude and the values that our academics share. Our aim is to increase dynamic cooperation in our research and strengthen connections with society.

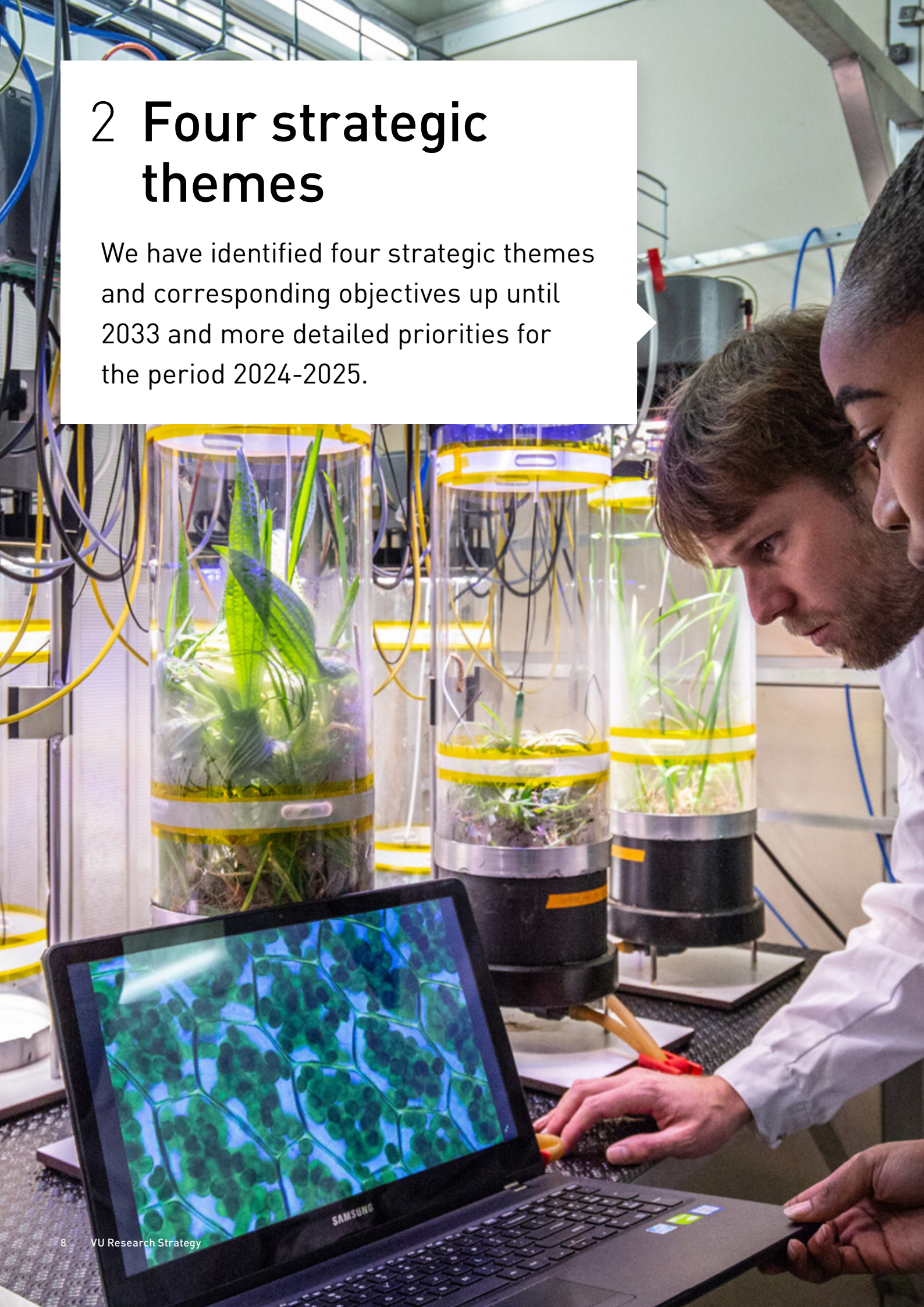
For the period 2024-2025 (as part of VU Amsterdam Strategy 2020-2025), we have formulated specific priorities and brought them together in four themes, based on which we are developing our research organisation into open, dynamic networks in which academics from various disciplines can collaborate with partners from within and beyond academia.

- 
- I Talent in teams
 - II Dynamic networks
 - III Research support
 - IV Transparency and reputation

These themes combine parts of existing activities and include new activities to achieve the goals and outline our trajectory for 2033.

2 Four strategic themes

We have identified four strategic themes and corresponding objectives up until 2033 and more detailed priorities for the period 2024-2025.

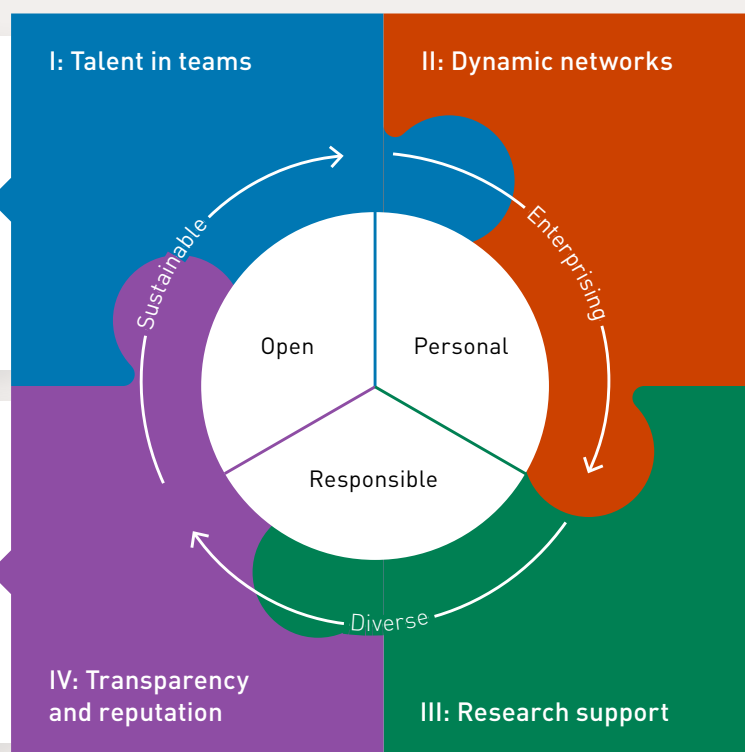


2025 objectives

- Recognition and reward at an individual and team level
- Equal attention for education, research and utilisation
- Offer room for development

2025 objectives

- Promote Open Science and invest in open infrastructures
- Enhance the reputation of our research
- Improve science communication and dialogue



2025 objectives

- Facilitate inter- and transdisciplinary research and mobility
- Transform to open, dynamic networks
- Strengthen support for flexible strategic consortia

2025 objectives

- The level of research support is adequate
- Strengthen the chain of research support

2.1 I: Talent in teams

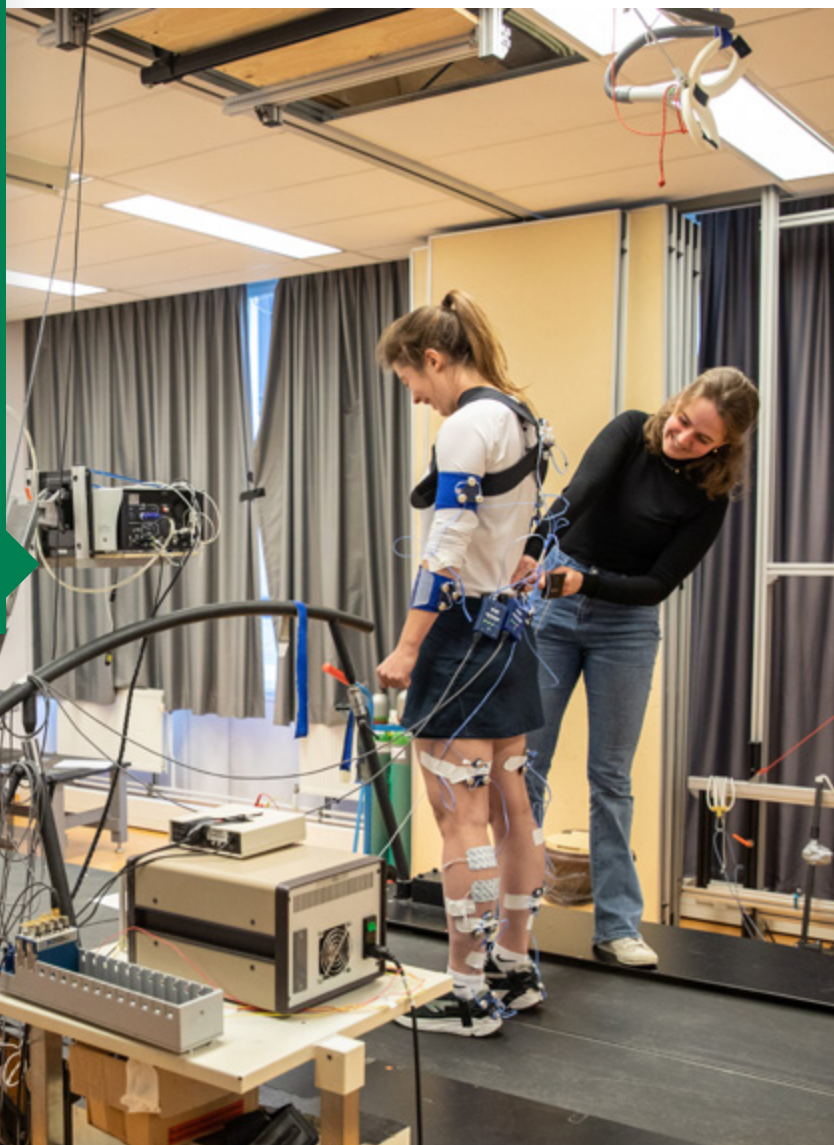
By 2033, academics at VU Amsterdam will be advancing in a way that suits their talents and our shared aim to contribute to a better world. VU Amsterdam offers academics a range of career paths and recognises and values their talents at individual and team levels.

Talent in teams is the basis on which we aim to achieve our ambitions. We seek to attract ambitious, societally committed academics and work together in teams on fundamental and pressing issues. An open attitude, public safety, diversity, transparency, and integrity are fundamental to the VU research culture. We listen to one another and

believe that other perspectives are enriching. Scientists with a *broader mind*, driven by curiosity, feel at home at VU Amsterdam – they follow their passion and develop their talents. When assessing academics, the emphasis is on quality, collaboration, and academic leadership. We work together based on equality, common ground, and fairness. With our broad range of research and study programmes, we encourage an open, reflective attitude among our academics and staff. We enhance diversity and inclusion, and with that *Team Science*, in our academic community. The campus and facilities create an inspiring environment for conducting research, and the graduate schools offer excellent education and support for PhD students.

A Broader Mind

Having a *broader mind* means having an open attitude. We are conscious of our own personalities, values, motivations, and conceptual frameworks while being open to those of others. We combine in-depth substantive knowledge with a broad inter- and transdisciplinary outlook and skills. We do so critically, from various perspectives, and across borders. We are committed professionals who appreciate one another's differences, putting them to good use and working towards a better world based on knowledge and expertise, today, tomorrow, and for future generations. This attitude is typical of VU Amsterdam and is reflected in personal development, academic broadening and societal orientation. Based on the *broader mind* concept, we are encouraging our academics to examine society, their area of expertise, and what their role is.



Q Freedom for curiosity-driven research

Spinoza prize winner Toby Kiers has been a Professor of Evolutionary Biology at VU Amsterdam since 2014. Together with biophysicists at the AMOLF Institute, Kiers is building a robot capable of imaging fungal networks for detailed study. This robot can be used going forward to track complex flows of nutrients within a network and understand the role of fungi in regulating carbon in the soil.

Kiers' research is mainly driven by curiosity. Thinking outside the box led to the creation of the *Society for the Protection of Underground Networks* (SPUN), an initiative through which Kiers is mapping fungal communities across the globe. Kiers integrates her research knowledge and theories from other disciplines, such as economics, robotics, and physics, and has the freedom to explore the big questions. That is at the heart of her success.



We recognise and value teaching, research, and knowledge utilisation as equivalent core tasks.

- We give these tasks (a) equal visibility through balanced communication on teaching, research, and knowledge utilisation; (b) equal attention in the planning and control cycle, the administrative and consultative meetings and annual staff appraisals and promotions; and (c) comparable administrative, policy and operational support for each of the core tasks.
- We explore whether the internal financial allocation model for teaching, research, and knowledge utilisation can be brought in line with the Recognition and Reward initiative and develop incentives for inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration and impact.

We give our academics the room to develop.

- We conduct a pilot study with our Science in Dialogue training programmes for a *broader mind*.
- We develop a learning path for successful grant applications and expand the impact in line with the various stages of an academic career (like the university teaching qualification/senior teaching qualification).
- We provide room for fundamental research by guaranteeing that, per faculty, at least 30% of time spent on research is financed from direct research funding, and we develop and implement guarantees for talented academics and their further development.

Objectives and activities for the 2024 to 2025 period

We have implemented the Recognition and Reward policy to recognise and value talent at an individual and team level.

- We use our Recognition and Reward policy to (a) attract, develop and forge bonds with talented academics; (b) diversify our career paths and make them dynamic with emphases either on teaching, research, or knowledge utilisation; (c) do justice to the independence and individual qualities of academics as well as team performance; (d) focus on the scientific quality and social relevance of research and less on quantitative metrics (i.e., publications published); (e) recognise and value inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration; (f) promote Open Science; and (g) promote academic leadership.

2.2 II: Dynamic networks

By 2033, VU Amsterdam will be a leader in inter- and transdisciplinary research in dynamic networks, Team Science, and co-creation with societal partners. VU Amsterdam is taking the initiative in forming national and international strategic consortia. We combine expertise from within and beyond the academy to achieve breakthroughs in scientific issues and societal transitions using new knowledge.

VU Amsterdam is a pioneer of inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration in research: we were one of the first universities in the country to organise research in interfaculty research institutes. VU Amsterdam also created academic collaborative centres early on to engender collaboration with our broader society. VU Amsterdam has everything it needs to look at the key scientific and societal issues from all angles. At VU Amsterdam, we have the Academic Centre for Dentistry Amsterdam and Amsterdam University Medical Centre on our campus, we have an alliance with the University of Twente, and we work with many other partners in regional, national, and international collaborations, such as in the Aurora network. We believe in the power of collaboration between disciplines and between science and practice. This

junction is where fundamentally new and relevant insights emerge and where we identify challenges and arrive at the right questions. The interplay between fundamental and applied research is essential; they reinforce and rely on each other. That is why we systematically make room for ground breaking and curiosity-driven research, funded from direct funding for research, sector plans, and starter and incentive grants to mention a few. We stand for academic freedom and freedom of expression and ensure that the knowledge from our research is utilised and geared for use in society. Our research is the basis for transferring, sharing, and testing knowledge when educating professionals in and outside academia.

Inter- and transdisciplinary research

We define interdisciplinary research as research in which academics collaborate with colleagues from other fields of science (humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, and medicine) and combine and integrate research methods, theories, theoretical science traditions, procedures and data into new knowledge, insights, and solutions. Scientists also collaborate across disciplines in transdisciplinary research with social partners and professionals, such as healthcare professionals, artists, policymakers, curators, social workers, technicians, and the general public. Together, we analyse and comprehend problems and integrate insights into new methods, concepts, tools, or theories. Inter- and transdisciplinary research often go hand in hand. Basic monodisciplinary research is the basis for both kinds of research.



Caring for the future of humanity and the planet is becoming more and more complex and multifaceted. This complexity calls for inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration. That is why we are steering the transformation towards *dynamic networks* in which academics from various fields of science collaborate with partners from within and beyond the academy. We link these networks to regional, national, and international agendas. Using these networks, we create flexible strategic consortia and help them attract external funding with training, strategic advice, and guidance at all stages in order to achieve scientific breakthroughs and address the big societal questions. In the years ahead, we will also use the interfaculty institutes and our interdisciplinary profile themes to reinforce that transformation.

Profile themes

All scientific domains at VU Amsterdam are involved in the quest for solutions to societal issues. VU Amsterdam connects academics from various disciplines in four profile themes that concern these societal issues:



Human Health & Life Sciences examines people's health and well-being and seeks answers on how to deal with the growing pressure on our healthcare system.



Governance for Society studies the organisation and governance of organisations and societies.



Science for Sustainability envisages an acceleration of the transition to a sustainable society in which people, the environment and the economy can flourish.



Connected World explores the role of technology in our daily lives, what connects us to each other, and how we can use digitalisation to get to know our past and each other better.

We use the knowledge and experience obtained in the profile themes to transform into dynamic research networks.

Dynamic networks in research

Dynamic networks in research are networks in which academics from various scientific fields and disciplines collaborate with partners from both within and beyond the academy, such as colleagues from other higher education institutions, policymakers from government authorities, companies, civil society organisations, the general public, and professionals practising in the field. We have broad experience in this thanks to our interfaculty research institutes, academic collaborative centres, and close cooperation with the University of Twente.

This collaboration is dynamic. Scientists collaborate in teams of various shapes and structures. How they do so varies depending on the theme, programme, research question or type of project. This involves creating and sharing knowledge, solving problems, and innovating. The networks and consortia evolve into a dynamic whole:

they vary in size and composition, density, and intensity in the interaction between them and in terms of their form. These dynamics are like the network dynamics in the brain. For every new action, question, or movement, the brain seeks new functional connections, and brain areas work together in varying degrees and intensities. The interactions are all but static and dynamically adapt to maximise the information flow.

A prime example of an open dynamic network is the VU Amsterdam Network for Science in Dialogue. The purpose of this interdisciplinary network is to create an open culture on campus where scientific research is both fundamental and responsive. Research accounts for societal values and needs, and academics are constantly learning about their own role in society.



Learning and convergence spaces

Learning and convergence spaces are physical meeting places for inter- and transdisciplinary research collaboration for academics from different disciplines and students and partners from within and beyond the academy. These spaces have facilities for exchanging ideas and knowledge and collaborating and experimenting. They focus on a specific societal issue or technology to accelerate the development of breakthroughs, solutions, and innovations. VU Amsterdam is facilitating the exchange and creation of new knowledge by making these spaces available. Alongside collaboration, reflecting on collaboration itself is also an important aspect of these spaces. Through them, we learn how to improve collaboration and use spaces created for this purpose.

Objectives and activities for the 2024 to 2025 period

We strengthen inter- and transdisciplinary research and inter-disciplinary mobility.

- We enhance inter- and transdisciplinarity using research funding, for instance, by encouraging faculties to use top-up grants (for holders of starter grants) for interdisciplinary research and remove impediments to collaboration.
- We facilitate the interdisciplinary mobility of academics and support staff, both internally, between departments and faculties, and externally, through sabbaticals, and by attracting international talent through the University Research Fellow programme.
- We conduct a pilot with a thematic learning and convergence space on the theme of sustainability as a physical meeting place with the DemonstratorLab to facilitate inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration with students and partners from within and beyond the academy.

We transform interdisciplinary research institutes into open, dynamic networks.

- At the faculties and institutes, we identify what is needed to transition to open, dynamic networks, like deploying knowledge brokers, for instance. We will monitor this transformation to find out what is necessary going forward.

We bolster decentralised and centralised support for inter- and transdisciplinary collaborations in teams, networks, and national and international strategic consortia.

- We give strategic advice, guidance, and support at all stages for applications for the second, third, and fourth flows of funds with VU knowledge brokers, legal experts, project managers and business and impact developers. We will test the approach by designating targeted support (probably at Human Health & Life Sciences) during a pilot project. We will then scale up.
- We continue our engagement with policymakers and funders on the importance of fundamental 'curiosity-driven' research as the foundation for inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration.
- We expressly link our research and profile themes to regional, national, European, and other international strategic agendas and programmes (e.g., the National Growth Fund, Gravity, National Science Agenda, National Roadmap for Large-Scale Scientific Facilities, Horizon Europe and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology). We build consortia with targeted support to identify opportunities to attract external funding. The profile themes will be evaluated in 2025.

2.3 III: Research support

By 2033, VU Amsterdam will be providing an inspiring academic campus environment with excellent research support and facilities. We will be conducting research into sustainability issues, and our aim is to conduct our research sustainably.

Solid research funding is required to conduct research into fundamental and topical areas and hold on to our position at the forefront of scientific research. We advocate for a sound financial basis from stakeholders, research funders, and government authorities (ministries in The Hague, the European Commission, and regional and local authorities). We support academics at central and faculty levels when applying for external funding and acquiring assignments outside the university. Excellent research facilities are crucial to high-standard research. Independently or in collaboration with others, at VU Amsterdam, we invest in specific research facilities that reflect our scientific and societal mission. The VU Amsterdam Consultative Meeting for Research and its working group advise on this. VU Amsterdam works toward ensuring that internal and external organisations use these resources efficiently and intensively. Our departments and faculties ensure that the basics are in place for excellent support for academics at all stages of their research, from exploring ideas to sharing and archiving results. Preferably, that support is arranged personally and close to academics. We have organised networks in which departments connect with faculty support staff. We offer a broad spectrum of support with personal advice, training, and technical tools.

Objectives and activities for the 2024 to 2025 period

We ensure that the level of research support is adequate.

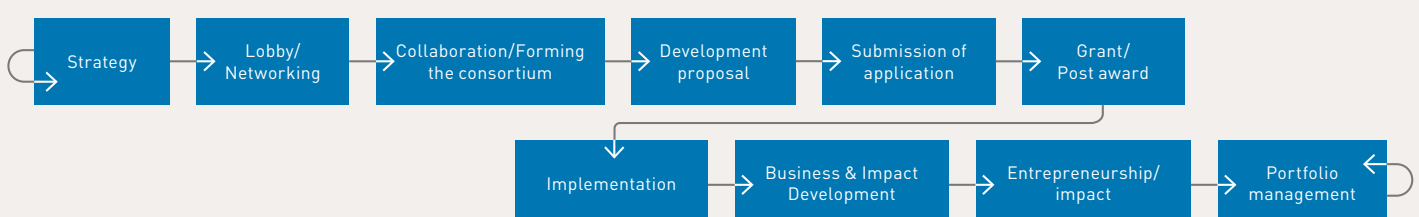
- We simplify processes and procedures and provide support for reporting tasks and administrative work and, by doing so, lighten academics' workload. When implementing this research strategy and in future projects and innovations, we design the support to ease the administrative burden for academics.

- We make the way we conduct research more sustainable, for example, by tightening and enforcing the business travel policy, with more sustainable procurement of research and promotional materials, and by reducing the amount of energy used by research equipment.

We strengthen the chain of research support to unburden academics.

- We develop a VU Research & Impact Support Portal (RISP) where all available support for academics (at faculty and central levels) will be provided in a clear and accessible way, guided by the academics' requirements and the demand for easy navigation.
- We support the entire chain of applications for research funding and project management and ensure that this support is set up as close to academics as possible. Decentralised funding officers advise prospective applicants and guide them in the faculties and departments in close collaboration with centralised grant consultants. Grant consultants give targeted advice on which programmes are and which are not appropriate.

Support for research funding chain: from strategy to impact



2.4 IV: Transparency and reputation

In 2033, VU Amsterdam is known at home and abroad as a university where academics are creating a better world based on an open and reflective attitude - in line with the unique history and identity of VU Amsterdam.

VU Amsterdam addresses challenging scientific and societal issues from various perspectives. Transparency, reusability, collaboration, and equal opportunities are important in this aim, not only at VU Amsterdam but also in national and international collaborations with our partners. At VU Amsterdam, we conduct research transparently and securely. Publications are openly available, and research data is FAIR (*Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable*) whenever possible. We offer our academics the facilities, training, and support to consciously work according to FAIR principles while safeguarding privacy, intellectual property, and knowledge security. We are open about what, how, and with whom we conduct research vis-à-vis other researchers and with students, social partners, and wider society. At VU Amsterdam, the spotlight is on academic integrity in the broadest sense. Our integrity furthers scientific progress and ensures that people continue to trust science. We strengthen and connect communities about Research Data Management, Open Science, academic integrity, science in dialogue and knowledge security so that academics and support staff inspire and learn from each other. We use academic communication to raise our profile, enhance our reputation and boost the visibility of our research. Collaboration of academics, citizens, and other partners in academic collaborative centres, field labs, and research and impact labs enables groundbreaking research and increases value creation from academic knowledge.

Objectives and activities for the 2024 to 2025 period

We put the principles of Open Science into practice and invest in open infrastructures.

- We develop and implement discipline-specific training courses for academic and support staff and students to guide them when implementing Open Science practices in their work.
- We explore how the Research Data Management, Open Science and academic integrity networks can connect to promote collaboration and learning.
- We expand open infrastructures and support data management and knowledge security with tools for secure online collaboration, improving storage facilities and setting up an online environment for documenting research projects.

We increase the impact and enhance the reputation of our research.

- Based on VU Amsterdam's 'Reputation & Impact' strategic programme, we are developing a distinctive VU narrative and corporate communication strategy to increase the impact and enhance the reputation of our research.
- We strengthen our representation in advisory boards and decisionmaking bodies for policy and other objectives in the Netherlands and Europe in terms of societal issues, research, and innovation to expand the impact of our research.

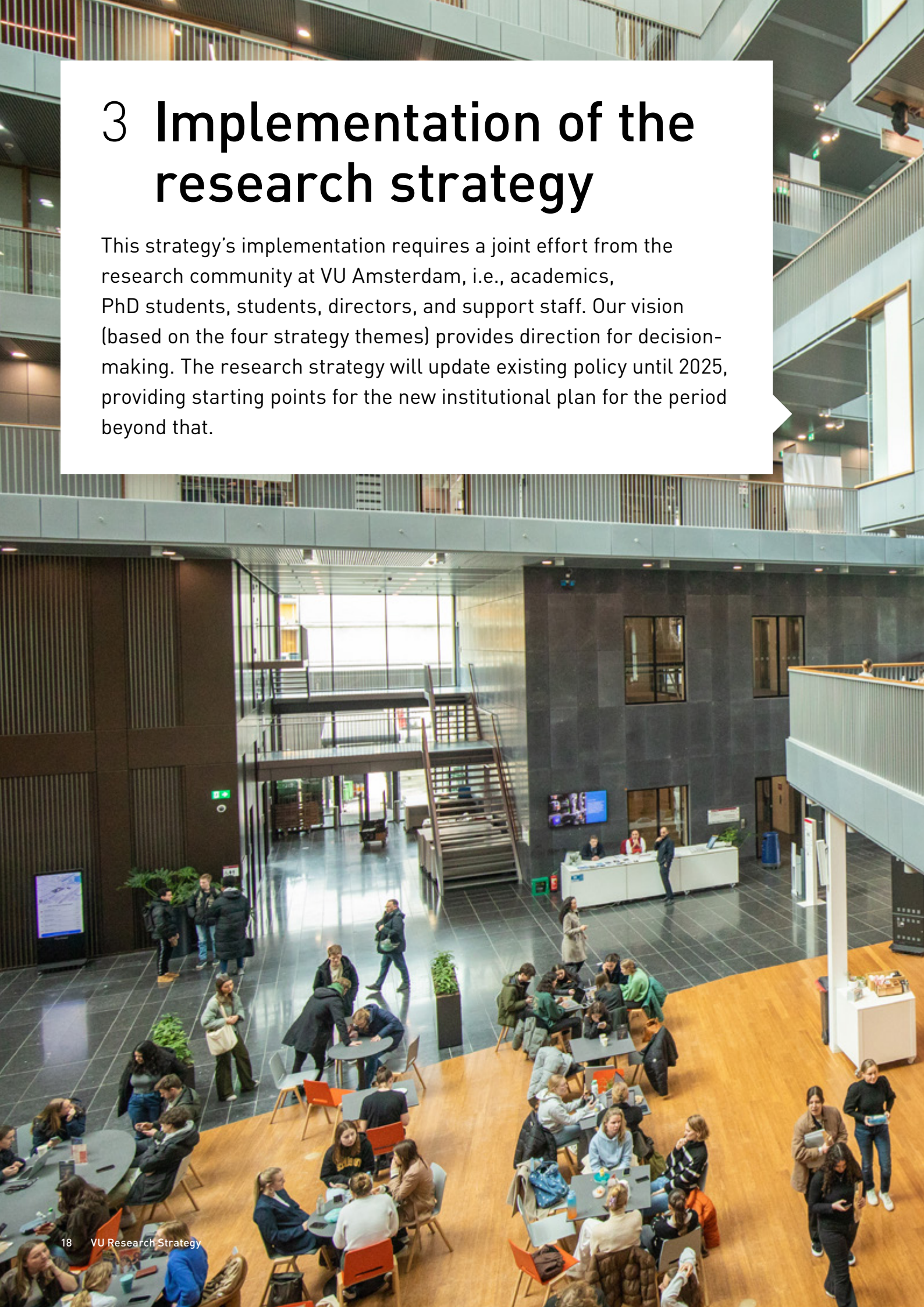
We improve academic communication and strengthen the dialogue between science and society and among academics.

- We employ science communication to encourage dialogue and the open circulation of knowledge and use this dialogue to make our research more responsive. For this, we are launching a pilot study with a series of dialogue meetings with academics and the public on climate change and how citizens can contribute meaningfully to VU research and how VU research can contribute to public initiatives.



3 Implementation of the research strategy

This strategy's implementation requires a joint effort from the research community at VU Amsterdam, i.e., academics, PhD students, students, directors, and support staff. Our vision (based on the four strategy themes) provides direction for decision-making. The research strategy will update existing policy until 2025, providing starting points for the new institutional plan for the period beyond that.





3.1 Coordinating the implementation

We apply an adaptive approach to the implementation of VU Amsterdam's research strategy. We monitor how existing and new activities contribute to the objectives and fine-tune subsequent activities and priorities accordingly. Depending on the progress and priorities in the new institutional plan, we will determine at what point we will hold another mid-term review.

To implement the strategy, the Executive Board is setting up a working group made up of portfolio holders for research. This working group will manage the implementation, monitor the strategy's progress, and periodically put forward proposals to the Executive Board for further development and future priorities, including the use of available financial resources. The working group will involve members of our research community, including representatives, when making decisions and implementing this strategy. VU Amsterdam Consultative Meeting for Research with the portfolio holders for research advise the Executive Board on interim proposals put forward by the working group. VU Amsterdam's Administrative Consultation (Inter-Board Consultative Platform, VUIBCP) is periodically kept abreast of progress and asked to advise the Executive Board on formal updates of the research strategy.

The activities that, based on this strategy, a faculty or department is tasked with become part of the normal planning

and control cycle. The faculties and departments integrate the ambitions and priorities set out in the research strategy into their multi-annual plans. In these plans, they outline how they will contribute to achieving long-term ambitions and short-term priorities. The multi-annual plans are ratified based on agreements with the Executive Board. Progress is monitored along the annual plans and reports in periodic VU Research Strategy working group meetings.

3.2 Resources

When implementing this strategy over the next two years, the emphasis will be on achieving the ambitions from the 2020-2025 VU Strategy in conjunction with other programmes and initiatives already being implemented. They are being financed from funds already allocated and the resources available for this purpose. In the process, we will take into account the changing circumstances that may restrict the financial leeway. For this, we will be making pertinent decisions concerning our priorities.

In mid-2025, we will review the extent to which the current instruments and deployment of available resources are adequate, whether they require adjustments or must be terminated. From an administrative perspective, VU Amsterdam remains committed to a more balanced distribution of resources among higher education institutions and education types and a better financial balance between the core tasks of education, research, and knowledge utilisation.



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