

Faculty of Humanities – Foundation for the future



Universiteit
Leiden

The Faculty of Humanities at Leiden University connects 450 years of knowledge with present-day questions. The strength of our modern academic community lies in its diversity: of scholars, students, perspectives and methods. Research and education are inextricably linked. Our students – in Leiden and The Hague – are taught in a research-driven environment, where we work with unique sources and collections to answer current and societal research questions. Our academic community, with its global orientation and local connections, forms a link between academic knowledge and the societal, cultural and political debate. Here you can discover the world.

What makes Leiden unique?

At Leiden, the humanities have **an exceptionally broad, global orientation**: from Europe to Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America; from the distant past to the present day; from clay tablets to AI. In a world that is characterised by geopolitical shifts, hybrid threats and increasing international integration, there is a growing need for in-depth understanding of how societies function and develop. Insight into language, culture, religion, history and regional dynamics is increasingly an essential basis for effective policy, international positioning and societal resilience. To understand global themes like migration, colonialism and climate change, it is important to look beyond our own time and our own country's borders, and to learn about perspectives from other places and other times. Leiden humanities scholars therefore study both modern and ancient languages in conjunction with culture, area history and social environment, and in interdisciplinary collaboration with linguists, archaeologists, historians, literary scholars, art historians, psychologists, educationalists, lawyers, biologists and physicians. Leiden's Faculty of Humanities thus fulfils **a strategic role in the Dutch knowledge landscape**.

Example:

Leiden linguists are working closely with archaeologists and geneticists on research into early migration flows and the spread of the Indo-European languages. The research topics include the etymology, reconstruction and division of the Indo-European languages, and prehistoric language contact. This enabled researchers to conclude, on the basis of ancient DNA from horse bones, that the spread of Indo-European languages did not take place on horseback, but rather on foot; these findings were published in an article in Nature.

Leiden humanities scholars have **broad cultural and geopolitical expertise** on areas including Russia, China, the Middle East and wider Asian regions, which is directly relevant for economics, security and politics. This Leiden expertise is rooted in deep historical knowledge, covering many different ages and built up over the centuries. Our experts are often consulted by media and authorities if they have questions about Asia, which is home to 60% of the world's population and accounts for more than 50% of the global GDP.

The value of language, culture and area studies lies partly in their capacity to explain power relations, ideologies and societal transformations. Historical experiences, religious sensitivities and cultural reference frameworks often determine the logic behind political choices and conflicts. If cyber threats are analysed without their geopolitical and ideological context, only part of the problem will be seen. If security issues are approached without historical and cultural understanding, crucial explanations will be missed. By bringing these dimensions together, the Faculty of Humanities makes a direct contribution to strategic and societal resilience, for example in dealing with disinformation, radicalisation or international tensions.

Example:

Since China became an economic, technological and scientific superpower, it has been even more important to understand the country's language, culture and society, so that we can comprehend and respond to China's policy towards the world. Leiden research on China focuses on the political content of Chinese entertainment, questions about digital nationalism, online conflict and digital governance. Research on China and global cybersecurity is aimed at assessing the country's impact on diplomatic and technical governance processes worldwide.

Example:

Leiden researchers have a large network of partners in the Global South. One example is the work conducted within the African Studies Centre, which includes research on networks of people involved in conflicts, both within countries and across borders. This research uses a variety of research methods to understand how these networks operate, especially in the Sahel in Africa and other areas. A major focus here is the role of digital connectivity as a disruptive factor in warfare. This research looks primarily at information flows on social media as a legitimisation of direct violence, i.e. mainly cultural violence.

Leiden humanities operate within a **unique academic infrastructure with strong collaborative partnerships**. Researchers and students work with Europe's most important collections of Asian and Middle Eastern manuscripts in the Asian Library and Middle Eastern Library, built up over the centuries. The African Library and many other collections of the University Library make a further contribution to the exceptional work environment. This **world-famous research infrastructure** is also supported by institutes such as the Netherlands Institute for the Near East (NINO), the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), the African Studies Centre, the Leiden Asia Centre and the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS). As an open archive, this knowledge infrastructure is an essential aspect of Leiden as an international centre for research on the world.

Example:

How can a micro-CT scanner help with research on the Ancient Near East? The Netherlands Institute for the Near East (NINO) has a collection of 3000-year-old cuneiform clay tablets. The clay tablets are encased in an 'envelope' of the same material. This casing was made around the tablet to protect the text against fraud. The clay tablets have been scanned by a micro-CT scanner at TU Delft, making it possible to read them without breaking the surrounding envelope. This is an example of researchers in the field of the Ancient Near East collaborating with colleagues at TU Delft on innovative methods to understand ancient material.

Collaboration with societal partners, including the National Museum of Antiquities (RMO), the Wereldmuseum ('world museum'), the Japan Museum SieboldHuis and Leiden Kennisstad ('knowledge city'), is **structurally embedded in the faculty's research and education**. Staff members of the faculty also work intensively with government ministries in The Hague and with the municipality of The Hague. Institutions like the Museon and the Mauritshuis are also important partners, as they use insights from history and religious and cultural studies in the humanities, for example, to interpret collections in the light of current societal questions, such as colonial legacies, identity, heritage, sustainability, security and inclusion.

Example:

How can we ensure that a historic city like Leiden is equipped to face the climate of the future? And still retains its heritage, not only of historic buildings, streets and lanes but also waterways? The Leiden Heritage Deal is a collaboration of historians, biologists from Naturalis and policymakers of the municipality of Leiden, working on tools that the municipality can use to develop and assess climate-adaptive measures in the city centre, based on knowledge about the history of nature in Leiden city centre. This will allow the city to remain habitable, while also retaining its historic character.

Example:

We have known for a long time that noise can be bad for public health. However, groundbreaking research conducted at the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts (ACPA) in the Faculty of Humanities shows that noise can actually help to improve public health if public spaces are designed to take account of sound. In this research, everyday sounds of the city are integrated within larger underlying themes, such as ecology, safety, public health and sociocultural diversity. By focusing on the relationship between sound and social interaction, climate change and health, urban planners and policymakers can see that sound is an intrinsic part of the environment, and that good policy consists of more than simply reducing the decibels.

Example:

Leiden historians play an important role in the public debate around historical slavery and the future of the Dutch colonial collections. For instance, they are conducting research on the history of slavery in relation to the Royal Family, the Province of South Holland and the city of Leiden, and also on the role of the university itself. Moreover, the acquisition and future of colonial collections in museums and archives is an important starting point in research on our colonial past. Our researchers therefore give advice on management and restitution of objects and documents to countries of origin, such as Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Suriname and America.

The Faculty of Humanities in Leiden and The Hague both builds on **a rich tradition and looks ahead**. At a time when global issues are becoming increasingly complex, our broad, deep-rooted and unique expertise provides guidance and direction. The combination of critical thinking and historical depth, international orientation and intensive collaboration with partners both within and outside the academic world allows us to educate a new generation of thinkers and doers. A history of 450 years of academic innovation thus offers a solid foundation for the future.