University of Utrecht Liberal Arts and Sciences Degree Programme

Introduction

In the Liberal Arts and Sciences Programme students design their individual curriculum cutting across the Humanities, Natural Sciences and Social Sciences. Teachers, tutors and alumni create a learning environment that supports the development of interdisciplinary competences, transferable skills and appropriate coherence to continue studying in (disciplinary or interdisciplinary) master programmes.

Keywords

Bachelor Programme, learning for life, interdisciplinarity, humanities, natural science, social science, transferable skills.

Summary

In the three-year Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) bachelor degree programme, students can combine courses from the humanities, sciences and social sciences. This interdisciplinary approach allows students to study complex problems using a range of different perspectives and tools.

The LAS degree is growing in popularity and attracts slightly older students, often with wide-ranging interests who wish to design their individual curriculum. In this they are guided by a tutor and a major advisor who help to maintain a certain level of coherence in the curriculum, by, for example, making sure that they take sufficient laboratory science courses to be seen as competent researchers. Such an approach to education suits students who can cope with uncertainty (not knowing where their degree will end up), the possibility of failing in courses that are outside their field of specialisation and the requirement to write two BA thesis (see below).

In the Programme's first year students can explore various disciplines in all departments – science, social science and humanities – and also take courses on connective thinking (The Writing Academy) and a multidisciplinary project. The second year the students choose a major in one of the three domains, or possibly an interdisciplinary major and deepen their knowledge and skills. During the second year, students also take a course on interdisciplinary research methods (The Thinking Academy). During the third year, students focus finishing their major and interdisciplinary requirement, and they may take a minor, do an internship, or study abroad. As part of their final evaluation, students write two theses: a disciplinary thesis (which is part of their specialisation) and an interdisciplinary capstone (part of the integrative core). As students have to demonstrate excellence in both areas, the programme is more demanding that a single discipline course.

LAS programme staff understand that they are educating students along a spectrum where some will acquire expertise in one additional area that complements their main interests, whereas others will become fully-fledge inter- and transdisciplinarians.

> **Graduates in this program have come to see interdisciplinarity as a way of both thinking and living, and have additionally developed a sense of agency over their education and future careers.**
>
> **Ria van der Lecq, founder of LAS, 2016, p. 79**

Students also have to write an e-portfolio reflecting on their studies and staff are involved in longitudinal research on interdisciplinary education. Several projects in the research group Subjects of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching (SILT) focus on the development of "meta-skills" such as analysing, debating and writing about research, (interdisciplinary) research collaboration, transferable skills, science communication, and 21st century skills such as self-authorship. These skills are developed in various formats: courses, group assignments, regular feedbacks, project-based learning, student-graduate/alumni-exchanges, tutorship and portfolio work.

After graduation, about 90% of students continue with a Master's programme. Nearly a quarter continues to pursue a Doctorate degree. "Thanks to the high standards set by both programmes in terms of independence and creativity, our students are well equipped to embark on successful careers in academia, the private sector, in NGOs and the civil service» (programme website 'education').

To sum up, this case illustrates how an ID/TD learning environment is created that enables the development of competences – such as flexibility and awareness of complementary roles – to deal with complexity and real-life challenges, as well as to collaborate across sectors and disciplines. Mutual understanding and common cognitive grounds between Arts and Sciences are fostered.

Further Resources

- ❯ LAS programme website 'education': https://www.uu.nl/en/education/school-of-liberal-arts/education

- ❯ LAS projects: https://www.uu.nl/en/education/school-of-liberal-arts/projects

- ❯ Research group Subjects of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching (SILT): https://transmissioninmotion.sites.uu.nl/subjects-in-interdisciplinary-learning-teaching-silt/

- ❯ Lecq, Riavan der (2016): Self-authorship characteristics of learners in the context of an interdisciplinary curriculum: Evidence From reflections, Issues in interdisciplinary studies, 34, 79-108.