

# Study Liberal Arts in The Netherlands

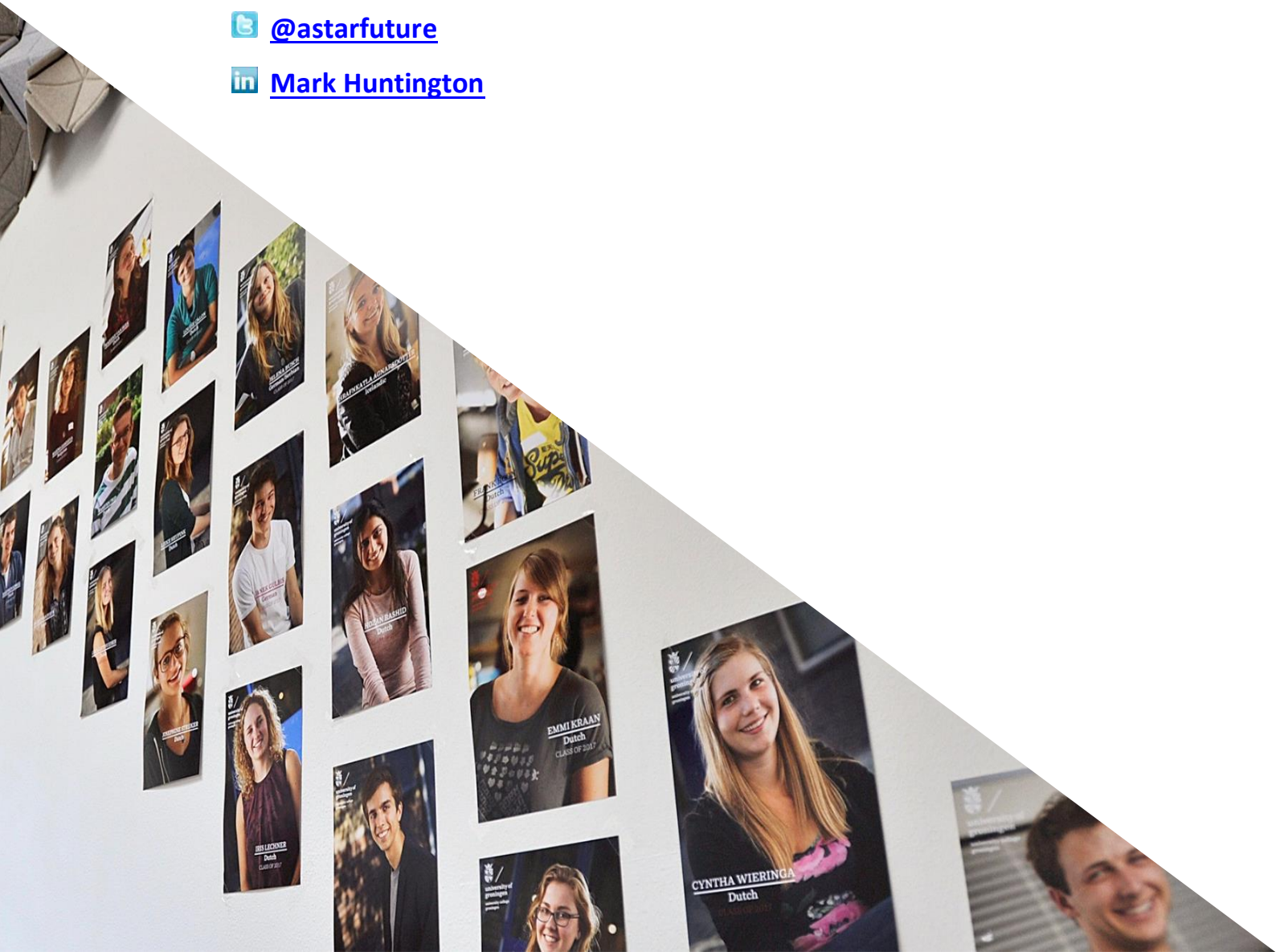
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## Executive Summary

Dutch universities have emerged as leaders among European peers in adopting the American model of liberal arts education. The broad, flexible and interdisciplinary nature of liberal arts degrees offers British students something that they are unlikely to find at their home universities. By choosing to study liberal arts in the Netherlands, they also benefit from the chance to access US-style education at a much lower cost and a lot closer to home.

## Introduction

When British students look at Dutch universities it is quite common for them to search for English-taught degrees equivalent to those on offer at British universities. They tend to choose a degree with a single focus, whether it is in arts, engineering or law. This is a natural and understandable inclination in the decision-making process. A' levels require earlier specialisation; hence British students' expectation to study only one subject at university. Unless actively encouraged to broaden their horizons, British students can overlook an alternative form of education that allows them the rare freedom to bring together disparate subjects they're passionate about, the joy of constant learning and exploration, and the chance to gain multifaceted knowledge about the world. This is at the core of all liberal arts degrees in the Netherlands.

The purpose of this guide is to give an overview of the liberal arts undergraduate programmes available in the Netherlands. We will start by explaining both the advantages and the disadvantages of a liberal arts education. These insights would help a student decide whether doing a liberal arts degree is the right choice for them. We will then highlight the similarities and differences between the liberal arts curricula across Dutch universities. We hope that this guide provides the material you and your students need to make an informed university choice.

## What is liberal arts education?

Liberal arts is not a subject, but an **educational philosophy**. Students never take classes in liberal arts at university. Neither will they graduate with a Bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts.

Liberal arts students learn two things. First, an **interdisciplinary curriculum** that they design themselves (hence "liberal"). Second, to **think big**. Liberal arts degrees are not designed to train students for a specific job or profession. Instead, they allow students to develop a broad range of knowledge and skills, which they can apply to many of the issues they are likely to face in their life and career.

## Why should a student do a liberal arts degree programme?

The description of a liberal art education might sound abstract and could contradict what are commonly said about university education, particularly when you compare it to the

majority of British university degrees. However, we strongly believe that a liberal arts education not only enriches the learning experience of students at university, but also provides them with long-term personal and professional benefits.

To fully understand the purposes and benefits of liberal arts, it is worth having a short look at its history. The ancient Greeks invented the liberal arts education model. They started with only three subjects: grammar, rhetoric and logic. During the medieval period, the curriculum was extended to cover four more subjects: arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. At that time, it was essential for people to be knowledgeable in many fields because it allowed them to have an active and virtuous civic life (e.g. participate in public debate, defend themselves in court and perform military service). In other words, the aim of a liberal arts education was to create **fulfilled individuals** and **responsible citizens**.

Nowadays, the liberal arts offer a much larger and updated range of subjects, but the essence remains the same: to develop **well-rounded** individuals motivated for **lifelong learning** and capable of **contributing to wider society**. As global challenges become more complex and require more collective effort to tackle, a liberal arts education is as relevant as it has ever been. Only through exposure to a variety of fields of study can a person have **unique perspectives** on issues and develop **creative solutions** for them. This is the key to a successful career and meaningful life.

If these values inspire and motivate a student, this might be all the motivation they need to move to the Netherlands, the hub of liberal arts education (taught in English) in (modern) Europe. To take a liberal arts degree, they have to attend a special type of institution called **University Colleges**. There are ten of them in the Netherlands. These are not separate universities. They are part of well-known Dutch institutions. For example, University College Groningen is part of the University of Groningen. As such, University Colleges do not appear in rankings of global universities under their own name.

### **Will a liberal arts degree from a Dutch university be recognised in the UK?**

As with any other Bachelor's degree from a Dutch university, if a student earns a degree from Dutch University College, it will be recognised in the UK.

At the end of a liberal arts undergraduate programme, students earn a Bachelor of Arts (BA) or a Bachelor of Sciences (BSc), depending on the focus of the curriculum. These qualifications are considered equivalent to British bachelor's degrees, so they shouldn't have any problems using them to apply for postgraduate courses or jobs in the UK. Many liberal arts students go on to study Masters degrees at the best universities in the world.

### **Does it make sense to study liberal arts in the Netherlands?**

In most parts of Europe, students receive a comprehensive liberal arts education while still at school but this is not the case in the United Kingdom where A' levels require earlier

specialisation. It might therefore be argued that A' levels are not the best preparation for a liberal arts education but British students would not be seriously disadvantaged should they choose to study such a degree. It might actually make up for some of the gaps in their secondary education. Indeed, some British universities have started to offer degrees in the liberal arts but they are rarely as wide-ranging as those in the Netherlands.

There are several places in the world where students can choose to study the liberal arts. American liberal arts colleges are perhaps the most famous. In Asia, liberal arts Bachelor's degrees are available at a number of Japanese and Korean universities.

**What sets Dutch liberal arts degrees apart from the rest is their three-year structure and extensive focus on Europe.** At American and Japanese liberal arts colleges, the standard length of course is four years.

Whichever Dutch university college your students choose, they are likely to get acquainted with three topics, also the three greatest challenges in Europe nowadays: **health, sustainability and diversity.**

With this in mind, a degree from a Dutch liberal arts college would best prepare a student for a future career in or related to Europe.

### **Where can students receive a liberal arts education in the Netherlands?**

The following Dutch university colleges offer liberal arts programmes:

- University College Groningen
- University College Amsterdam
- University College Utrecht
- University College Roosevelt
- University College Tilburg
- University College Twente
- University College Maastricht
- University College Venlo
- Erasmus University College Rotterdam
- Leiden University College

These institutions are similar in numerous ways. They all provide:

- a residential setting (compulsory except at Tilburg)

- a small scale, well-rounded and flexible education
- an intense and intellectually challenging curriculum in English, however, with little emphasis on work experience.

**There are many clear benefits that come with their liberal arts education model.** In a close-knit community where students live and study with their classmates 24/7, they have the opportunity to **build lifelong friendships**. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum, students have a lot more variety in their courses and **become a generalist** with more career options after university. Above all, liberal arts is an educational philosophy, so what students get out of their education is not only knowledge and skills, but also a mindset. Indeed, the ultimate goal of letting students be in charge of what they learn is to train them to be **independent thinkers**.

**A liberal arts culture can also be challenging.** Students can easily lose track if they are not good at managing their studies. Moreover, the workload is heavy, so there is little spare time for work experience. This can be a slight risk for their career prospects. The common wisdom is that a generalist can do anything. However, the downside is that without much work experience liberal arts graduates may need to look for “real world” experience at other points in their life.

**Choosing the right university college that match a student’s personalities and career ambitions would help them get the most values out of their liberal arts education and minimise the risks.** Here we highlight the key differences between the liberal arts curricular at Dutch university colleges so you can help your students can decide which one is the best fit for them.

### **1. Focus areas**

Students wouldn’t choose liberal arts if they have already decided to study one subject only at university. They choose liberal arts because it gives them the freedom to experiment with different fields and opens the door to unusual but interesting career paths.

However, the drawback is that designing your own curriculum is not an easy task. Usually it takes a member of faculty to help a student choose the right path. Some students are good at reflecting on and integrating what they learn along the way, others struggle to find a clear direction on their own. For this reason, every university college sets out a few **focus areas** to ensure that whichever way students customise their degrees, the knowledge and skills they acquire are always connected meaningfully. These focus areas essentially restrict what students can study within a liberal arts programme. They should play an important role in university choice. If a student is interested in learning more about arts, for example, it does not make sense for him to join a programme with a strong focus on engineering.

Students can identify the focus areas of a liberal arts programme by looking at its **themes, majors or course directory**.

Many Dutch university colleges use **central themes** to help their students set learning outcomes. These themes tend to address the most prominent global challenges. Students should choose the programme whose themes excite them the most, because they will spend the next three years learning every aspect of these topics. Admittedly, some themes involve more scientific knowledge, and others require more input from social sciences and humanities research.

[University College Groningen](#) would be an ideal choice for students who want to combine different disciplines to ask original questions and deliver creative responses to the three issues: **(i) energy, (ii) healthy ageing and (iii) sustainable society**. If a student seeks more humanities and natural sciences options, [Amsterdam University College](#) might be a better choice, because their programmes are organised around six themes: **(i) energy, climate and sustainability, (ii) health and well-being, (iii) life, evolution and universe, (iv) cities and cultures, (v) social systems and (vi) information, communication and cognition**.

With the theme *“bring technology and society together”*, [University College Twente](#) is the only institution that incorporates **engineering** into a liberal arts education. This engineering component is tailored to students who are good at sciences and want to capitalise on this strength but are aware of the issues that technology can have on society as a whole. In contrast, [Leiden University College](#) attracts students more drawn into global social issues such as **(i) peace and justice, (ii) sustainability, (iii) prosperity and (iv) diversity**.

With a narrower geopolitical scope, [University College Tilburg’s](#) programme cater those having a particular interest in Europe. It addresses five topical issues of the continent: **(i) modernity, (ii) identity and evil, (iii) war, (iv) law and (v) film and consumerism**.

Some university colleges allow students to enjoy the maximum freedom of a liberal arts education by letting them select and combine courses from a **directory** to form a degree. Of course, there are graduation requirements to ensure that students make sensible choices, but essentially they can explore a much wider set of possibilities than following themes. This is the approach of [Erasmus University College](#), [University College Utrecht](#) and [University College Roosevelt](#). These institutions require students to take classes across the Humanities, Sciences and Social Sciences departments, but put them in charge of setting the themes and directions for their degrees. They might be the best options if a student is keen to focus on **arts and finance**, or any other subject that is absent from the central themes of many Dutch liberal arts programmes. They are also suitable for students who are confident in their abilities to set learning objectives and plan to achieve them.

At the other end of the spectrum, if a student wants to enjoy the flexibility of a liberal arts education while ensuring their studies have a meaningful focus, we recommend choosing

the university colleges offering **majors**. A major contains a portfolio of courses designed to deepen students' understanding about a topic. Picking a major means giving your degree a specialisation. The majors available at [University College Groningen](#), ranging from culture and media to human anatomy, are broad and generic. They give students plenty of room to further tailor their degrees to their needs within the humanities, social sciences and sciences. In contrast, [University College Tilburg](#) and [Leiden University College](#) only offer five and six majors respectively. Focusing on a specific field, for example "Law in Europe" and "Global Public Health", they closely resemble the majors students would get at a normal Dutch university. This means they would have minimal freedom to customise their degrees.

## 2. Degree structure

All Dutch liberal arts programmes require significant independent study. However, each has a unique supporting structure in place to facilitate learning and guide students on building a curriculum.

Here we give you three examples of how a student will typically study in a liberal arts programme. You will see that every degree has three main components: compulsory courses, majors and minors. Nonetheless, each degree structure gives students a different level of flexibility. Their task is to identify the programme with the level of flexibility they are most comfortable with.

At [University College Groningen](#), compulsory courses account for one third of the degree. These consist of a **core programme** (30 credits) in the first year, and an **integrative project** (15 credits) and a **research and methodology programme** (15 credits) in the second year. Students will spend 50% of their degree working toward a **major**. This involves **5 academic core courses** (30 credits) in the first year, **9 courses of a selected major** (45 credits) in the second and third years, and a **capstone project/thesis** (15 credits). For the remaining 30 credits (16%) of their degree, they can either study abroad or stay in Groningen to do a minor. Other institutions that use the same structure (One third is compulsory. Two third is your choice) are [Amsterdam University College](#), [Leiden University College](#) and [University College Tilburg](#). Moreover, at all four university colleges, for their major, students will take a coherent package of courses following a central theme. These institutions have the most **fixed** degree structure among Dutch university colleges.

On the other hand, [Erasmus University College](#), [University College Utrecht](#) and [University College Roosevelt](#) offer **semi-structured** liberal arts degrees. Choosing their programmes, students take compulsory introductory courses in their first year, but from the second year onward, they have the freedom to gradually build a major out of a broad portfolio of courses offered by different departments. In other words, for two third of the degree that students have control over, they have much more flexibility to shape how it looks like.

At its most extreme, the liberal art education at [University College Twente](#) is **freestyle**. There are no fixed courses, no conventional exams and no grades! The whole degree is a self-designed, self-regulated learning project. It is the perfect choice for those who like breaking the norm and are willing to work hard without much guidance.

In addition to the course structure, students can look at the teaching style of each university college to get an idea of how they will study there. For example, [University College Groningen](#) and [University College Twente](#) pioneer **project-based learning**. Instead of attending lectures, students work in small teams to contribute to a project where you learn how to deal with challenges in a real-life setting. This approach would suit “doers” who are keen to get their hand dirty. If a student is more a strategist, perhaps they would find the **problem-based learning** model at [Erasmus University College](#) more attractive. For each course, 10 students meet in 3-hour sessions once a week, guided by a tutor, to solve a hypothetical problem from trigger materials. On the other hand, choosing [University College Tilburg](#) and [Leiden University College](#) means a student, for the most part, will mainly attend **lectures**. This is perfectly fine if they are more into the research route and want to approach a field in a more systematic way.

### 3. Other opportunities outside of the classroom

The main goal of a liberal arts education is to create scholars. The workload is heavy, leaving little space for work experience during the academic year but there is most certainly time for extracurricular activities. Dutch university colleges run a wide range of initiatives to make sure their students have the competencies needed for their future employment. When doing research about a university college, it is worth checking the options it offers, and whether they can help a student gain an advantage in their desired career path.

For example, students at [University College Groningen](#) can go on an **exchange** in their final year, improving their language skills and cultural awareness while living abroad for a semester. Alternatively, they could choose to immerse themselves fully in Dutch culture and language by staying on campus. Choosing [University College Tilburg](#), students will benefit from making contributions to their **social innovation projects**. If a student wishes to **learn a foreign language** during their degree, [Amsterdam University College](#) will give them that option through their “Global Identity Experience” programme. For those who want an **internship with credit towards graduation**, [University College Utrecht](#) might be a preferable choice. At an extreme, if a student wants their **hobbies** to count toward their degree, they should go for [University College Twente](#), where 10% of the curriculum will be dedicated to their individual learning project.

### Where are the best places for liberal arts in the Netherlands?

Having pointed out how each liberal arts degree programme suits a different type of person, we think it should be up to a student to decide which one is the best for them. As such, a



league table may give a misleading impression. All of the opportunities to study liberal arts in The Netherlands are of the highest quality.

### **What grades does a student need to get in?**

Because of the small scale of Dutch liberal arts degree programmes, they are selective. In general, students need at least 32 IB points, or BBB in A' Levels to get in.

There are two exceptions. [University College Utrecht](#) only accepts students with at least AAB in the A' Levels. To be eligible for a place at [University College Tilburg](#), a student must have at least 3 GCSEs (A\* - C) and 3 A Levels (A\* - C) (six different subjects).

Some Dutch university colleges also require students to have Maths in their A' Levels subject mix. They need to have at least a B in Maths if they want to apply to [Amsterdam University College](#), [University College Twente](#), or [Leiden University College](#).

### **For further information**

A Star Future provides an advisory and support service to British careers professionals. We can assist you with information about international higher education not only in Europe but around the world. Every year we visit approximately 250 schools and colleges, speaking to groups of Year 12 students and/or parents.

Please contact us at [info@astarfuture.co.uk](mailto:info@astarfuture.co.uk) if you would like to schedule a visit or if you have any queries with which we may be able to help you.

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*The information contained within this document is correct to the best of our knowledge. It has been compiled from a variety of sources, including Dutch universities' websites. We cannot take responsibility for any inadvertent inaccuracies.*