

If the UvA Board Will Wait Until the Next Scandal, We Won't

Another year, another faculty, another incriminating [dossier](#) documenting institutional apathy towards the intimidation of students and staff at the UvA. The victims of both cases, whose exact numbers we still don't know, have to live with the pain of their experiences. Meanwhile, nothing substantial is being done to ensure that similar allegations are independently investigated, let alone that the culture allowing abuses and their toleration is recognized and fought.

The university board's formal [reaction](#) to the most recent revelations exposes yet again that expressions of remorse and promises of learning, listening and healing remain hollow. It has become painfully clear how the imbalance of power within the university systematically creates a productive playing field for abuse and its cover up. The procedures which the higher management insist on to make the workplace "safe" protect alleged abusers up the hierarchy, and obscure both the extent of the abuse and its willing and unwitting enablers. To add insult to injury, managers' claim that such cases are "[horrible for everyone](#)" create a false equivalency between those at the perpetrating and those at the receiving ends of such actions, in effect blaming the victims for causing pain to perpetrators.

The university, like other hierarchical organizations, is clearly ill-equipped to investigate itself when it comes to structural abuses of power; it is simply unwilling to see them. **What we need is a different structure and a new process for handling complaints.**

Years of the university board's dragging their feet and devising half-hearted solutions signal to those who are knowingly abusing their power: keep going, with impunity. Little is being done to proactively address—at all levels—the inherent imbalance of power and how to counterbalance it when it comes to abuse. That means that staff are nowhere nearly as aware as they should be to their privilege and capacity, willingly or not, to make others feel unsafe or discriminated against. Which explains tone-deaf announcements of "open doors." **What we need is a cultural change, and a concerted effort to raise awareness that staff and students have good reasons to mistrust those placed in charge.**

But we are not having the right kind of conversations, because higher management on this front is out of touch with students and staff realities. Not all problems can be fixed by a slick communications department and repeating meaningless "core values." We need to actually sit down and reflect on what is wrong and how to address it. And failing that, as is clearly the case, we need to have immediate and consequential action, since we no longer trust that the current university board and its policies can or wish to fix a broken system when it comes to staff and students' wellbeing.

The university board must change its course immediately and save the UvA. They should:

1. Apologize unreservedly for their gross incompetence in handling the recent case, **find appropriate ways to support victims**, and acknowledge that the system in place does not suffice;
2. Admit that the structural issues cannot be solved by offering "open doors," which demoralize victims who understandably trust neither upper management nor the process;
3. Dismantle the toothless office of *Vertrouwenspersoon*, which can never sufficiently address the problems at hand;

4. Abolish the ill-conceived, non-independent and clearly incompetent *Ombudsfunctionaris*;
5. Declare you will provide appropriate funds to establish a completely independent office for academic grievances for students and staff, in collaboration with local and national student unions;
6. Commit to fully cooperating with the new office, whose mandate will be to investigate allegations dating back at least 10 years; and
7. Institute regular diversity and inclusivity training to all staff members immediately. This is one meaningful way of conducting new kinds of conversations about what constitutes a safe learning environment.

University board members: we and others have urged you repeatedly about these issues [in the past](#). This time, however, there is no need to threaten sanctions for your failure to enact these simple, and by now obvious changes. The sad truth is that your blindness and incompetence is eroding trust in our workplace, our reputation and everyone's wellbeing. If you won't save our workplace, we will do it for ourselves by having direct conversations, by supporting each other in finding new ways of speaking out, and by cutting out what appears to be useless, expensive and ineffective intermediaries, whose priority is evidently not us.

Sincerely,

ReThink UvA