

Open Letter
to the Board of the Faculty of Humanities
by the teaching staff of the Department of History & Art History

We write as Assistant Professors and temporary or permanently employed teaching staff, in the Department of History and Art History to express our deep concerns with our current working environment. We – together with the teaching staff in other departments – deliver one of the financially and structurally most important parts of this faculty, yet we have been hit the hardest by the recent cutbacks. Our working environment is students' learning environment and these conditions affect the entire academic community. Only last year, the Commissie Werkdruk has highlighted the intense pressure teaching staff is under at this faculty, yet instead of addressing this unsustainable situation the Faculty Board is planning cuts that will further exacerbate it.

We also feel that despite the importance of our tasks to the existence of the university, our concerns have not been taken seriously despite repeated individual and collective meetings and written expression. The suggestions made by the Rethink UU group in 2015, for example, have been largely ignored. For these reasons, we are using this open letter to submit our suggestions for a better working environment to the Faculty Board:

A fairer sharing of the burden

- **A more realistic DCU model:** the current model does not represent the actual workload invested in teaching: preparation, marking, individual feedback, office hours and other educational duties. It is not possible to deliver the quality of teaching the faculty aims for in the time that is allocated. Many of us choose to work more hours than we are paid, and we sacrifice leave and research time in order to maintain high standards of teaching. We ask for a more realistic allocation of teaching time to enable us to do our job effectively and with integrity.
- **Transparency about the allocation of cuts:** we understand the situation of ever decreasing public funds for universities. We do our part to address this situation. However, the most recent cutbacks have mainly been applied to teaching staff, and teaching duties. Expanding class sizes and lowering the amount of DCUs allocated to classes (even further than the already inadequate allocations) cuts our salaries. In effect we work more for the same salary. We would like to know what sacrifices management and administrative staff are making to help shoulder the burden of the cutbacks. They may be contributing their fair share. Yet the top-down approach to planning and implementing recent cuts lacks transparency. It creates frustration.
- **Assign a minimum teaching load to all academic staff:** The people who currently make the decisions about teaching load, class sizes and time allocated for completing duties associated with teaching are not involved in the day to day operation of the majority of the teaching at this faculty. They might have previous teaching experience, but they do not have direct and current experience of the situation of teaching staff. A minimum teaching load of at least one full course on BA level for all academic staff of all levels, including departmental and faculty management, would share the teaching load more fairly and ensure that the people who make decisions about teaching are also directly affected by them.

Organization of teaching and research

- **Fewer contact hours:** the high number of contact hours at this faculty places an undue burden on teaching staff. It undercuts an academic emphasis on self-directed study that defines tertiary study as opposed to secondary.ⁱ Recent studies suggest that contact hours, particularly when they are spent in large classes, are less useful for students than independent study.ⁱⁱ While the amount of contact hours for first year courses is set at twelve in accordance with performance agreements with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, there are no reasons to keep this high number of contact hours for second- and third-year courses. A reduction of contact hours (without a reduction of DCUs) would lighten the currently unsustainable load of teaching staff and improve the learning experience of students.
- **Return to research-led teaching:** as academics, we have accepted relatively low pay in exchange for autonomy in teaching and research. However, the centralization of decisions about the curriculum and teaching methods on faculty level has led to an erosion of the ideal of research-led teaching at this faculty. Research-led teaching is one of the most important aspects of university education. Undermining it calls into question the nature of the University.
The failure to uphold and encourage research-led teaching wastes our expertise and knowledge of the field. We were employed at this faculty as researchers and scientific experts. We are not deployed effectively in that role. This undermines the students' education: only people with expert knowledge, an inherent interest in the field and control over the way that this expertise is taught can deliver enthusiastic, deeply informed teaching.
The effect of current policies is that we experience an increasingly de-professionalized university, in which our autonomy has been reduced. Professionalism for managers seems to consist of the installation of systems of distrust and control mechanisms, such as the demanded research output (dynamisering onderzoekstijd). Yet true professionalism hinges upon trust in the capabilities of the professional. The faculty should show more trust in our abilities, as proven experts, to deliver valuable education at university level. We ask for a return of decision-making powers about the titles, content, structure and assessment of the teaching we deliver every day.
- **Research output:** while the teaching load has expanded (which means an effective cut in our research time), the demanded research output (dynamisering onderzoekstijd) for permanent staff has remained the same. This is obviously unsustainable. At the same time, grant writing takes up more and more of our time without being properly being accounted for, e.g. by counting proposal-submissions in a similar way as publications. We ask for a more flexible and more autonomous approach to research output that takes account of grant proposals.
- **Suspension of teaching evaluations:** there are many recent studies that show the gender, age, and race bias of student teaching evaluations.ⁱⁱⁱ Student evaluations, in the deeply flawed format they are used at this faculty, undermine the relationship between teachers and students which is the basis for good university education. Furthermore, because of their bias against female and minority staff, student evaluations undermine the recent university-wide ambitions to increase diversity.

We ask for the suspension of teaching evaluations until the problem of bias is addressed on the basis of scientific studies and our input about their appropriate use.

An academic community

- **More say in decisions:** the managerial culture at this faculty has led to high levels of frustration on our part. We do not feel that our concerns are heard or taken seriously when they are voiced. We feel we are treated as mere employees, rather than members of the same academic community and as professionals with a stake in the well-being of the institution we represent. We ask for more direct consultation in any decision that directly affects teaching.
- **Fairness for temporary staff:** this faculty relies on underpaid and overworked temporary staff for a high proportion of its teaching. Our colleagues on temporary contracts are essential for the functioning of this faculty, but that have no perspective for a permanent job in this institution. This belies the excellence rhetoric frequently used by the faculty. We ask for a change in this strategy to create more permanent posts that offer a long-term perspective for indispensable staff.
- **A different vision:** the faculty seems to be ruled by a surprisingly uncritical approach to quantitative performance indicators, such as league tables. It has embraced business-like rhetoric that frames students as consumers and staff as service providers. We disagree strongly with the idea of the university as a business. We believe that the university, as a public institution funded mainly by public money, fulfils a different role in society than a company delivering a product: it is vital for the education of responsible, critical and informed citizens and thus for the continued existence of an open, democratic society. We ask for a review of quantitative performance measures to prove in a qualitative way, established in deliberation with all staff it concerns, that they help solving a pressing problem and that they will not establish a counterproductive effect. We seek the formulation of an educational mission grounded in values that go beyond numbers, marketable skills and performance indicators.
- **Pushback against cutbacks:** we often feel that the faculty does not represent us to central management. Rather it acts as a representative and executor of central management. We would like to see faculty management take our side and voice a more robust, vocal and public pushback against cutbacks, marketization of university education and casualization of teaching contracts.

(in alphabetical order)

Dr Lars Behrisch
Dr Eleni Braat
Dr Sarah Carmichael
Pauline Dirven
Dr Floris van den Eijnde
Dr Rachel Gillett
Dr Lauren Gould
Rutger van der Hoeven
Dr Marijke Huisman
Dr Pieter Huistra
Dr Jochen Hung
Dr Merlijn Hurx
Erik Jacobs
Dr Christ Klep
Dr Heleen Kole
Dr Reinbert Krol
Matthijs Kuipers
Dr Tessa Lobbjes
Dr Sarah Joan Moran
Dr Peter Malcontent
Dr Rob Meens
Dr Sjoukje van der Meulen
Dr Dirk van Miert
Dr Carine van Rhijn
Dr Steffen Rimner
Joris Roosen
Dr Joep Schenk
Dr Britta Schilling
Dr Ralph Sprenkels
Dr Rolf Strootman
Niels Terpstra
Dr Anna Tijsseling
Lotje van Uhm
Dr Uğur Üngör
Dr Lorena de Vita
Dr Christian Wicke
Dr Robert-Jan Wille

In support:

Dr Jolle Demmers
Prof Ed Jonker
Dr José de Kruif
Prof Tine de Moor
Prof Koen Ottenheym
Dr Remco Raben

Dr Willemijn Ruberg
Prof Leonard Rutgers
Dr Fenneke Sysling
Prof Ismee Tames
Prof Mariken Teeuwen

ⁱ For comparison: a 7.5 ECTS course at our department normally has 42 contact hours in a 10-week teaching period (4.2 per week on average), while at University College London a comparable course at the Faculty of Arts & Humanities has 20 contact hours in a 16-week teaching period (1.25 per week). At the University of Helsinki, a comparable course at the Faculty of Humanities has between 20 and 32 contact hours in a 10-week teaching period (2 - 3.2 per week).

ⁱⁱ For an overview of these studies, see Camille Kandiko Howson, '[Don't equate contact hours with teaching quality](#)', *The Guardian*, 23 November 2016; '[Independent study more useful than contact hours, study suggests](#)', *Times Higher Education*, 13 November 2016; Christopher Bigsby, '[Counting university contact hours is a waste of time](#)', *Times Higher Education*, 20 November 2014; Graham Gibbs, 'Teaching intelligence: Contact hours and student engagement', *Times Higher Education*, 14 March 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Henry A. Hornstein, 'Student evaluations of teaching are an inadequate assessment tool for evaluating faculty performance', *Cogent Education*, Vol. 4 (2017), No. 1, published online: 20 Mar 2017; Anne Boring, 'Gender biases in student evaluations of teaching', *Journal of Public Economics*, Vol. 145 (January 2017), pp. 27-41; John A. Centra and Noreen B. Gaubatz, 'Is There Gender Bias in Student Evaluations of Teaching?', *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 71 (2000), No. 1, pp. 17-33. See also '[Research suggests students are biased against female lecturers](#)', *The Economist*, 21 September 2017; Eva Lilienfeld, '[How Student Evaluations Are Skewed against Women and Minority Professors](#)', *The Century Foundation*, 10 June 2016; Colleen Flaherty, '[Bias Against Female Instructors](#)', *Insider Higher Ed*, 11 January 2016.