

Description of Chair ‘LONG-RUN DEVELOPMENT OF GLOBAL WELLBEING’

Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University

1. Introduction

The chair (1.0 fte) will be embedded in, and financed by, the Economic and Social History (ESH) group at the Department of History (GKG) and will be expected to play a prominent role together with scholars at Utrecht University in the multidisciplinary initiatives within the strategic theme Institutions for Open Societies (IOS). IOS, which studies the role of institutions in the genesis and development of open, sustainable societies, forms one of the four strategic themes of Utrecht University and considers a better understanding of the development of well-being and its institutional underpinnings as a key focus point.

2. Academic Profile

Over the past few decades, economists and policy-makers have moved away from narrow definitions of development (income per capita) to devising and applying broader definitions of wellbeing. Following Amartya Sen’s “capabilities approach”, organizations such as the United Nations have developed broader indicators of wellbeing, including not only income, but also education and life expectancy (Human Development Index). There is ample need for further elaboration of what wellbeing means, and how we can quantitatively and qualitatively assess levels of wellbeing in a comparative perspective.

Given the ever-changing nature of our society and economy, the issue of what wellbeing is, how definitions and perceptions of it have changed in the past, and how we may expect it to change in the immediate and more distant future, are highly relevant questions. The current level of welfare has direct consequences for generations to come. For example, for the first time since the nineteenth century, younger generations in the Netherlands on average do not fare better than their parents. Historical research on indicators of wellbeing, inequality, and social mobility, using theory and methods from the social sciences, can provide important pointers to solving such present-day and future problems.

As Sen’s capabilities approach shows, well-functioning institutions are indispensable for enhancing people’s freedom and wellbeing. The historical study of these institutions, and their effects on different indicators of human wellbeing – e.g. income, democracy, gender (in)equality, educational attainment – is crucial to understanding long-term patterns of change. It enables us to come to generalizations, and thus, theory formation on how institutions have influenced wellbeing in the past, and at the same time stress the contingencies of how particular institutional arrangements have played out under specific circumstances that varied throughout time and space. Therefore, the past forms an excellent laboratory to test ideas about how and why societies across the globe have succeeded (or failed) in bringing about wellbeing for their population under changing conditions, and what policy implications this entails.

3. Embedding in the Department of History & Art History in combination with the UU Strategic Theme Institutions

The chair will be embedded in the Economic and Social History (ESH) group, at the Department of History and Art History (GKG).

The research profile of the chair aligns with the ‘global turn’ of this group over the past decade, its interest in global inequality, as well as with the interdisciplinary approach of most members of the ESH group, who combine quantitative and qualitative research methods and are inspired and informed by social science theories (see below under 5). The chair’s research will closely align with work of colleagues within the ESH group who are engaged with the study of inequality and wellbeing worldwide (e.g. Bas van Bavel, Sarah Carmichael, Selin Dilli, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk and Auke Rijpma). Within the wider context of GKG, the new chair will be expected to collaborate with scholars dealing with issues of human wellbeing such as environmental history (e.g. Liesbeth van de Grift), sustainability (e.g. Johan Schot) and democracy (e.g. Ido de Haan).

The chair is expected to play a prominent role within the university’s strategic theme Institutions for Open Societies and to initiate interdisciplinary research and teaching within this strategic theme in collaboration with other UU top researchers from different faculties involved (see <https://www.uu.nl/en/research/institutions-for-open-societies>). In this capacity, the chair should have or develop a research agenda that on the one hand is interdisciplinary and addresses the core issues of the Institutions program and, on the other hand, fits within the research program of the ESH group.

4. Contributions to teaching

Teaching activities will concern lecturing in the interdisciplinary BA teaching program of Politics, Philosophy and Economy (PPE). Moreover, the chair will be teaching in the Bachelor as well as in the Master programs of the Department of GKG, e.g. the Bachelor specialization The Great Challenges: Crises, Inequality and Sustainability, the Master program History of Politics and Society and the History Research Master, as well as in interdisciplinary courses, such as the newly developed “Big History” course (with GEO-sciences). Also, the chair may be involved in teaching in the Department of Economics (USE). Moreover, the chair is expected to collaborate in efforts to develop new possibilities for interdisciplinary education based on the research done within the strategic theme Institutions for Open Societies, e.g. together with Erik Stam (Economics), Tanja van der Lippe (Sociology) and others. This may involve, for instance, contributing to the possible development of a new Master program Public Policy.

5. Research profile of the chair

This chair studies the development of human wellbeing – in the broad sense of the term – in a long-term comparative perspective. The development of human wellbeing in a long-term comparative perspective forms a vital component of Utrecht University’s research endeavours. Utrecht University developed a Better Well-Being Index, which is an integrated index for measuring well-being and includes a wide set of dimensions.

The chair is intended to continue the important work in the field of global inequality and wellbeing by prof. dr. Jan Luiten van Zanden (retiring early 2022), who over the years has collaborated with historians and other scientists, studying long-term socioeconomic development in a worldwide perspective. Furthermore, the chair will contribute to the

collection and analysis of large datasets, by using comprehensive quantitative as well as qualitative techniques.

6. National and International positioning

In the national context, this chair is vital to maintain UU's strong position in the field of interdisciplinary history of long-run development and human wellbeing. While colleagues at RUG also focus on these themes, and we collaborate with them, their work is more strictly confined to economic indicators such as GDP, whereas the UU approach takes a much broader view on long-run human wellbeing. Internationally, the chair also appears timely. In many parts of the world, scholars are developing large historical databases to measure historical wellbeing, but they generally either concern much shorter periods, and less complex indicators of welfare, or are not globally encompassing (e.g. Giovanni Vecchi, University of Rome Tor Vergata; Ian Gazeley and Andy Newell, LSE/Essex University). Ideally, the research of this chair would link up to other global comparative projects that are currently ongoing in the US (e.g. CHIA database, Patrick Manning, University of Pittsburgh; Seshat database, led by Daniel Hoyer, George Brown College, Toronto). Moreover, the chair "Long-run development of global wellbeing" is expected to include important additional qualitative and institutional indicators into the analysis of human wellbeing.

7. Profile of the occupant of the chair

The criteria on which the candidates will be selected are the following:

- Successful applicants must be at the top of his or her league either as a high potential or as a world research leader.
- Successful applicants must have an excellent publication record in international journals in fields relevant for the research area described.
- Based on past performance, successful applicants must show potential for doing outstanding multi- or interdisciplinary research.
- Successful applicants have expertise in quantitative research methods and working with big (historical) datasets.
- Successful applicants must have a keen eye for the societal relevance of the research in his or her field, and actively seek to contribute to public engagement/outreach.
- Successful applicants must have demonstrable experience in acquiring additional and external funds to extend the research within the thematic pillar.
- Successful applicants must have extensive experience in academic teaching as well as experience in managing a research group and in having supervised successful PhD students.

8. Required competencies

The tasks of the chair will be divided in 50% research and 50% teaching. Corresponding to the criteria indicated above, the position includes in particular the following tasks:

- Doing research and publishing internationally on institutions and wellbeing in the long run

- Playing an initiating role in new initiatives from the strategic theme Institutions for Open Societies and contributing to their coordination.
- Collaborating with researchers within the strategic theme Institutions for Open Societies inside and outside the Faculty of Humanities.
- (Co-)supervising PhD students who are doing their research in the field of institutions and wellbeing also from other research groups.
- Teaching in the bachelor of PPE and/or BA/(R)MA History and/or Economics.
- Supervision of bachelor and/or (research) master theses
- Investigating opportunities for integration of teaching between faculties on the theme of Institutions and Wellbeing and contributing to their realization.
- Taking up management tasks and board functions within the section, Department and/or strategic theme.

9. Contextual analysis

The chair will be a member of the Economic and Social History group. The chair is expected to be able to take a central position in the management of this group and/or contribute to organizational tasks within GKG, including by taking up rotating board memberships/directorates. Also, the candidate is expected to play a prominent and active part in the multidisciplinary strategic theme Institutions for Open Societies.