

# A development path for teachers in higher education

In higher education, teachers play a crucial role in student development. Their passion, skills, and commitment contribute directly to the effectiveness of education. Continuous teacher development is essential in this regard, because what higher education requires of teachers is constantly changing. However, for teachers in research universities and universities of applied sciences, limited training is sufficient to obtain a basic teaching qualification, and such a qualification is generally considered the end point of teacher development. To enable teachers to continue to develop themselves and thus continuously strengthen the quality of education, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam has created a development path for teachers. In this whitepaper, we describe the history of the path, its current form, the associated didactic principles, and our intentions for the future.



LEARNING, CONNECTING,  
CREATING WITHIN  
VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT  
AMSTERDAM



# What is the mandate of higher education?

Higher education has an educational mandate. It bears the responsibility of preparing students for the future. However, this future is continuously evolving due to societal, technological, and scientific developments. The competencies demanded of professionals, leaders, thinkers, and researchers now are different from what will be needed in 10 years. This makes the task facing higher education complex: how do you design education when you don't yet know what it should prepare for? To remain relevant and effective, education will need to constantly innovate and adapt to the changing society.

The educational mandate of education consists of three goals : qualification, socialization, and subjectification of students. Qualification involves acquiring the competencies necessary to participate in the professional field and

society. Socialization involves learning to be part of a larger entity (such as a professional field or society) with its associated norms and values. Subjectification relates to learning to stand freely and responsibly in the world, with the development of the individual at its core.

These three goals show that the educational mandate of higher education goes beyond just imparting knowledge and skills. There is also a societal component: The students of today will become part of and contribute to their professional field and society after graduation. Therefore, it matters how they are socialized, what norms and values they learn, how they think about dilemmas existing in society, and what responsibility they take on. This means that the design of the education also encompasses an ethical issue.

# What does higher education require of a teacher?

To achieve continuous innovation in education, continuous development of teachers is necessary. This ongoing development ensures that they can critically and confidently relate to themselves, their students, education, and society. To guide this continuous development, we formed a vision on teaching in higher education based on the following sources:

- the commonly known teaching frameworks in the Netherlands by Ruth Graham and Esther van Dijk (et al.)<sup>3</sup>;
- the ideas of renowned education experts such as Biesta, Kelchtermans<sup>4</sup>, and Korthagen<sup>5</sup>;
- the national frameworks developed for the University Teaching Qualification<sup>6</sup>, and the basic teaching qualification for universities of applied sciences<sup>7</sup>;
- the professional profiles describing generic and discipline-specific competencies<sup>8</sup>.



<sup>2</sup> Ruth Graham, *Teaching Framework*, <https://www.teachingframework.com/framework/>

<sup>3</sup> van Dijk, E.E., Tartwijk, J. van, Schaaf, M. van der, & Kluijtmans, M. (2020) *What makes an expert university teacher? A systemic review and synthesis of frameworks for teacher expertise in higher education*. *Educational Research Review*, 31, 11 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100365>

<sup>4</sup> Kelchtermans, G. (2013). *Narrative knowing, self-understanding and vulnerability*. In: *Teacher who are you?* By Luc Stevens. Guarantor: Antwerp-Apeldoorn

<sup>5</sup> Korthagen, F. A. J. (2014). Promoting core reflection in teacher education: Deepening professional growth. In: L. Orland-Barak & C. J. Craig (Eds), *International Teacher Education: Promising pedagogies (Part A)* (pp. 73-89). Bingley, UK: Emerald.

<sup>6</sup> VSNU (2018). *Professionalization of lecturers at the university. The UTQ and thereafter* (ast). VSNU: The Hague

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.vereniginghogescholen.nl/vereniging-hogescholen/publicaties/publicaties-gesorteerd-op-verschijningsjaar-1/2013-1/1964-protocol-inzake-wederzijdse-erkenning-basiskwalificatie-didactische-bekwaamheid-1>

<sup>8</sup> a.o. <https://www.beroepsbeeldvoorleeraar.nl/> for professional profile PRIMARY, SECONDARY, MBO and <https://elbd.sites.uu.nl/2024/03/19/beroepsbeeld-beta-docent/> for professional profile beta teacher

# Vision on teaching

Within learning environments in higher education, students, teachers and society come together. This requires acting intuitively, responsibly, tactfully, and at the same time responsibly and effectively. An engaged and knowledgeable teacher challenges students and supports them in their education. Thus, teaching is relational in nature and action is central.

Teaching requires an awareness of the relational nature of education. At the same time, it requires awareness of the relative unpredictability of learning, development and social processes. These (learning) processes are experienced differently, which requires sensitivity to what a student or group of students need. It demands resourcefulness and (pedagogical) tact to deal with them appropriately. In other words, it requires the ability to assess situations and act accordingly.

What makes this even more challenging is that these situations occur within a complex context. What makes the context complex is (1) the increasing superdiversity of the target group and (2) the continuous developments in society, necessitating adjustments to educational content and format. The target group becomes more diverse, among other

reasons, due to the encouragement of lifelong learning, leading to more frequent education provided to alumni and other professionals. Due to societal developments, both the content of the field and the forms of education are changing (such as the increasing possibilities for implementing blended learning).

The described diversity and changes require teachers to have a tolerance for uncertainty and adaptability: being open and observing what is happening, assessing situations, and making choices where the success of a decision cannot be predicted beforehand. In addition to knowledge of their own field, knowledge of scientific insights into student learning and development, innovation and curriculum development, and the continuously changing context are required. Through reflective and learning abilities, teachers critically question





their own beliefs and those of others, and consider their own and others' actions in terms of their intentions and effectiveness.

Finally, our image is that education is teamwork. Together, teachers are responsible for designing, implementing, and evaluating developmental lines and innovative curriculum development. The responsibility for the curriculum as a whole is shared, and colleagues are potential sources of support. Collaboration also occurs outside the team with important partners in education, primarily with societal organizations within the field. The teacher recognizes being part of a larger whole.

In summary, given our vision of teaching, continuous development is necessary to continue to provide high-quality education. Therefore, we have developed various offerings at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam to strengthen teachers in their development. The core of this offering is the development path.



# The development path of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

## Development of the path

How can teachers be prepared for and supported in their development, so that they can effectively contribute to the educational mandate of higher education in a constantly changing society? That is the question that underpinned the development path we created at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam for teachers. With the 4C/ID model of van Merriënboer & Kirschner<sup>9</sup> in mind, we formulated meaningful learning tasks based on our vision on teaching.

*Learning tasks can consist of complex cases, assignments, projects, problems, or professional tasks. Learners prefer to carry out the tasks either in the real task environment or in a simulated environment that is as close as possible to the environment of the profession. The learning tasks present learners with problems that they have to solve in an integrated way: all the skills, knowledge, and attitude aspects necessary for the proper performance of the task in the later profession are addressed in the learning task. We start with relatively simple but realistic situations, in which all essential aspects of the task are incorporated<sup>10</sup>.*

Based on our vision on teaching, we came up with 5 learning tasks:

- Designing education
- Teaching Practice/didactics
- Supervising students/coaching students
- Assessment/testing
- Educational Leadership

During the development of the path, we paused to consider whether professional development and utilizing and/or conducting educational research are separate learning tasks. We chose

to make both an integral components of the other learning tasks, because in the context of teaching they always serve the aforementioned tasks. However, we noted for ourselves to devote enough attention to this in our didactic principles.

Our vision on teaching (including the relational character, working in a complex context, adaptive action, and education being teamwork) is fully integrated in all learning tasks.

<sup>9</sup> van Merriënboer, J. J. G., & Kirschner, P. A. (2007). *Ten steps to complex learning: A systematic approach to four-component instructional design*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

<sup>10</sup> Off: <https://www.bsl.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Uitleg-over-het-4CID-model.pdf>

# Description of the development path

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the development path.



Figure 1. The development path of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

The path begins with a Start-to-Teach day for all new teachers. Following this introduction, the next step is typically the University Teaching Qualification (UTQ), unless teachers have been hired for a limited teaching task—such as mentoring or supervising theses or internships. After obtaining

the UTQ, teachers can further specialize, for example, in the field of assessment, or broaden their knowledge. Teachers determine themselves which “honeycombs” they want to follow. This allows them to choose training sessions that meet their current learning needs.



Designing education	UTQ > Expert Educational Design > STQ > Big Ideas in Curriculum Design
Teaching Practice didactics	UTQ > Mixed Classroom in Practice Training > STQ
Supervising students coaching students	UTQ > Coaching of Students > Supervision for PhD Students
Assessment/testing	UTQ > BKE > SKE
Educational Leadership	UTQ > Building Strong Teams in Education > STQ > Light on Leadership > Educational Leadership Course

example curriculum learning path - specialization

Broadening	UTQ > BKE > Mixed Classroom in Practice > SKO > Curriculum Design
------------	---

example learning path – broadening

When teachers bear responsibilities that transcend subject expertise, such as coordinating a learning trajectory or educational project, they have the opportunity to pursue the Senior Teaching Qualification (STQ). During the STQ, they delve into educational leadership and development at a cross-disciplinary level. Teachers are nominated for this program by their faculty. Generally, there is a minimum of 5 years between a UTQ and STQ trajectory. Even after obtaining the STQ, teachers can further broaden or specialize their skills. The offerings after the STQ are tailored to the roles and responsibilities of a senior teacher. This includes working at the curriculum

level and leading teams. Teachers who are (or will be) responsible for education at the faculty/strategic level can participate in the Educational Leadership Program. A minimum of 10 years of experience is required for this, and teachers are nominated similar to the STQ process. After completing the Educational Leadership Program, teachers can participate in short leadership programs or work on their own cases through individual coaching and other open-format programs. Additionally, Educational Leadership Program alumni have the opportunity to participate in a leadership program at the European level.





# The didactic principles within the path

The target audience of the development path consists of adult professionals who work in an educational context. Adult learning differs from adolescent learning in that the adult student<sup>11 12</sup>:

- has an already established frame of reference
- possesses a professional identity
- experiences different emotions during learning
- combines study with work and/or family

Based on the characteristics of the target audience and our vision on teaching, we developed 4 didactic principles that guide our approach.

- 1 Education is co-creation
- 2 Strength lies in differences
- 3 Teachers are their own instrument
- 4 Education requires taking leadership

## 1 Education is co-creation

Creating good education is a collaborative process. The development of the student is central. Even if a teacher teaches only one subject, they are part of this larger whole. Therefore, providing and designing education requires intensive collaboration. In good education, both teachers and students are involved. Together, they create the learning process, are responsible for the learning environment, and seek ways to make learning as meaningful as possible. In our programs, we exemplify this.

Additionally, working in education requires having tolerance for uncertainty. Teaching takes place in a complex context. Developing tolerance for uncertainty crucially relies on the support of the teacher team (in the workplace or within teacher professional development). This social support can serve as a buffer for the stress that uncertainty may bring. Social support stimulates wellbeing.<sup>13</sup>



<sup>11</sup> Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2015). *The adult learner. The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (8th ed.). London, England: Routledge.

<sup>12</sup> Bolhuis, S. (2001). *Learning and change in adults. A new approach*. Bussum, The Netherlands: Coutinho Publishers.

<sup>13</sup> Granziera, H., Collie, R., & Martin, A. (2020). *Understanding Teacher Wellbeing Through Job Demands-Resources Theory* (pag. 229-244). In: *Cultivating teacher resilience* door C. F. Mansfield.



## 2 *Strength lies in the differences*<sup>14</sup>

To broaden and enrich the perspective on education, exploring other perspectives is necessary. Within our programs, we emphasize the value of diversity within the group. We work with teachers to raise awareness of their own frame of reference and how that frame can color their perception of each other, education, and students. By engaging in dialogue with other perspectives, teachers learn to empathize with others and critically reflect on their own frame of reference.

To facilitate this process optimally, we focus on the learning environment. Only then can teachers learn optimally from different perspectives and build an inclusive learning community. We exemplify how teachers in their own groups can ensure that everyone can learn freely and safely from each other.

## 3 *Teachers are their own instrument*

In teaching, relationships play a central role. There is continuous interaction with (groups of) students, colleagues, the subject matter, and other stakeholders. During these interactions, ideas, norms, and values are exchanged consciously or unconsciously. The beliefs a teacher holds about teaching and their own role therein color these relationships<sup>15</sup>. In these interactions, the teacher is thus their own instrument. By making teachers aware of these processes, we work on developing a “teacher identity”.

This is particularly important because every educational situation is different. What the teacher can rely on is themselves. Their own identity can become a source of resilience<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Mixed Classroom Educational Model developed by Ramdas, Slooman & Oudenhoven – van Zee (2018)

<sup>15</sup> Brok, den P., Tartwijk, J., Opendakker, M-C., & Wubbels, T. (2017). Effectief leraarsgedrag (pag. 17-15). In: *Weten wat werkt. onderwijsonderzoek vertaald voor lerarenopleiders*. Red. Douwe Beijaard. Meppel: Ten Brink Uitgevers.

<sup>16</sup> Ruijters, M. C. P. (red.). (2015). *Je binnenste buiten. Over professionele identiteit in organisaties*. Deventer, Nederland: Vakmedianet.

## 4 Education requires taking leadership

Education requires action and “educational wisdom”; the ability to weigh different courses of action and courage to make a choice<sup>17</sup>. For these considerations, you need sufficient professional knowledge, language, competence, and imagination. Imagination, because there is no one right solution. That is why we focus on increasing the teacher’s problem-solving ability. We focus on the development of personal leadership.

By reflecting on these decision-making processes with other teachers, and learning from each other’s approach and perspective, one’s own repertoire of actions is enlarged. This skill—reflecting on one’s own actions, and discussing them with colleagues—also continues after and between our developmental activities. In this way, we facilitate the “lifelong learning” aspect of teaching. Like any craft, it requires time and practice.

## Application of the didactic principles

We strive to use the VU Mixed Classroom educational model as a basis in every setting. This consciously creates space for understanding one’s own perspective and reflects on what is needed to remain open to other approaches and principles. As part of our Mixed Classroom approach, we choose interactive, activating forms of work as much as possible, stimulating dialogues between teachers.

We work, where possible, in heterogeneous groups in our offerings, allowing teachers to experiment and practice collaborating and communicating with colleagues with different perspectives and approaches. One-on-one conversations between the instructor and the teacher, alongside

plenary meetings, enhance the growth process. Beyond the group context, we connect education professionals and encourage encounters/relationships, enabling teachers to feel free to learn and experiment together.

Teachers always work on meaningful assignments that are applicable in their own teaching practice. Within the programs, teachers are explicitly encouraged to experiment with new behaviors.

By spending extended periods of time with teachers and regularly reflecting on their development, we ensure continuous guidance and attention to growth.

<sup>17</sup> Biesta, G.J.J. (2015). How does a competent teacher become a good teacher? On judgement, wisdom and virtuosity in teaching and teacher education. In R. Heilbronn & L. Foreman Peck (Eds), *Philosophical perspectives on the future of teacher education* (pp.3-22). Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

# Intentions for the future

## A community of practice - building bridges in practice

Within the development path, we currently focus mainly on formal learning through training, peer coaching, and coaching by a trainer. However, we believe that much of the learning takes place in the workplace. Therefore, the quality of guidance in the workplace matters. How can we encourage the improvement of the quality of this guidance? How can we further collaborate to support the development of teachers? We can learn from the concept of "Samen Opleiden" (Collaborative Training), which is applied in the Netherlands within primary education, secondary education, and vocational education. Within "Samen Opleiden", partnerships are formed between schools (in the higher education context: institutions) and teacher educators (in the higher education context: Centers for Teaching and Learning) who work together to enhance the quality of (prospective) teachers.

In these communities of practices, we aim for a combination of workplace learning and more formal teacher professional development. By integrating these two methods, a learning cycle is created characterized by authentic experiences, collective reflection, competency development, and boundary crossing. In this way, we contribute to the quality of education.

**Do you have ideas? Join us!**

