

UCANN

University College Academics Network in the Netherlands

1. What is Liberal Arts Education?

Liberal Arts education derives its name from the Latin *artes liberales*, the knowledge and skills (*artes*) required to become a free (*liber*) person capable of thinking, judging and acting independently. Rooted in Greek and Roman antiquity, liberal arts dominated the Middle Ages in Europe and continued to develop well into the modern world, especially in the United States. In the past two decades, it has returned to Europe and flourished in the Netherlands, in the institutional setting of University Colleges.

Liberal Arts education generally focuses on developing students as persons, authentic human beings and citizens capable of curiosity, critical thought and independent judgment. To this end, it employs intensive and interactive teaching methods in small-scale settings. In most cases, curricula are multi- or interdisciplinary, to prevent a one-sided disciplinary focus and to stimulate a critical and creative attitude to scholarship and science. Hence, the first year usually features a wide-ranging Common Core with courses in history, economics, philosophy, natural sciences, computer science and law, among many others. Students are thus challenged follow their curiosity, and to discover and explore their interests.

The re-emergence of Liberal Arts in Europe corresponds to a growing dissatisfaction with the strong influence of neo-liberalism in education and in society at large. Under this influence, learning and teaching have been narrowed to the efficient and effective transmission of scientifically certified and economically marketable knowledge, skills and competences. By the same token, the organization of education has been subjected to managerial techniques derived from the world of commerce and recast in terms of the mass-production of students as successful producers and consumers.

From the perspective of liberal arts, neo-liberal thinking is based on a questionable view of rationality as primarily, if not exclusively technical and instrumental: generic methods aim at producing decontextualized theoretical knowledge and “practitioner-proof” modes of practice, and focus exclusively on questions of effectiveness and feasibility. While the focus is solely on identifying and tailoring means to ends, driven by increasingly specialized research, the question of ends or values is dismissed as irrelevant or even irrational. By the same token, education as a social interaction between unique individuals viewed as ends in themselves is marginalized, as teaching and learning are reduced to depersonalized teacher- and student-proof procedures in which control and validation are the primary concerns.

Liberal Arts and Sciences education seeks to push back against this impoverished and hazardous conception. Judging from the resounding success of University Colleges in the Netherlands in the past two decades, this motivation is shared by an increasing number of people.

2. What is UCANN?

The University College Academics Network in the Netherlands (UCANN) is a community organization composed of scholars employed at Dutch Liberal Arts and Sciences higher education institutions at the existing University Colleges in the Netherlands. It unites a community of academics to further the mission of liberal arts and sciences education, both externally and internally.

A. External

UCANN represents and advocates the mission of liberal arts and sciences education and research in the Netherlands by informing the wider public, as well as by acting as a primary interlocutor for universities, governments and other educative, societal and political institutions.

B. Internal

UCANN provides information, means of development and support in the fields of *education*, *research* and *administration* to the community of university college academics:

- Information on current developments in liberal arts and sciences education and higher education in general.
- A social network that allows individuals to interact and exchange information.
- A platform that facilitates the exchange of experience, expertise, skills and best practices, and that encourages an open and free discussion on what constitutes Liberal Arts and Sciences education (its nature, its principles, its methods etc...).
- Information on career development, career trajectories (teaching, research or both), coaching and empowerment in the workplace.

By providing such resources and support, UCANN seeks to promote and develop the specific features of Liberal Arts and Sciences education: intensive and interactive teaching, multi- and interdisciplinary research, and the virtuous administration of both.

C. External and Internal

UCANN fosters communication and collaboration with peer communities and organizations outside of the Netherlands.

UCANN organizes an Annual Conference on one or more Liberal Arts and Sciences-related topics. The conference, which is hosted by one of the member University Colleges, aims to bring together university college academics and the broader public.

UCANN also (co-)organizes, hosts and/or supports other events relevant to Liberal Arts and Sciences education, research and administration.