

## GENERAL STRATEGIC PLAN 5

# **CHERISH WHAT IS GOOD, STRENGTHEN WHAT WE MUST**

## 2023–2027

The context in which a university operates is changing rapidly. Demographic changes and migration, developments in science and technology, increasing digitisation, successive crises and global issues demand an agile, and proactive approach and create the need for VUB to position itself clearly for the continued pursuit of our core tasks: education, research and service.

Like the world around us, our university is changing. Therefore, in the coming years, VUB will continue to work on a high-calibre education and student policy and the creation of an optimal, future-proof research environment. All of this is set within a broader research data policy and an Open Science strategy, with a focus on scaling up and efficient process management. The continuously decisive strategy pursued by our university is nonetheless consistently supported by our formal values, mission and vision.

Of particular note during this strategic period is the emphasis placed on fine-tuning our efficient internal organisation. Improving governance and administrative efficiency will be a top priority organisation-wide in the forthcoming policy period. Evolving into a high-performing and agile institution is the starting point for our organisation, with respect to all our customers (students, staff, external parties). In the first instance, achieving this objective entails conducting a debate about our core tasks. This debate distinguishes the processes and activities that are necessary or essential for the performance of our core tasks from those that are not, or are less so. Working with the faculties, we are creating a connection between faculty needs and the university strategy.

#### *Our values: freedom, equality and solidarity*

VUB's education, research and outreach activities are based on a radical humanism. This is reflected in our principles of freedom, equality and solidarity.

- Freedom stands for free enquiry: the rejection of any purely authoritarian argument and safeguarding of free judgment.
- Equality stands for parity and the recognition of diversity.
- Solidarity stands for our involvement in the great societal challenges and our concern for behaving respectfully towards fellow human beings and the world.

#### *Our mission*

VUB is a university in the capital of Europe. It aims to inspire and shape its students, researchers and staff into open-minded citizens of the world. Freedom, equality and solidarity with society are the cornerstones of our university project. VUB encourages self-reflection, an enquiring and critical attitude and an open, creative approach to scientific and social issues. Respect and empathy are at the heart of our interactions with others and the world.

Based on the principle of free enquiry, both our research and our teaching are fundamentally groundbreaking and pioneering. We build bridges between ethics, theory, practical research and professional field. We encourage entrepreneurship, engagement and responsibility. We want to play our part in an inclusive society.

VUB cherishes its free-thinking and humanist roots. We are guided by the motto 'scientia vincere tenebras' – overcome darkness through science – and by the conviction that each and every one of us can make a difference: 'it's up to all of us'.

#### *Our vision*

Every organisation must prepare for a world that could look completely different, faster than we think. It needs to think about how to avoid being overtaken by events. VUB has opted for a humanist, city-centric and twenty-first-century path, meaning an approach that is sustainable, diverse, digital and deliberative.

## **Continuity with new emphases**

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The strategic policy established during Rector Caroline Pauwels' term set a clear, positive note. We will build on this in the coming years. Prompted by Rector Jan Danckaert, VUB has expressly chosen to consolidate its existing achievements and update the policy plans with new emphases. Strengthening our internal organisation is a priority.

The Vrije Universiteit Brussel's fifth General Strategic Plan (GSP 5) is built around five major pillars. Four of these – VUB as a 'learning', 'open', 'connected', 'warm and appreciative' organisation – had already featured in the two previous policy plans. GSP 3 looked forward to 2030. It set the direction and inspired further transformation into a sustainable university. GSP 4, 'The future is a foreign country: they do things differently there', maintained and updated this direction. GSP 5 carries these efforts forward and works towards the creation of the '21st century UNIVERSITAS'.

At the same time, we have added a fifth pillar – VUB as an 'efficient' organisation. This new pillar is aimed at increasing organisational resilience. This is a necessary response to a number of developments in the political, cultural, social and financial environment. VUB's values of freedom, equality and solidarity are key to our vision of education, research, valorisation and internationalisation. The university is

therefore deliberately taking a broadly based, deeply embedded approach across all its faculties and departments.

## VUB as a **learning organisation**

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During the previous policy period, a coherent vision of the education of the future was developed. The 2040 Education Vision outlines the general direction of the education we want to offer and the way we strive to produce unconventional, engaged researchers and global citizens in their professional careers. This vision of education will be widely disseminated throughout the organisation and then implemented and consolidated.

The Flemish government has expressed concerns about academic success in the government agreement with several action points concerning student intake and progression in higher education. As part of its education and student policy, VUB is actively committed to strengthening the study progress policy. VUB's curriculums are constructed in model pathways with a logical and consistent structure in curricular strands, and through better guidance, students are encouraged to optimise the effectiveness of their efforts.

In line with our policy focus on high quality education, we will continue to promote innovation in education and will achieve these objectives by blending relevant teaching/learning methods with technology/infrastructure. To this end, we safeguard and support the quality of education and put the training teams at its heart.

Partly through our participation in the EUTOPIA project, we aim to build a forward-looking education model, strengthening our position as an internationally focused and locally engaged institution. With this in mind, we will also develop a Language Policy 2.0 and continue to work on a sustainable and integrated student welfare policy.

## VUB as an **open organisation**

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*Open Science, Science Communication, Science Outreach and Citizen Science*

True to its values and mission, VUB stands for science that benefits the community: 'science for the public good'. To this end, we are firmly committed to intensifying our efforts around science communication and citizen science. This is also part of our broader open science policy, where open access is now the default strategy for managing and disseminating our research data.

Open science is embedded in the terms of the many international, European and national bodies that fund our research. The roadmaps for open access, open data and metrics for open science need to be finalised and implemented jointly with the faculties, central departments and research groups in order to continue to play a relevant role in them. We do this by promoting our research results so that they filter through to society, where they have a positive impact and put VUB on the map regionally and internationally. To this end, we are stepping up cooperation with businesses and other social players and encourage entrepreneurship among our researchers.

On the research front, VUB aims to deliver quality with strong local roots and broad international recognition. Putting our research at the service of our environment is one of the university's essential tasks. That is why we want to focus firmly on communication. Not just to inform, but also to generate enthusiasm among young people about research and to address local challenges, together with the region. Bringing science closer to citizens and society with clear, attractive and accessible science communication, science outreach and citizen science is one of the university's main tasks. With a particular focus on vulnerable target groups who are less likely to come into spontaneous contact with science or be able to take part in the scientific debate.

## VUB as a **connected organisation**

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Vrije Universiteit Brussel is only socially relevant if there is interaction between the university and the various players in society. Accordingly, we are committed to sustainable regional, national and international partnerships and networks.

VUB wants to be connected to the city, society and the world, delivering our programme together with partners at home and abroad. In the forthcoming policy period, we will determine how to bring our

Urban Engaged positioning to public notice, and how to keep it alive through a rigorous positioning exercise and through clear communication in a wide range of fields: through a press campaign focusing on scientific research, to prospective students with a view to recruitment, and in all our contacts with internal and external stakeholders.

We are taking an internationally oriented approach to institutional policy and rolling it out further, in cooperation with international partners and in coordination with our own departments and faculties. By definition, a sound research culture translates into internationally and regionally embedded research, focusing on quality and structural grounding. Through maximum internationalisation of education, 'Internationalisation at Home' and strategic international partnerships and collaborations with top companies, we deliver future generations of students and researchers who will contribute to a sustainable society, through local, European and global connected communities.

Recognition of top research should also be more prominently featured in our communications. In the forthcoming policy period, extra attention will be paid to communication around our research, with a special focus on our pioneering researchers. This kind of communication goes hand in hand with additional measures to foster a research culture, and to encourage and retain good researchers through a warm and appreciative staff policy.

#### *Internationalisation*

Internationalisation is a priority. VUB promotes integrated internationalisation in all aspects of the university: teaching, research, technology transfer, social engagement, alumni work and communication. The Internationalisation Vice-Rectorate has therefore put forward a plan for 'Comprehensive internationalisation', focusing on planned and observable changes.

European university alliances are a new type of inter-institutional partnership, unconstrained by geographical or traditional learning environments, which can bring together diverse populations for teaching and research, and which can lend support and resilience to individual partners as they face new challenges related to or impacting on higher education.

Taking part in the European University Initiative is crucial to increasing and even to maintaining our international recognition. Think, for example, of the European diploma, which will be sought after by many students. VUB has therefore undertaken to take the lead for the 'Education and Students Work Package' that was at the heart of EUTOPIA 2050.

In particular, our focus here is on supporting and strengthening bottom-up collaborative initiatives between VUB research groups and EUTOPIA partners to develop and unlock knowledge within a learning ecosystem that makes a beneficial contribution to global social challenges through cross-fertilisation. To this end, broad cooperation will be established with the central services within all partner universities responsible for curriculum development, quality assurance and steering research portfolios.

VUB will also continue to focus on better substantive guidance of international dossiers and collaboration by qualified staff. The imPACT programme helps attract postdoctoral researchers who carry out a two-year research and innovation project and are trained in entrepreneurship, business case development and advanced transferable skills.

#### *Inclusive and student-centric approach*

An integrated international dimension in education is the tool of choice for boosting self-reliance, self-confidence, social integration, and cross-cultural and language skills. VUB therefore strives to provide international opportunities for all. Such mobility is unfortunately often seen as an exclusive activity. We want to get rid of that stigma by maximising scholarships or financial incentives and providing a solid alternative through Internationalisation at Home. More qualitative research into, and the continued roll-out of, homegrown international experience on our own soil is needed as an inclusive form of internationalisation; sharing expertise in this International Classroom through consultation is also necessary. Taking into account the available support capacity, we will roll out the enriched guidance for blended education, skills development and support pathways.

Diversity and internationalisation also extend to disadvantaged groups, who, when their needs are supported, may later become outstanding ambassadors of VUB. Programmes for social and academic inclusion should be sustained as the flagship of a socially engaged university.

## VUB as a **warm and appreciative organisation**

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Studying and working at VUB must be a positive experience. People are happy to work at VUB, partly because of the commitment and involvement of their colleagues. That said, we need to make continued efforts to make the professional mission workable, to promote wellbeing and to recognise and appreciate the efforts made by colleagues. We are developing a warm and appreciative HR policy, introducing a new career policy for professorial staff. We develop and encourage engaged leadership, at all levels in the organisation. We are committed to a long-term and integrated student welfare policy, organised within a "community of caring".

### *Training, well-being and integrity*

Supporting early-career researchers is essential for a successful academic career. Training programmes in leadership and project management will be developed as a priority via online course materials, podcasts and more traditional forms of training. These will take place on the basis of a systematic satisfaction and needs analysis by users in order to strengthen coaching for researchers and to make optimal use of people and resources. The pathways also focus on career development and promoting non-academic career prospects.

Moreover, we cannot accept the growing external pressure on unfettered research. Therefore, with training and a clearly agreed framework, we make our researchers resilient to attacks on academic freedom. Indeed, a healthy, competitive research culture goes hand in hand with a principled research environment and an appreciative human resources policy.

Drawing on You Are Not Alone (YANA), the framework that ensures an integrated, coordinated and transparent approach to transgressive behaviour, we are pursuing our policy on welfare and transgressive behaviour within the organisation.

These elements are widely supported and enjoy the participation of all VUB affiliates and stakeholders, resulting in a global reputation as a leading Urban Engaged university.

### *Community of caring*

46% of students screen positive for the criteria of one or more mental health problems. Among these students, about 5% experience no impact, 25% little to mild impact and 10% mild to moderate impact on daily life. 5% of students belong to a critical group, who have many mental health problems and experience high impact.

As an Urban Engaged University, we recognise that big city living is often associated with lower socio-economic status, which can also bring additional welfare challenges for our students. Investing in social connectedness is the best way to prevent impaired mental wellbeing in students. Our 'community of caring' includes a well-thought-out VUBuddy system and active alumni involvement.

A more appropriate study progress policy with additional instruction and guidance for students will also be embedded in GSP 5. In doing so, VUB is putting extra effort into mandatory remediation, special measures for advancement within a programme and changes in study progress monitoring.

## VUB as an **efficient organisation**

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This new GSP introduces an additional target to the existing pillars: VUB as an efficient organisation. The acronym VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) aptly captures the circumstances we find ourselves in today. With a high-performance and agile attitude, we can respond faster and better to the challenges we face. In addition to performance, as an organisation we should also take a customer-focused approach as our starting point. This applies to students and staff as well as to the wider public.

To this end, we are simplifying our core processes and VUB governance and adapting our internal organisation and services accordingly. This exercise involves creating, structuring and simplifying existing procedures and administrative processes to provide more efficient services and improved customer-friendliness. For students and staff alike, because every member of the university community must be able to rely on appropriate and customer-friendly support for basic processes.

We aim for scale optimisation in teaching and research but also in the administrative and logistical organisation of our university across faculties and departments. Transparent and efficient decision-making processes, assuming responsibility and control, and rethinking the concept of 'representation' are three pillars for this. Process simplification will be achieved via an integrated approach.

#### *Striving for better research output*

A priority focus for us is on increasing research potential. VUB's funding is largely determined by its share of research output parameters. We will therefore work to strengthen our output by rolling out a clear research-group-based policy involving all VUB independent academic staff members. We are committed to further increasing our share of the IOF funding formula.

We are also working on an ambitious funding strategy and the development of sustainable and flexible infrastructure, as well as giving new impetus to VUB policy concerning the Incubators and the Research Park. Making state-of-the-art research infrastructure available, preferably housed in central core facilities, technology and infrastructure platforms, is one of the most important tasks of research policy. We are also looking at how we can provide AI- or data-driven support for policies and operations. This calls for a number of technical interventions to make data available, store it, analyse it and to ensure that data is correct at all times. We also need to organise our institution such that correct data is the basis for making decisions and conducting work.

### Sustainability, equality and wellbeing as guiding principles

The current fifth strategic period 2023–2027 forms the starting point for the policies we use as a touchstone for the choices we make and the decisions we take over the coming years. To implement the policy plan, we translate the strategic objectives into actions. We draw up a timeline for these actions and define the quantitative and qualitative indicators to give us an overview of the progress and implementation of the policy plan. We reaffirm the importance we attached in previous strategic plans to the cross-sector themes that cut across all policy areas - sustainability, equality and well-being - and we remain close to the position set out in the note 'VUB as Urban Engaged University'.

With PACT – in full the Caroline Pauwels Academy of Critical Thinking – VUB seeks to promote doubt, uncertainty and advancing insight as the engine for scientific and social progress. Not a weakness, but actually a driving force. We aim to encourage dialogue, self-reflection and self-examination en route towards a more sustainable world and its activities.

The rollout of GSP 5 over the next few years will be dynamic, closely tracking developments in higher education. In the meantime, we are regularly evaluating the proposed objectives and making adjustments where necessary. Even in such instances, we keep the findings from the core task debate front and centre. In implementing this strategic plan, we also aim to strike a good workable balance between evaluation and renewal. As indicated earlier, we continue to work on the five strategic pillars. For each of these strategic pillars, we determined what change we sought to prioritise, the levers to make that change, and the practical initiatives the organisation needs to undertake. These initiatives are developed on the basis of the strategic objectives set out in the rector's and vice-rectors' policy plans.