HEI’s delivering flexible courses to soceity, easy-peasy or not???

UiA University of Agder Norway

Co-creation of knowledge

Morten Brekke
Professor

2025 European Learning & Teaching Forum, Feb. 2025 Cork

UiA University of Agder Norway

51
MASTER'S PROGRAMMES

46
BACHELOR'S PROGRAMMES

34
ONE-YEAR PROGRAMMES

15000
STUDENTS

UiA

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION

LEARNING & TEACHING PAPER #21

Flexible learning and teaching

Thematic Peer Group Report

Chair: Morten Brekke,
University of Agder, Norway

EUA Coordinator: Thérèse Zhang

March 2024

UiA

Key findings

- Increasing demand for flexible learning in HEIs.
- Diversity in definitions and perspectives of flexible learning.
- Two main aspects of flexible learning identified.
  - Flexibility within a traditional study program
  - Flexibility under the format of non-degree credits or learning provision
- Impact of COVID-19 on flexible learning
- Student and teacher perspectives on flexible learning

5 recommendations

- The institution's strategy and capacity building for flexible learning
- The students' agency
- Curriculum design and delivery
- The use of flexible support and resources
- Staff development and teacher training

eua EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION

TRENDS 2024

European higher education institutions in times of transition

By Michael Gaebel and Thérèse Zhang
Co-author: Henriette Stoeber

Many HEIs report either continuously low or decreasing funding over the past five years and identify underfunding as one of the obstacles for improving learning and teaching.

- Mission overload and the "do more with less"

Trends shaping our sector

(as it is in Norway)

Need new financial model

Need for innovation

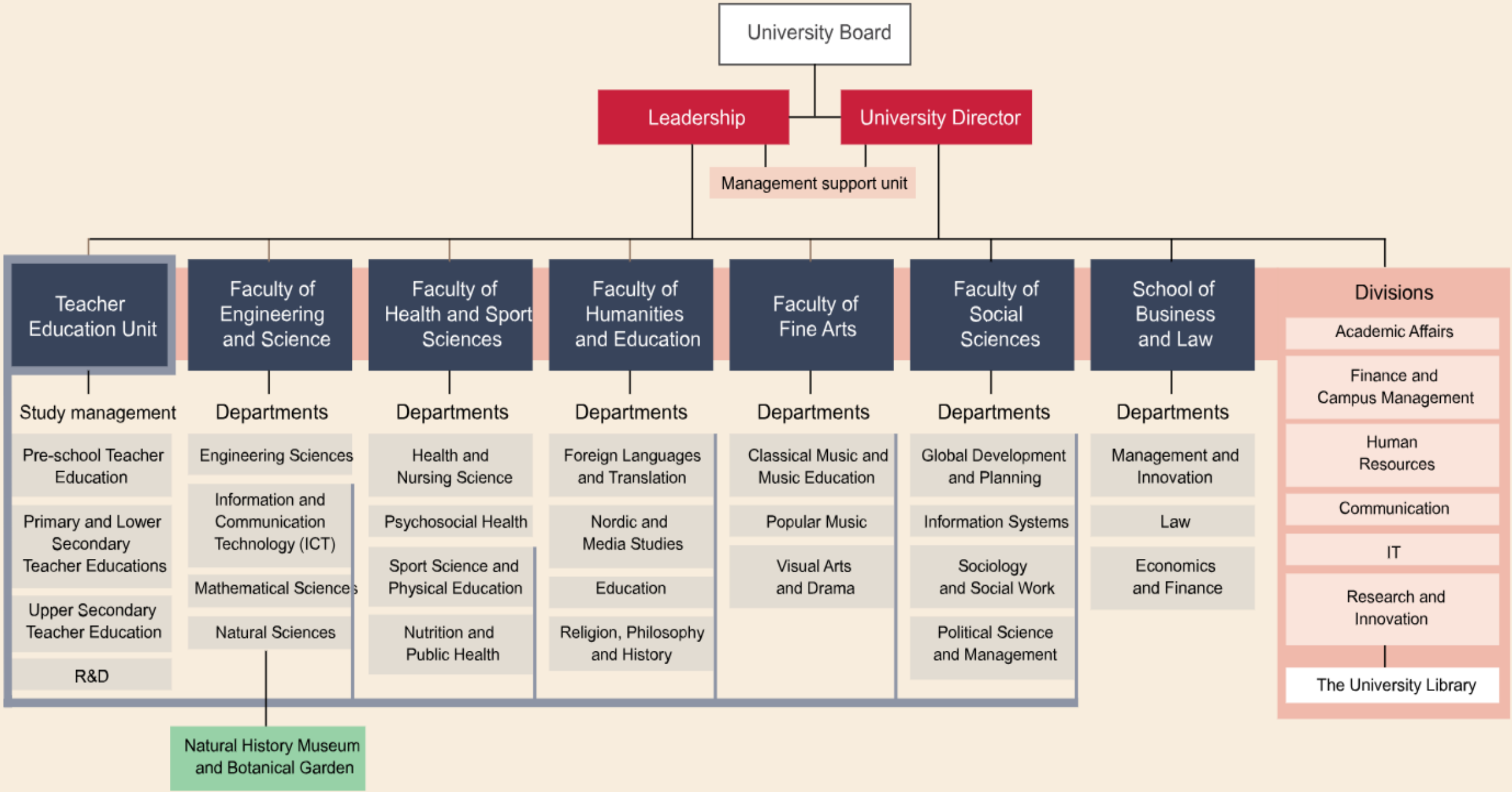
Need for flexibility

UiA

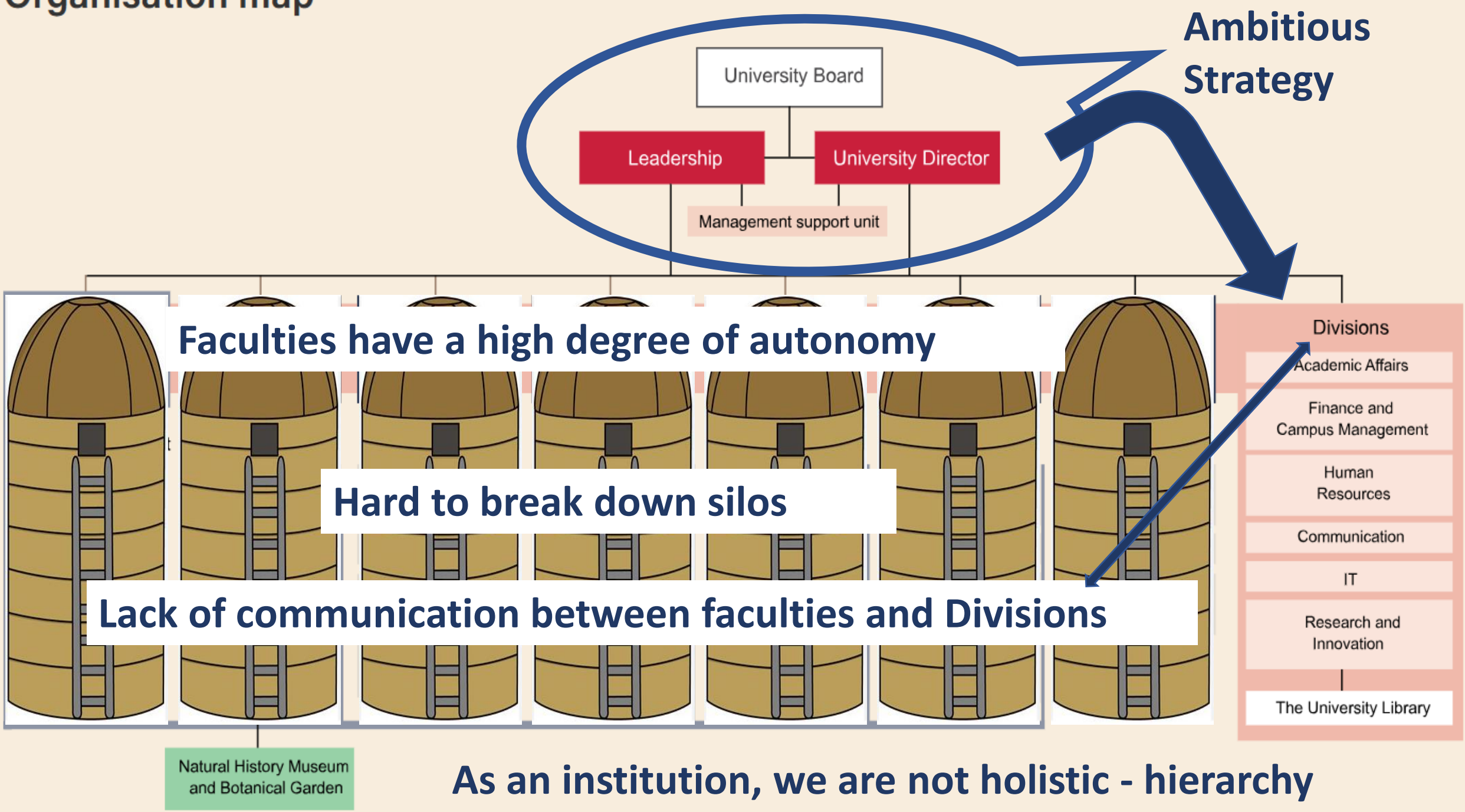
Why is flexibility challenging for HEIs?

I will reflect on this, using my university as an example.

Organisation map



Organisation map



Example - the teaching process

We are organized for on-campus teaching – not flexibility!

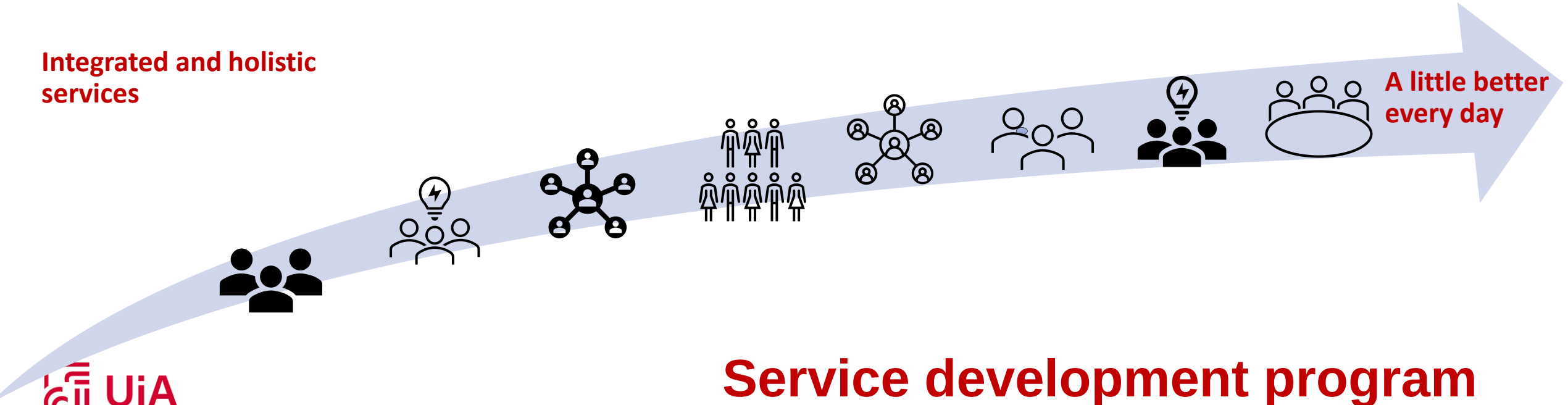
Administrative services

BOLK
Canvas Leganto
Zoom
UiA Help
xxx
Faculty adm.
Inspera Exam-tool
FS Course planning
Timetables
Qual.system education
Division of Academic Aff.
UiA PULS
Campus Management
University Library
Media Centre
IT
SiA
Exam Office

UiA

Integrated and holistic services (e.g. the teaching process)

Integrated and holistic services



UiA

Service development program

How does it work? (At my University)

Top down

I initiated several ‘top-down’ projects led by the central administration

Bottom up

Initiatives are really what we want - projects arising from groups of academic staff.

UiA

How does it work? (At my University)

Top down – challenges

I initiated several ‘top-down’ projects led by the central administration

- **Project leader - organized seminars to attract academic staff to join.**
- **Lack of interest from the academic staff.**
- **Tried to approach staff or heads of departments.**
  - **Already full work plans**
  - **Do we get funding to do this?**
  - **No funding, within the faculty’s ground funding.**
- **Still “treading water”**
- **Main challenge project is not “grounded” within the faculty staff.**
- **Not easy to “control” academic staff**

Bottom up – challenges

Initiatives are really what we want - projects arising from groups of academic staff.

UiA to launch flexible engineering degree

How does it work? (At my University)

Top down – challenges

I initiated several ‘top-down’ projects led by the central administration

- Project leader - organized seminars to attract academic staff to join.
- Lack of interest from the academic staff.
- Tried to approach staff or heads of departments.
  - Already full work plans
  - Do we get funding to do this?
  - No funding, within the faculty’s ground funding.
- Still “treading water”
- Main challenge project is not “grounded” within the faculty staff.
- Not easy to “control” academic staff

Bottom up – challenges

Initiatives are really what we want - projects arising from groups of academic staff.

- Main challenge here is a lack of communication between academic staff and administration.
- Things take longer than expected, motivation drops.
- Who makes the decisions?
- Academic staff lacks sufficient knowledge about how the university works.
- We “invent the wheel again and again”
- Lack of holistic approaches

Digital campus: A part of future UiA?

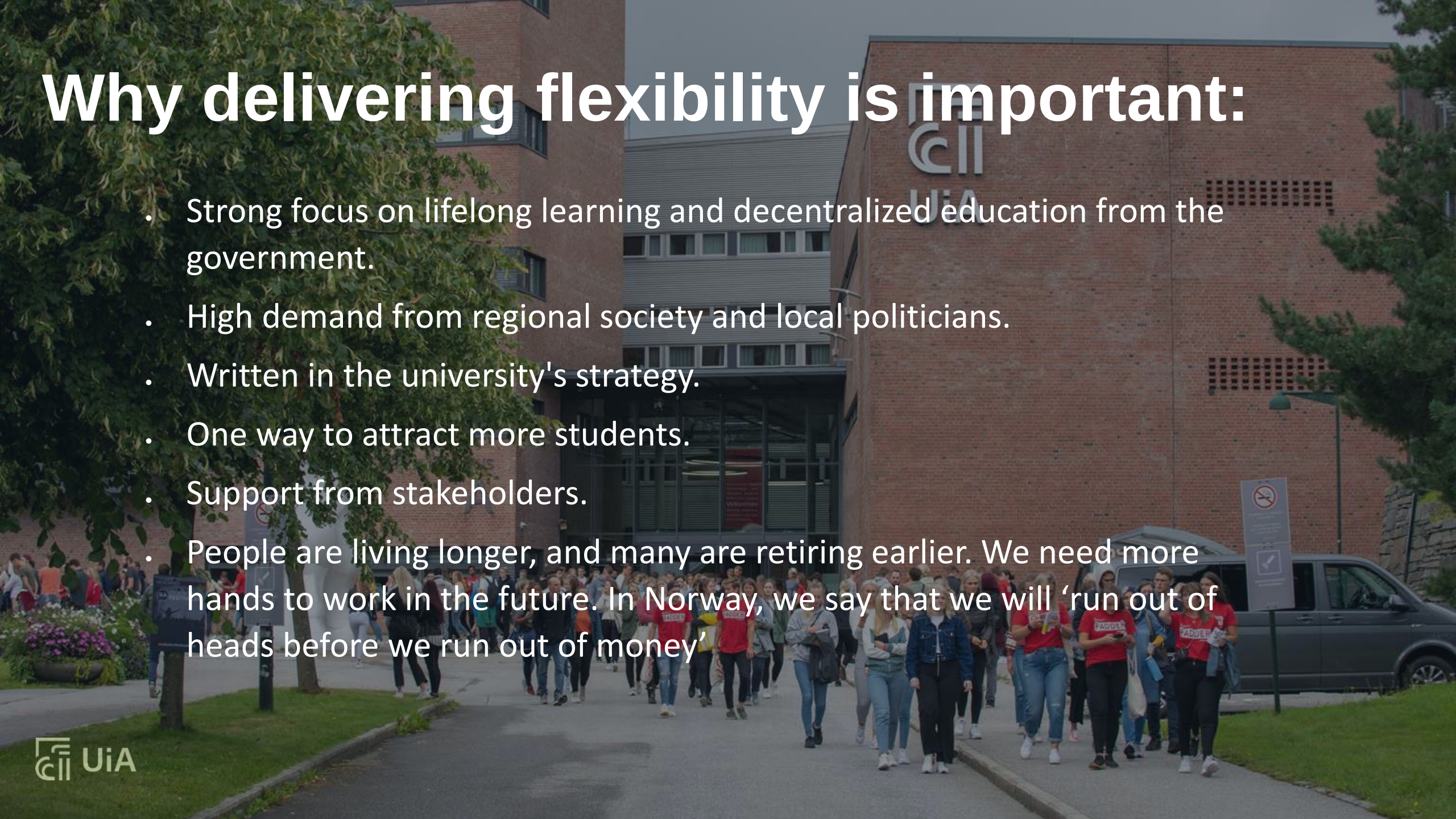
We are now set to explore the potential of a digital campus. The goal is to create a comprehensive framework for all our flexible programmes and

Fields of study – part time at UiA

- Pre-school and teacher →
- Health and sports →
- Economy, business and law →
- Engineering, IT and technology →
- Social science →
- Art and music →

Why delivering flexibility is important:

- Strong focus on lifelong learning and decentralized education from the government.
- High demand from regional society and local politicians.
- Written in the university's strategy.
- One way to attract more students.
- Support from stakeholders.
- People are living longer, and many are retiring earlier. We need more hands to work in the future. In Norway, we say that we will ‘run out of heads before we run out of money’



Why do we (HEIs) struggle?

- How we are organized. Many layers of leadership. From rector to dean, to head of department, to head of bachelor programs, to section manager for the academic community. At what level do we make decisions?
- How we recruit leaders at all levels. We mostly recruit internally or from other HEIs - ‘imbalance' in the hierarchy .
- How to get teachers involved. It is challenging to convince staff with full work plans to make an effort.
- Lack of incentives to go “the extra mile”. “Good for promotion” – but what about the professors?
- HEIs lack holistic approaches. We reinvent the wheel several times due to lack of internal communication.
- National and local regulations and rules are “old fashioned” and made for campus education

UiA

I believe HEIs need to rethink how we do things!

Let me quote what our former Minister of Research and Higher Education said in a speech to HEIs in Norway in 2021

“The party is over – it is time to deliver”,
cutting the budget every year since.

At UiA, we are facing a 75 million NOK deficit this year and 125 million NOK next year.

This is a major concern among our leaders – but for most of our academic staff, it is still business as usual.

If we do not act and increase our income, people will be fired, and programs will be closed.

We already see this in many Norwegian universities.

UiA

Thank you for your attention!