

VU Education Awards

2025-2026

Jury report



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Jury composition

The VU Education Awards are judged by a jury that consists of various subcommittees. Each of these committees bears partial responsibility for judging the various awards.

The subcommittees are led by a single jury chair. Prof. dr. Sandjai Bhulai has been the jury chair since 2023. The judging process is coordinated by the department of Student and Educational Affairs, and supported by secretaries Kristel Struiksmā (Educational Policy and Advice), and Amrita Das and Syreen Arens (Centre for Teaching and Learning).

Below is an overview of the various committees for 2025-2026 and the awards for which they are responsible for judging.

Academic Committee

The Academic Committee is responsible for the entire judging process for the Student Talent Award (both compiling the shortlist and conducting the interviews) and the first step in the judging process for the Master's Thesis Award (only compiling the shortlist). The Academic Committee consists of the following members:

Name	Faculty or School	Position
Sandjai Bhulai (chair)	Science	Professor of Business Analytics
Mariët van Buuren	Behavioural and Movement Sciences	Assistant Professor of Clinical and Developmental Psychopathology
Sharda Nandram	Religion and Theology	Professor of Hindu Spirituality and Society
Remco Zwinkels	Business and Economics	Professor of International Finance
Etienne Verheijck	Dentistry	Director of Education, Faculty of Dentistry
Sofia Zampedri	Law	Winner of the Student Talent Award 2024-25
Anne Bruggink	Behavioural and Movement Sciences	Chair of the University Student Council

Master's Thesis Award Reading Committee

The Master's Thesis Award Reading Committee is responsible for the second and final step in the judging process for the Master's Thesis Award. The Reading Committee thoroughly reads the master's theses of the shortlisted candidates for the Master's Thesis Award, assesses them, and selects a final winner. The Reading Committee consists of the following members:

Name	Faculty or School	Position
Sandjai Bhulai (chair)	Science	Professor of Business Analytics
Bram Groothoff	Law	Lecturer-researcher in Criminal Law

Freek Colombijn	Social Sciences	Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology
Inge van Wijk	Medicine	Associate Professor of Paediatrics

Education Impact jury

The Education Impact jury is responsible for the entire judging process for the Education Impact Award (both compiling the shortlist and conducting the interviews). The Education Impact jury consists of the following members:

Name	Faculty / Department	Position
Sandjai Bhulai (chair)	Science	Professor of Business Analytics
Janneke Waelen	Student and Educational Affairs	Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (VU)
Jantien Stuifbergen	Law	Director of Education, Faculty of Law, winner of the Education Innovation Award 2021-2022
Mariska Min-Leliveld	University of Amsterdam	Director of the Teaching and Learning Centre (University of Amsterdam)
Yvette Taminiau	Social Sciences	Associate Professor of Organisational Sciences, winner of the Van der Duijn Schouten Education Award 2022-2023
Geertje Tijsma	Science	Researcher at VU Athena Institute

Master's Thesis Award

The VU Master's Thesis Award is presented annually to the master's student who best demonstrates the (potential) social impact of their thesis research. The Master's Thesis Award is awarded on the basis of a two-stage assessment. In the first stage, the Academic Committee selects the three best master's theses based on their social impact. In the second stage, the Master's Thesis Award Reading Committee selects the best master's thesis from these top three.

The winner of the Master's Thesis Award receives €2,000 and is linked by Alumni Relations to a VU alumnus who is of interest to him or her.

Conditions

- Theses that conclude a (research) Master's programme at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam are eligible.
- The theses are nominated by the faculty board; students cannot nominate their own theses. It is up to the faculty board to decide how to select these theses, for example on the basis of the numerical assessment of the thesis.
- The nominated theses must be accompanied by a social impact summary written by the student in Dutch or English.
- A thesis written by several students is also eligible for the award. Any prize money awarded will be divided. It is advantageous if the group of students is diverse in composition.
- Co-productions by students and staff are not eligible.
- Only final theses from the academic year 2024-2025 are eligible.
- **The grade awarded to the Master's thesis is not a criterion.**

Criteria

The Academic Committee assesses the submissions on the basis of the social impact summary. This summary encourages students to explain to a lay audience why their thesis contributes to society.

- The social impact summary can be divided into the following sub-criteria:
 - > What makes the thesis relevant to the field and society?
 - > How does the thesis contribute to the VU values of 'open, personal and responsible'?
 - > What recommendations would you give to society based on your thesis?
 - > How has the thesis contributed to your own learning curve?

The Master's Thesis Award Reading Committee assesses the submissions based on the following criteria:

- Scientific quality and originality, with the following subcriteria:
 - > Internal logic of the text;
 - > Originality;
 - > Readability;

- Relevance to the field and society.

Nominees

This year, the faculties nominated a total of 10 students for the VU Master's Thesis Award.

- **Anna Schaminée (Dentistry)**
Thesis title: *The influence of physical activity on temporomandibular disorders.*
- **Roy Pontman (Science)**
Thesis title: *The Development of an Impact-based Flood Forecasting System based on Ensemble Precipitation Forecasts: A case study of the Geul Catchment.*
- **Thijs Raymakers (Science)**
Thesis title: *L1TF Reloaded: Breaching Virtual Machine Isolation with Half-Spectre Gadgets.*
- **Isabel Glaser (Behavioural and Movement Sciences)**
Thesis title: *“Let it out” or “Keep it in”? The Influence of Attachment Style on Partner-Focused Emotion Regulation in Romantic Relationships.*
- **Nariman Metwally (Medicine)**
Thesis title: *Bronchodilator Response in Childhood Moderate-to-Severe Asthma: A Non-Invasive Biomarker for Clinical and Inflammatory Phenotyping.*
- **Anne van Leeuwen (Law)**
Thesis title: *Between Norm and Value. A critical consideration of the amendment to Article 137c of the Criminal Code in light of the concept of legal interests.*
- **Isa Kors (Business and Economics)**
Thesis title: *Sensemaking of electronic health record interoperability.*
- **Tymen Bakker (Business and Economics)**
Thesis title: *Environmental Data Meets Wall Street: The Power of Trucost Intensity Metrics for Sustainable Investing.*
- **Nikki Apeldoorn (Religion and Theology)**
Thesis title: *The Incarnation as a “Queer Heresy” in the Socio-Ecological Crisis.*
- **Liza Pol (Social Sciences)**
Thesis title: *The Somatechnics of Contraception: How Bodily Experiences and Digital Environments Are Co-Constituted.*

Shortlisted candidates

The jury selected **Roy Pontman, Nariman Metwally and Liza Pol** for the shortlist because of their ability to clearly articulate the (potential) social impact of their thesis research in a very concise manner.

Below is a brief summary of each candidate's thesis and the jury's assessment.

Roy Pontman (Science), with the thesis: *The Development of an Impact-based Flood Forecasting System based on Ensemble Precipitation Forecasts: A case study of the Geul Catchment*.

This is what the Faculty of Science has to say:

"Inspired by the devastating July 2021 floods in the Geul catchment in Limburg, Roy took up the challenge to contribute to more effective early warning systems and developed a new forecast and warning system.

Working within an existing model, he developed a more refined tool that not only predicts the amount of water in a flood event, but also makes a prediction of where a flood will cause damage. Comparing his model to existing tools, Roy's system proved capable of providing a warning three days in advance, with data in highly detailed geographic resolution, which is extremely valuable information for emergency preparedness and responses."

This is what the jury says:

- This thesis was clearly written with great enthusiasm.
- The research is also very accessible to the layman: Roy takes the reader by the hand and explains the various steps and choices he made during his research very clearly. In addition, the discussion provides very clear feedback on the original research questions.
- The research results are very useful at both the local and international levels.
- The explicit practical tips are a strong addition.
- The research has a tangible impact: the Limburg Water Authority wants to integrate Roy's model into its toolkit, and Roy is currently testing the system in southern Brazil, in the context of a World Bank project.

Nariman Metwally (Medicine), with the thesis: *Bronchodilator Response in Childhood Moderate-to-Severe Asthma: A Non-Invasive Biomarker for Clinical and Inflammatory Phenotyping*.

This is what the Faculty of Medicine has to say:

"Nariman explored the use of the bronchodilator response (BDR), a simple, non-invasive lung function test, as a biomarker for asthma phenotyping in children. Her study was the first to demonstrate a link between BDR and inflammatory proteins such as IL-4 and IL-13, suggesting that this routine test could guide personalized treatment strategies and reduce the need for invasive procedures.

The research directly addresses a major societal challenge: improving the management of childhood asthma, a condition with significant personal and economic burden. By translating complex immunological data into practical, patient-friendly insights, Nariman's thesis bridges clinical practice and molecular science and has clear potential to improve quality of life for children and families."

This is what the jury says:

- The thesis addresses an important knowledge gap relevant to moderate-to-severe asthma in children.

- Nariman skilfully positions the contribution of this thesis within the existing academic literature.
- The methods used are rigorous, reproducible and clinically well-founded.
- The research is of high quality and technical excellence and could be published in a medical journal as it stands.

Liza Pol (Social Sciences), with the thesis: *The Somatechnics of Contraception: How Bodily Experiences and Digital Environments Are Co-Constituted*.

This is what the School of Social Sciences has to say:

"Liza has translated the abstract concept of somatechnics into empirical research in an exceptional way, making a valuable contribution to theory formation in this field. Through a combination of interviews and an analysis of TikTok videos, she investigates how digital contraception narratives and bodily experiences influence each other.

The analysis results in clearly defined somatechnologies and offers an innovative perspective on how affective dynamics, rather than misinformation, contribute to uncertainty and reluctance surrounding contraception. (...) Precisely because female sexuality and contraception are still often taboo, highlighting this thesis contributes to breaking that silence."

This is what the jury says:

- A clear research gap is identified (the use of social media as a non-neutral information channel).
- The current social relevance and urgency of the subject are explained excellently.
- The use of the mixed method methodology is innovative, original and skilfully executed.
- The research offers many starting points for follow-up, for example in the areas of policy and education.
- The thesis demonstrates excellent research rigour, as evidenced by the interview guide, hashtags, R script, LLM prompts, ethical approval and data management plan.

Winner: Roy Pontman (Science)

The jury was pleased to see that the theses selected for the shortlist are so different from each other. This reflects the diverse scientific disciplines at VU Amsterdam and is something to be proud of. The jury would like to emphasise that all three are fantastic theses, each excelling in its own way. In order to reach a decision, the jury placed great emphasis on readability and social relevance. In this respect, Roy's thesis stood out. Despite the technical complexity of the subject, Roy's research is exceptionally accessible and easy to follow. Roy's research is also already being implemented in practice and has therefore had the most tangible social impact. For these reasons, the jury has selected Roy Pontman as the winner of the VU Master's Thesis Award 25-26.

Student Talent Award

The VU Student Talent Award was established to recognise students who have made a significant impact on society and/or the VU campus. These students are role models for other students and demonstrate that you can contribute to society in both small and large ways. In doing so, they take on the role of bridge builders and demonstrate their connection to the VU community. When they receive the award, they are affiliated with VU as student ambassadors for one year.

The Student Talent Award is presented on the basis of a two-stage assessment. The Academic Committee selects three students for the shortlist based on nominations from the faculties. The three shortlisted candidates are then invited for an interview with the jury. After the interview round, the jury selects a winner.

The winner of the Student Talent Award receives €2,000 and is linked by Alumni Relations to a VU alumnus who is of interest to him or her.

Conditions

To be eligible for the Student Talent Award, the nominated student must meet the following conditions:

- Final-year Bachelor's or Master's student;
- Enrolled as a full-time VU student;
- No older than thirty years of age*;
- No more than one year of study delay;

*In exceptional cases, the jury will consider nominations of students older than thirty years of age, provided that the faculty provides a well-reasoned argument. See the document with criteria and formats for further explanation of this condition.

Criteria

To be eligible for the Student Talent Award, the nominated student will be assessed on the basis of the following conditions:

- The student makes a special social or cultural contribution;
- The student has organisational talent, administrative talent, creative talent and/or sporting talent;
- The student is innovative, enterprising, intrinsically motivated, resilient and wants to utilise these talents;
- The student possesses qualities that enable them to serve as a role model for (VU) students;
- The student is a bridge builder and is involved with VU.

Nominees

This year, the faculties nominated a total of four candidates for the Student Talent Award.

- Sara Ben Hmido (Medicine)
- Aye Kari Soe (Business and Economics)

- Eline van der Kaaden (Religion and Theology)
- Aidan Miller (Social Sciences)

Finalists

Of the four nominated candidates, three were selected for the shortlist. Below is an overview of their activities and achievements:

Sara Ben Hmido (Medicine)

- Combines a master's degree in Medicine with PhD research into the use of AI in surgery. Connects the perspectives of doctors and researchers with those of patients, ethicists and lawyers in her research.
- Gives lectures on AI and other innovations in healthcare during minor programmes in medicine at bachelor's level and supervises bachelor's and master's students in writing their theses.
- Was a member of the Amsterdam Honours Council (VU & UvA) for a year.
- As a member of the National Youth Council, represents the youth perspective on healthcare and education and advises policymakers.
- Mentor and tutor, particularly for first-generation students with a migrant background.
- Provides masterclasses for healthcare professionals on AI in healthcare.
- Gives guest lectures at the Université Hassan II de Casablanca in Morocco and advises on teaching materials and curriculum development.

Aye Kari Soe (Business and Economics)

- Pursues a Master's degree in Business Administration, specialising in Management Consulting.
- Founder of SoeConsultancy, a consultancy firm focused on issues surrounding geopolitics, human rights and corporate supply chains.
- Founder and chair of Fembitious, an NGO focused on promoting financial literacy among women.
- Founder and chair of WorldWide Burmese Students, an NGO focused on leadership, sustainability and democracy in Myanmar.
- Appointed as the first SDG Voice of the Netherlands (2019-2023) and promoted the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals at the national level in that role.
- Involved in The Angel Initiative, a collective that aims to educate more women and encourage them to invest in start-ups with female founders, as well as making financing more accessible to this group.
- Was a member of the World Innovation Alliance's Human Rights Committee for three years and, in that role, contributed to global initiatives to promote human rights and innovation.

Eline van der Kaaden (Religion and Theology)

- Is pursuing a three-year master's degree in Theology and Religious Studies at the Mennonite Seminary.
- Coordinator of the Bridging Gaps programme, an *exposure* programme at VU that introduces theology students from the Global South to theology practice and churches in the Netherlands. Acts as a linking pin between various social partners (charities and aid organisations, religious and academic institutions from different backgrounds).
- Supports the Amsterdam Centre for Religion, Peace and Justice Studies and the Master's programme in Peace, Trauma and Religion as a student assistant.
- Board member of Kairos-Sabeel Netherlands, a non-profit organisation that supports Palestinians and Palestinian Christians who want to contribute to the establishment of a just peace between Israel and Palestine through non-violent means.
- Gives public lectures at VU and in Amsterdam on current social issues, such as migration, peacebuilding, polarisation, science and activism.
- Nominated last year for the title of Young Theologian of the Netherlands.

Winner: Sara Ben Hmido (Medicine)

The jury is delighted to note that this year it once again had a choice of three fantastic shortlisted candidates.

The files of Eline, Aye Kari and Sara show that all three excel in various criteria. Sara is clearly a role model. Her file shows a strong focus on academic excellence, a passion for healthcare, research and education, and a drive to give back to students and young people who are still finding their way in the academic world. Aye Kari is entrepreneurial and groundbreaking. Her file shows a unique combination of a highly *business-minded* spirit on the one hand and political and social activism on the other. Her desire to empower women and her involvement in the political situation in her home country of Myanmar are a common thread throughout. Eline is a true bridge builder. Her dossier combines meaning, connection and solidarity with political and social activism, and her religious beliefs and sense of justice are driving factors.

It is important to note that, due to personal circumstances, Eline was unfortunately unable to attend the interview rounds. For this reason, the jury ultimately had to exclude her from the final deliberations. The jury therefore had to choose between Sara and Aye Kari.

As the two candidates were evenly matched, the jury gave considerable weight to the criterion of involvement with VU. After reading the dossiers and conducting the interviews, the jury concluded that the choice was between an *inside-out* approach with Sara or an *outside-in* approach with Aye Kari. Aye's file shows an internationally oriented view of the outside world, while Sara's feels more grounded in the VU community. The jury therefore believes that Sara will be able to fulfil the role of student ambassador for VU in a natural way. For this reason, the jury has selected Sara Ben Hmido as the winner of the VU Student Talent Award 2025-2026.

Education Impact Award

The VU Education Impact Award is intended for (interdisciplinary or trans faculty) teaching teams that develop an innovative project with demonstrable impact on teaching practice at VU. Projects that translate the VU educational vision into concrete improvements in students' learning may also be eligible for recognition under the VU Education Innovation Award. The collaboration context is intentionally open, so teaching teams are encouraged to involve support staff, students, and relevant societal partners where this strengthens both innovation and impact. The jury will select two winning teams.

Selection procedure

The award is granted through a two stage assessment process. First, the Academic Committee selects four teaching teams for a shortlist based on faculty nominations. The four shortlisted teams are then invited to an interview round with the jury. Following these interviews, the jury designates two winning teams.

Award and support

Each winning team receives €15,000. The Centre for Teaching and Learning also provides the two winning teams with free support to help scale up their projects.

Criteria

1. **Vision and rationale:** The project plan is well substantiated, convincing, and strengthens the VU educational vision.
2. **Student learning impact:** The initiative delivers a clear and demonstrable improvement in the student learning process.
3. **Dissemination and scalability:** There is a concrete, feasible plan to share insights, experiences, and results within and or beyond the faculty.
4. **Team diversity:** The teaching team has a diverse composition.
5. **Strategic alignment:** The initiative convincingly aligns with one or more VU themes (sustainability, diversity and inclusion, transformative learning, learning with new technology), and makes this clearly visible in both approach and implementation.

Conditions

To be eligible for the Education Impact Award, the project must meet at least the following conditions:

- **Use of prize funds:** The prize money must be used in full to realise the project, including impact focused dissemination. After completion, the team must submit an account of the project's implementation and outcomes for approval by the Rector.
- **Presentations and reach:** Winning teams commit to delivering at least three presentations to a broad audience, for example during VU Education Day and other education related events such as KnowVU meetings, the Educational Leadership Course (LOL/ELC), Senior Teaching Qualification (STQ), or faculty education days.

- **Public visibility of impact:** Winning teams are required to publish the project's progress, evidence of impact, and key learnings on a public website, with a minimum of 10 blog posts over the course of the project.
- **Workshop and reporting:** Winning teams are required to organise one public workshop halfway through the project (and within a maximum of two years from the project start), and to submit a final report (in Dutch and in English) that makes the innovation, implementation, and impact accessible to a broad audience.
- **Recommended publication:** Teams are encouraged to publish their work in a teaching and learning journal, such as the Journal of Higher Education.

Nominations and shortlisted candidates

This year, the Education Impact Award received a record number of eight applications, reflecting strong interest and stiff competition across a wide array of topics and approaches to educational improvement. Following the first stage of review, four teams were selected for the shortlist, recognising the quality, ambition, and potential impact of their projects, and advancing them to the next stage of the selection process.

Shortlist

In reviewing this year's submissions, the jury shortlisted four teams whose initiatives combine pedagogical innovation with clear educational impact, and with credible pathways for uptake beyond their immediate teaching context.

Anne Marie Slotboom and Elanie Rodermond (Faculty of Law) were shortlisted for *Inside Out, Closed doors, broader minds*, a powerful model of transformative learning in which VU students and incarcerated students learn as equal peers in a prison based learning environment. The jury valued the programme's sustained track record (beyond a one off pilot), its deep alignment with the VU ambition of developing a Broader Mind, and its strong potential to generate evidence informed insights on inclusion, dialogue, and societal engagement in higher education.

Denise van Diermen and Marije Petersen (ACTA) were shortlisted for *DentEmergencyVR*, a virtual reality learning design that trains dental students to recognise and manage acute medical emergencies in realistic, high pressure scenarios. The jury considered the initiative compelling because it targets a safety critical competence that is difficult to practise authentically in everyday education, while also embedding structured feedback and reflection to translate simulation into clinical readiness and confidence.

Natalia Silvis Cividjian, Joshua Kenyon, and Elias Groot (Faculty of Science) were shortlisted for the *Autonomous Systems Engineering (ASE) Lab*, a multidisciplinary educational playground that enables students to make technical knowledge tangible through small scale autonomous systems, while explicitly engaging with societal, ethical, and sustainability questions. The jury noted the impressive evidence of reach and adoption within Computer Science education, the strong learning rationale (code made visible through physical systems), and the robust co creation model across staff, engineers, and students.

Mario Torralba and the trans faculty team (Science, SBE, AUC, CTL and colleagues) were shortlisted for *Plato's Garden*, an ambitious nature based pedagogy initiative that repositions nature as an active co educator through embodied, experiential learning practices (for example ecowalks, forest bathing, and art and nature based learning). The jury appreciated the initiative's relevance to contemporary student wellbeing and sustainability challenges, its adaptable design across diverse courses, and its concrete plans for dissemination and impact evaluation through a shared platform and community of practice.

Winners

In its final deliberations, the Jury selected two winning teams whose initiatives most convincingly combine a strong educational rationale with clear, demonstrable potential for impact on student learning, alongside credible prospects for broader uptake. Both projects stood out for the clarity of their pedagogical intent, alignment with the VU educational vision and themes, and their commitment to sharing learning across the university community.

Winner: Closed doors, broader minds, Transformative learning through the Inside Out Prison Exchange Program (Faculty of Law)

The Jury awards this project for its compelling educational vision and well substantiated rationale, paired with a strong proposition for meaningful impact on student learning. The initiative offers a credible pathway to transformative learning outcomes by positioning students in a carefully designed peer learning environment that is both socially grounded and academically rigorous. The Jury particularly valued the societal and transformative dimension of the approach, and its clear alignment with institutional themes.

Winner: Plato's Garden, nature based pedagogy in higher education (Trans faculty team)

The Jury awards this project for its distinctive and innovative pedagogical concept and its promising potential to enhance learning outcomes while strengthening student engagement, including wellbeing. The proposal demonstrates strong institutional fit and timeliness, supported by a diverse team composition that increases the likelihood of broader uptake. The Jury recognised the project's clear ambition to generate impact beyond the immediate classroom and to build a shared practice that can be adopted across contexts.