FIXING ACADEMIA

Reflections from a New Generation of Scholars

Dion Kramer &
Berend van der Kolk
(Eds.)

"This book offers a thoughtful and engaged reflection on Dutch academia. The contributions are realistic about the challenges facing academia, yet ambitious in charting ways forward. I value that mindset. The themes are diverse, yet united by a concern for creating an academic environment in which people can develop, do meaningful work and contribute to society. I hope and expect that this book will help advance important conversations on how we can improve the Dutch academic climate. I read it with great interest and will gladly draw on its insights in my work."

Professor Caspar van den Berg
President of Universities of the Netherlands

"Young academics are not only the future; they are the present. Yet their voices are not always represented in university management and science policy. That's why this book is essential: It shows how young academics are committed to strengthening science and building a more inclusive academia."

Dr. Eddie Brummelman
Chair of The Young Academy

FIXING ACADEMIA

FIXING ACADEMIA

Reflections from a New Generation of Scholars

Dion Kramer &
Berend van der Kolk (Eds.)

VU University Press

VU University Press
De Boelelaan 1105
1081 HV Amsterdam
The Netherlands

www.vuuniversitypress.com
info@vuuniversitypress.nl

Omslagontwerp en vormgeving
binnenwerk: Haller Brun, Amsterdam

ISBN 978 90 8659 918 9
NUR 143

This open access publication was funded
by the Amsterdam Young Academy (AYA).

Do you prefer reading paper books?
Scan the QR code to order the beautiful
print edition of *Fixing Academia*.

www.fixingacademia.com

Contents

Introduction: Reflecting on an Institution That's Already Under Attack

Berend van der Kolk & Dion Kramer

Universities worldwide are in challenging times. As funding declines and academic freedom is curtailed, geopolitical rivalries are eroding international cooperation. Academic institutions face coordinated attacks and the context in which universities operate is becoming increasingly polarized and hostile. Robust scientific findings are neglected or openly discredited if they do not fit a political agenda, with dire implications that reach far beyond academia. Under these circumstances it is natural to wonder if this is the right time to publish a book that critically reflects on the current state of academia. Is it not the task of young academics to defend the institution at all costs?

We acknowledge that critiquing an institution that is already under attack is a delicate balancing act. Furthermore, there are many positives in academia which should not be ignored. We consider it a profound privilege to work as academics: teaching, research, and societal engagement are activities that are intrinsically rewarding. At the same time, we think it is important to critically reflect on the inner workings of academia to understand how it functions and how it can be improved. In fact, we believe this is both the right and responsibility of academics who take values such as academic freedom and critical thinking seriously. Academic freedom includes reflecting on one's own institution and speaking out against it, if necessary, and is a "basic element for ensuring the progress of science and the health of democracy."[1] Articulating where we can improve as an institution enables us to exercise academic freedom while highlighting its relevance for society.

1 European Parliamentary Research Service, *Horizon Europe: Protecting Academic Freedom*, PE 757.804 (Brussels, 2024), iii.

What is the purpose of a university? While there are many answers possible, most people would probably agree that the primary goal of universities is increasing knowledge and educating students. The 'how' of achieving this and the prioritization of activities is often subject to fierce debate. In his standard work on American universities, Berkeley president Clark Kerr wrote that "the university is so many things to so many different people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself."[2] On top of the resulting internal conflicts come challenges and tensions that are specific to time and place. Before introducing the main themes of this book, we briefly outline the challenges and internal tensions that 21st-century universities have to navigate. We emphasize that this book is anchored in the experiences of scholars working in the Netherlands. Dutch academia therefore offers the context and examples from which we draw most of our conclusions. In the Netherlands, universities are largely government funded and offer programs in Dutch and English. The reflections shared in this book may be more or less relevant in other parts of the world, but we hope that our analysis of the Dutch situation facilitates critical discussion and, perhaps, inspires change beyond national boundaries.

The ivory tower. Although the image of the professor tucked away behind books might be something from the past, universities and academics are still often accused of operating in "ivory towers," detached from reality. Factors that may contribute to this image are hyper specialization within academia, an obsessive focus on obtaining grants and other funds to conduct research (see Chapter 3), and a publication culture that signals that "more is always better." Indeed, various internal incentive structures within the contemporary academic system can stand in the way of building meaningful links between science and society.

2 Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University, 5th ed.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 7.

At the same time, however, building bridges to society and industry in pursuit of "valorization" also comes with challenges. Universities, particularly those in the Western world, have moved to the center of knowledge and value production in neoliberal knowledge economies and have become an important nod in a complex network society.[3] Yet partnerships with industry or governments have the potential to reduce independence of inquiry that is at the heart of scholarship (see Chapter 8). And taking positions within public debates or aligning oneself with civil society groups may come at the cost of being accused of "activism."[4] Scholars who dare to leave the ivory tower may find out that in the media it is not always possible to be as nuanced as in academic journals, and when their findings and quotes are reduced to soundbites they may even be critiqued by their peers for not being nuanced enough. While academics of the 21st century are expected to be good at addressing both academic and non-academic audiences, they are often not trained to do the latter (see Chapter 7). All in all, universities and academics alike must find a way to accommodate and balance the plethora of expectations, which requires constant effort.

The moral actor. As institutions of discovery, innovation and critical thinking, universities are assigned a primary role in tackling global challenges. Universities across the world have committed themselves to the UN Sustainability Goals, such as a reduction of poverty and hunger, urgent climate action and the pursuit of peace and international justice. This translates into mission statements that position universities as places that help to build a better world. While explicit cooperation with the tobacco industry now seems taboo, the question whether universities and academics should no longer cooperate with the fossil fuel industry remains much more contested. Even more pertinent,

3 Adam Matthews, "The Idea and Becoming of a University across Time and Space: Ivory Tower, Factory and Network," *Postdigital Science and Education* 5 (2023): 665–693.

4 Ladan Rahbari et al., "Activism and Academia: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Academic Freedom and Social Engagement," *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 47, no. 1 (2024): 73–89.

at the moment of writing, is the question how universities should have responded to the large-scale student and staff protests against the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and the crimes against humanity in Gaza. The protesters appeal to the university's role as a public and moral actor that can make a difference, for instance by breaking ties with Israeli universities (which many Western universities did with Russian universities in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine). In response to these developments, the idea of "institutional neutrality" has gained renewed traction within some circles.[5] Often traced back to the Kalven report (1967), institutional neutrality sees the university as a "home and sponsor of critics" and not the critic itself. According to this view, the university should "maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures."[6] Even when one accepts the premise of neutrality, it remains an open question how far this can or should be stretched. Should universities protect academic staff and students that take critical stances on both sides of a public debate? Of course. But what happens when standpoints become more extreme? And how should universities govern their campuses, if at all? What are the conditions under which debates should take place? Should campuses be free of protest or, quite the opposite, should universities facilitate politics, protest and even occupation of buildings in recognition of the campus as a unique site of pluralist dialogue within society? Regardless of how such questions are answered, their existence shows there are practical limits to institutional tolerance, and that these limits are likely to remain contested.

Massafication. A third tension concerns the massification of higher education that has taken place over the past decades. The unparalleled increase in student numbers

5 Robert Post, "The Kalven Report, Institutional Neutrality, and Academic Freedom," in *Revisiting the Kalven Report: The University's Role in Social and Political Action*, ed. Keith Whittington and John Tomasi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming).

6 Kalven Committee, *Report on the University's Role in Political and Social Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1967).

seems to be a mixed blessing. It has certainly made the university a more inclusive place, enabling emancipation and social mobility based on meritocracy (although this has important limitations, see Chapter 1). Massification also comes with great challenges, not least regarding the quality of education and the mental health of students, for whom earning a diploma traditionally is a marker of success that promises entry to the better segments of the labor market and society. The university has transformed as a result – from an exclusive place *for* the elite, who receive academic *Bildung* in accordance with the Humboldtian model, to what some might call a "diploma factory" and a place for the production *of* an economic, social and cultural elite. In the Netherlands, this has led to growing concerns over the central role of higher education in the creation of a "diploma society," a society characterized by a divide between the theoretically educated and practically schooled.[7] While it would be unjustified to say that universities *caused* this, the "diploma society critique" concerns universities as they are turned into an object of political and social contestation, and a potential target of political resentment, as we have seen around the Dutch national elections of 2023.

Internationalization. While student mobility is of all times, contemporary discussion around the internationalization of higher education has politically escalated to the point of outright government interference. This development would have been unthinkable only a couple of decades ago. The Netherlands was a marginal country in the world of higher education until the 1990s: the number of Dutch nationals going abroad to pursue degrees (mostly to escape the strict "numerus fixus") far exceeded the number of foreign students coming to the Netherlands. Obstacles to student inflow included Dutch language barriers, housing shortages and high tuition fees (among the highest in Europe).[8] A government-driven *push* for internationalization –

7 Mark Bovens, "Opleiding als nieuwe verzuiling: En wat dit betekent voor de universiteit," afscheidsrede, Universiteit Utrecht, November 29, 2024.

8 Parliamentary Document Tweede Kamer, 1991–1992, 22452, no. 3.

combined with legal developments concerning the free movement of students within the EU – tilted the balance significantly in a matter of years. In the academic year 2024-2025, 27.2% of university students were internationals and 71% of the master programs were exclusively taught in English.[9] Internationalization has become a growth model for Dutch universities, a teaching method (the international classroom), and even an indicator of quality in some university rankings.[10] Internationalization has made the Dutch university a dynamic and a competitive place within globalized academia, a better place for students to understand our interconnected world and a place that performs a political-economic role of national importance in attracting a highly qualified workforce in times of an aging population and a global race for talent. It is a legitimate question to ask if this process has gone too fast or too far. As Professor Jane Knight, a leading scholar in the internationalization of higher education at the University of Toronto, warned in 2014, internationalization is intended to "honour local culture and context" and "complement, harmonise and extend the local dimension, not dominate it." In case of the latter, "there is a strong possibility of backlash and for internationalisation to be seen as a homogenising or hegemonic agent."[11] While the jury is still out, critics point to the destabilizing effects of internationalization, including its distributive impact on access to housing and education, and its contribution to widening the gap between academia and society.

In addition to the aforementioned tensions and challenges, Dutch universities had to deal with historic budget cuts in the years preceding the publication of this book. On top of this, the number of Dutch students at universities

9 Nuffic, *Factsheet Internationale Studenten 2025* (Den Haag: Nuffic, 2025).

10 Berend van der Kolk, *The Quantified Society* (Amsterdam: Business Contact, 2024).

11 Jane Knight, "Is Internationalisation of Higher Education Having an Identity Crisis?" in *The Forefront of International Higher Education: A Festschrift in Honor of Philip G. Altbach*, ed. Alma Maldonado-Maldonado and Roberta Malee Bassett (Cham: Springer, 2014), 75–88.

has declined from 2021 to 2024 by about 6%.[12] As funding is tied to student numbers, this decline poses immediate and future financial challenges for universities. Financial constraints render the debate about the essence of universities more urgent and put questions such as "What should universities look like?" high on the public agenda. This book seeks to contribute to this fundamental and timely debate. In the next section, we will introduce which topics will be dealt with in more detail.

12 In 2021, approximately 261,000 Dutch students were enrolled in programs at Dutch universities, but by 2024 this number had declined to approximately 246,000. These numbers were obtained from reports and databases shared with us by an official of the Universities of the Netherlands (UNL).

Content covered in this book

Anyone who reflects on the question "What needs fixing in academia?" will agree that it is impossible to come up with a definitive list. The answers you get depend on who you ask. Additionally, every era has its own issues. For this book, we have asked young scientists from Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam (UvA) to reflect on an important problem they identified. We challenged them to not only reflect on the problem, but also to investigate what had been done so far, and what should be done in the foreseeable future, to address it. The result is a kaleidoscope of chapters that showcases not only the diverse backgrounds of the contributing academics, but also reflect the time in which we live and the multifaceted nature of academic work.

In Chapter 1, Yusuf Çelik critically addresses the barriers to entering university and becoming an academic. While, compared to the past, more and more people are academically schooled, entry barriers continue to disadvantage first-generation students and those from migrant or lower socio-economic backgrounds in particular. Looking empirically at the educational system in the Netherlands, Çelik shows how path dependency reduces the chances of academic success of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. After reviewing specific programs and scholarships supporting first-generation students, he urges universities to expand these initiatives and reform admission and recruitment processes.

Chapter 2, by Diletta Martinelli and Maarten Bolhuis, also addresses accessibility, but from a global perspective. The chapter discusses the issue of declining accessibility of academia, particularly for students from the Global South. Martinelli and Bolhuis develop arguments that appeal to morality and effectiveness, and make the case in favor of strengthening the diversity and accessibility agenda of Dutch universities. They call on academic leaders to take coordinated action to facilitate access for students from the Global South in the form of exchange relations, scholarships,

and transparency about admission criteria to create a level playing field.

In Chapter 3, Dion Kramer takes issue with the proliferation of competitive funding. Increasingly, academics spend significant time writing grant proposals for highly competitive research funding competitions with very low success rates. Winning competitive grants, in turn, has become an access ticket to a successful academic career. He argues that allocating research funding through competitions is inefficient and prone to inequality and instability on the work floor. With the introduction of Starting Grants in 2022, the Dutch government undertook an unprecedented experiment, providing young assistant professors with a promising alternative to competitive grants. Kramer relies on a survey he conducted with the Amsterdam Young Academy to defend baseline grants while also warning against its potential pitfalls.

In Chapter 4, Laura Dreissen argues that promotion rights should be distributed more fairly. In most Dutch universities, the right to be the primary PhD supervisor is reserved for senior academics (full professors and associate professors). This custom is challenged by Dreissen. Particularly in situations in which an assistant professor is the principal investigator and carries out most of the supervisory work, she argues, their work should be recognized formally by allowing them promotion rights and the right to wear a gown at academic ceremonies.

Chapter 5 by Evgenia Lysova problematizes the relation between motivation and overburdened academic staff. Academics are generally passionate about the diverse work at universities, balancing teaching, research, administrative tasks and building bridges to society. An inherent potential problem in the architecture of academic work is that each of these tasks comes with a different set of stakeholders with varied expectations. This accumulation of responsibilities, in combination with the promise of meaningful work or future promotions, may lead academics to accept more tasks than what would be associated with healthy work conditions. Lysova proposes various ways to deal with

this, including individual coaching and more transparency about allocated tasks.

In Chapter 6, Callista Mulder analyzes how parenthood impacts academic careers. Drawing on personal experiences, Mulder talks about the challenges of balancing a scientific career with maternity. In this chapter, she discusses research that shows that nearly 50% of females leave full-time science after their first child is born, demonstrating that this is far from a personal issue. In academia, it seems, we expect too much from parents and support them too little. To accommodate parents in academia, Mulder suggests, among other things, to improve job security after parental leave and to elaborate existing extension programs for grants.

Chapter 7 by Gea Dreschler examines the writing skills of academics and explores what more should be done to turn academics into effective communicators. In a world where academics are increasingly required to demonstrate impact and build connections with society, strong communication skills are key. Interestingly, however, academics do not often view themselves as "writers", but rather as "researchers." Yet, much of their work consists of writing and communicating to various audiences. Dreschler examines the impact of recent developments, including the availability of Generative AI, on the writing process and offers suggestions for developing the writing skills of PhD students.

Chapter 8 by Tiago R. Matos focuses on integrity and independence of research, particularly in the biomedical sciences. Matos reflects on the position of key opinion leaders (KOLs), industry-backed senior researchers who often hold various gatekeeping roles. The chapter also problematizes the influence of pharmaceutical companies on scientific work and practices, such as ghost management and honorary authorships. Holding positions both in academia and industry, Matos reflects on what researchers can do to preserve research integrity, and pushes for more transparency about relations between academia and industry.

Chapter 9 by Berend van der Kolk deals with complications related to the current system of academic publishing.

Drawing on several interviews with experts, the dominance of a few large, commercial publishers is problematized. Van der Kolk argues that academia essentially pays triple for publishing research. First, academics write, review, and edit papers, almost always without payment from publishers. Second, Dutch universities pay about EUR 50 million for subscriptions and for publishing open access per year, and third, academics and universities pay by providing large amounts of data to publishers – sometimes referred to as "surveillance publishing." He concludes that changing the system is difficult, but not impossible, drawing attention to novel initiatives to regain control over the infrastructures that are used to disseminate research.

The book ends with a brief epilogue highlighting several overarching conclusions that can be drawn from its presented chapters. What stands out in each of them is fairness of academic structures and academia's relationship with society.

In this book, we aim to provide an analysis of some of the problems facing academia, and offer constructive suggestions on how to move forward. We should acknowledge that claiming to know "how to fix it" may be presumptuous. It implies that easy solutions exist for the problems we identify, which, unfortunately, is rarely the case. All chapters are structured around three main questions: what needs fixing, what has been done in the past to address the issue, and what more should be done? The book includes numerous successful examples that illustrate that changes can be made. We do not need to accept the status quo. This book and the included recommendations can be seen as building blocks for the university of the future. While we focus our analyses primarily on academia in the Netherlands, we hope they can also trigger reflection and action elsewhere. The chapters are intended to inspire academics, policymakers, and administrators to make the changes needed to navigate the challenges of our times.

1.

Breaking the Barriers for First-Generation Students

Yusuf Çelik

The history of education in the Netherlands seems to reflect an ongoing progression toward greater democratization and accessibility, opening doors to students from a broader range of social backgrounds and representing a positive achievement by any measure. For instance, while only 1% of the population was academically schooled in 1960, this figure has recently risen to 14%.[13] Similarly, the number of individuals completing a PhD has nearly tripled since 1991.[14] However, these statistics should not give the impression that inequality of opportunity is no longer a concern. On the contrary, despite the advances achieved, first-generation students – particularly those from migrant or lower socio-economic backgrounds – continue to face structural barriers within the Dutch education system. Understanding why such patterns of inequality endure requires an examination of two underlying mechanisms: path dependency and the Matthew effect. In this chapter, I examine how these mechanisms function within the Dutch academic context and outline measures that may help mitigate them

13 Mark Bovens, "Opleiding als nieuwe verzuiling: En wat dit betekent voor de universiteit," afscheidsrede, Universiteit Utrecht, November 29, 2024.

14 Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, "Aantallen gepromoveerden in Nederland," June 16, 2025, www.ocwincijfers.nl/sectoren/wetenschap/universitair-onderzoek/aantallen-gepromoveerden-in-nederland.

What needs fixing?

Consider the following example. A recent PhD vacancy in psycholinguistics at a Dutch university lists "existing peer-reviewed publications and conference presentations" as traits that will "give you an advantage." At first glance, this wording seems to reflect academia's ever-rising bar. Some decades ago, entry-level research positions rarely required this. On closer inspection, however, this requirement puts first-generation students at a structural disadvantage within academia and demonstrates the persistent inequality of opportunity throughout the academic system. For starters, first-generation students often report a diminished sense of belonging, limited awareness of the hidden curriculum, and face challenges in graduating.[15] Under financial and familial pressure, they are also far less likely to participate in the extracurricular opportunities that foster the social and cultural capital from which early publications often emerge. Hence, what may appear to be a neutral preference can thus inadvertently disadvantage first-generation students and disproportionately exclude applicants from less privileged backgrounds.

What the example illustrates is that past events and circumstances can impact future choices and outcomes, a phenomenon known as path dependency. Understanding the marginalization of first-generation and disadvantaged students requires us to consider path dependency in Dutch education more widely. To start with, it is well known that students from less privileged backgrounds can receive school recommendations below their actual potential: a practice known as "under-advising."[16] This can result from implicit biases among teachers or assumptions that these

15 Dialogic, Een serieuze zaak: De wereld van kansenongelijkheid voor eerstegeneratiestudenten achter het halen van een diploma (Utrecht: Dialogic, 2024).

16 Centraal Planbureau, *Stapelen in het voortgezet onderwijs* (Den Haag: CPB, 2022).
Also see: Sara Geven, Anatolia Batruch, and Herman van de Werfhorst, *Inequality in Teacher Judgements, Expectations and Track Recommendations: A Review Study* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2018).

students lack the necessary support systems, including academically engaged or well-resourced parents.[17] As a result, ambitious students with the potential to achieve more are often forced to take a more arduous path toward higher education. In other words, they begin on a lower educational track and must sequentially accumulate qualifications (*stapelen* in Dutch) to reach the level they are capable of.

While those who progress from vocational education to university often show extraordinary tenacity and perseverance, this trajectory is not without its consequences and risks. To begin with, pursuing multiple degrees requires additional financial resources. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often lack such means, this can potentially become a deterrent, which may lead them to voluntarily opt out of further study. Second, sequential accumulation of qualifications can lead to gaps in foundational skills, particularly in language and mathematics. These subjects are heavily emphasized in pre-university tracks such as the *gymnasium* but are often deprioritized in early vocational routes like *MBO*. The cumulative effect of this more difficult path – combined with a weaker academic foundation – makes the already challenging experience of being a first-generation student even harder, leading to a higher risk of dropping out or having to struggle to finish nominally without building the social and cultural capital needed after graduating.

Even when students from disadvantaged backgrounds manage to overcome their initial hurdles, such as receiving a school recommendation that truly reflects their potential, they may still be held back later in their educational journey by mechanisms like the *numerus fixus* and decentralized selection procedures. These systems often assess applicants using measurable indicators such as grades,

17 Inti Soeterik et al., *Onderzoeken wat we niet zien: Een verkennende literatuurstudie naar onderadvisering vanuit intersectioneel perspectief* (Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Instituut, 2025); Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, *De overstap van po naar vo: Handreiking schooladvisering* (Den Haag: Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2020).

aptitude tests, or written assignments, with little to no consideration of social background. This creates an asymmetrical comparison between students from different backgrounds. For example, students from more affluent backgrounds often have access to tutoring and other forms of academic support, which can lead to higher grades, while students from less privileged backgrounds may achieve only passing marks. Yet, few pause to recognize the significance of attaining a passing grade while navigating the additional burdens imposed by socio-economic disadvantage. As a result, research findings indicate that in highly selective programs like medicine, students from the wealthiest 10% of the population are also the most likely to gain admission.[18]

Once established in prestigious academic and professional fields, advantages continue to compound for the privileged through the way grant schemes are structured. Grants often reward the very achievements, such as early publications and international research experience, that are more readily attainable for those with socio-economic advantages. Moreover, as the Matthew effect predicts, receiving one grant significantly increases the likelihood of securing subsequent ones (see also Chapter 3).

The inequality of opportunity between the privileged and the socio-economically disadvantaged risks reverberating all the way to the highest levels of academic governance. Academics whose careers are defined by the successful acquisition of grants are more likely to rise to influential positions in leadership, policymaking, and governing boards. From these positions of power, they may – even unintentionally – perpetuate the very inequalities from which they once benefited by continuing to hire and promote candidates with similar backgrounds and trajectories. After all, effects like similarity bias or class bias are well-documented

18 Tessa Hofland, "Kansenongelijkheid medische studies gestegen: Met een migratieachtergrond minder kans op toelating," *Erasmus Magazine*, September 9, 2022, www.erasmusmagazine.nl/2022/09/09/kansenongelijkheid-medische-studies-gestegen-met-een-migratie achtergrond-minder-kans-op-toelating/.

in hiring practices.[19] Yet this dynamic stands in stark contrast to the urgent need for academic leadership to become more diverse – not less – in order to serve an education system that already, often implicitly, contributes to inequality of opportunity.[20]

19 Caren B. Goldberg, "Relational Demography and Similarity-Attraction in Interview Assessments and Subsequent Offer Decisions," *Group & Organization Management* 30, no. 6 (2005): 597–624.
Zie ook: Michael W. Kraus et al., "Evidence for the Reproduction of Social Class in Brief Speech," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 46 (2019): 22998–23003.

20 The Young Academy, *First but Not Least: Experiences of First-Generation Academics in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: The Young Academy, 2025).

What has already been done to address this issue?

Inequality of opportunity in academic education and post-graduation has been addressed in the following principal ways: (1) raising awareness of inequality, (2) institutional support programs, (3) improved financing flexibility, and (4) more inclusive grant schemes.

First, numerous academics have sounded the alarm in various media, including speeches, magazine articles, and reports. As a result, there has been a growing awareness of the problems related to inequality of opportunity in higher education, particularly as they affect less privileged students, including first-generation students.

Second, universities have begun offering programs designed to support first-generation students in their academic journey. One such example is the *Better Prepared* initiative at VU Amsterdam. Better Prepared is principally a two-day preparation program offered by the VU to help new students start their studies with confidence. It is especially aimed at students who are the first in their family to attend university, though others can also join. The program offers practical study tips, introduces the university campus and culture, and helps students build useful social connections.

Third, the aforementioned path dependency in education is, to some extent, mitigated by alternative financing options such as the lifelong learning credit (*levenslanglerenkrediet* in Dutch). Regular student finance in the Netherlands is capped at the age of 30. As a result, first-generation students who previously dropped out of higher education due to financial hardship or exhaustion from sequential accumulation of credentials can still return to complete their studies after turning 30. In the past, they would have been effectively locked into their earlier path, with the only alternative being the far less feasible option of full self-financing.

Finally, even grant schemes have become more aware and accommodating to first-generation students from migrant backgrounds. The most noteworthy example in this

regard is NWO's Mosaic 2.0 PhD scholarship. This scholarship is designed to stimulate the participation of underrepresented graduates in the Netherlands with a migration background in the academic world.

What more should be done?

Efforts to further promote equality of opportunity in academia should focus on three key areas: (1) supporting first-generation students, particularly those from economically vulnerable backgrounds, and researching potential causes of inequality; (2) developing more equitable admissions procedures that take socio-economic background into account; and (3) enabling the adoption of contextual recruitment practices to ensure fairer access to high-profile academic and professional roles.

First, the current momentum, namely the growing recognition of inequality of opportunity across various levels of academia, including higher education, must be sustained, measured, and expanded where necessary. Continued and targeted support for first-generation students, especially those from economically vulnerable backgrounds, remains essential. Initiatives such as the Better Prepared program should not only be maintained in the coming years but also critically evaluated for their effectiveness. If needed, such programs should be expanded. Currently offered as a two-to-four-day orientation, it is worth asking whether this duration is sufficient to provide meaningful, long-term support for students.

This need for further research also applies to several unresolved and contentious issues that lack sufficient data. One such issue is the binding study advice, a decision made by universities to determine whether a student may continue their studies after the first year. Research suggests that first-generation students often need more time to adjust to academic life. It stands to reason, then, that these students may be disproportionately affected by a binding study advice issued precisely at the point when they are beginning to acclimate. However, while significant statistical correlations have been observed, there is currently insufficient evidence to establish a causal relationship. As a result, it remains an open question to what degree the binding study advice contributes to higher dropout rates among first-generation students compared to their peers.

Second, in addition to continuing existing initiatives, there is a pressing need to develop more equitable admissions procedures, both at the level of higher education and in the hiring process for PhD positions. The issue of *admissions gatekeeping* (e.g., *numerus fixus* and decentralized selection) remains problematic, as these procedures still fail to account for applicants' socio-economic backgrounds. This stands in contrast to practices in other countries, where a candidate's background is considered as part of a more holistic admissions process. In the Netherlands, however, legal constraints still pose significant challenges to affirmative action or Widening Access policies.[21] As the Dutch Minister of Education stated in 2024 in response to *parliamentary questions*, decentralized selection may only be based on qualitative criteria such as cognitive ability or academic performance and not on cultural or socio-economic characteristics.[22] As such, substantial political deliberation and legal changes are still required before more equitable admissions practices can be implemented.

Lastly, once the aforementioned political and legal challenges are resolved, it may also pave the way for the adoption of contextual recruitment practices, which can improve access to high-profile positions, including academic roles, for first-generation graduates. Contextual recruitment allows employers to consider the circumstances in which candidates achieved their academic results, highlighting applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds who have outperformed their peers. By incorporating contextual information, this approach enables a more informed evaluation of candidates' potential, rather than relying solely on raw grades or traditional metrics.[23] It is particularly valuable

21 Lianne Mulder et al., "Selection for Health Professions Education Leads to Increased Inequality of Opportunity and Decreased Student Diversity in the Netherlands, but Lottery Is No Solution: A Retrospective Multi-cohort Study," *Medical Teacher* 44, no. 7 (2022): 790–799.

22 Parliamentary document Tweede Kamer, 2023-2024, 31288 no. 1113, https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-31288-1113.html.

23 The Bar Council, "Contextual Recruitment Explained," The Bar Council (blog), 4 December 2024, www.barcouncil.org.uk/resource/contextual-recruitment-explained-blog.html.

in identifying high achievers who have demonstrated resilience by overcoming significant challenges.

2.

Opening the University to the Global South

Diletta Martinelli & Maarten Bolhuis

Talented and motivated students coming from different parts of the world face different academic pathways. Access to opportunities is deeply influenced by someone's country of origin and the institutions they have previously attended. While global academia thrives on diversity and inclusion of perspectives and knowledge from across the globe, equitable access remains elusive – especially to academic institutions in the Global North for students from the Global South. A diverse and inclusive academy has much more to offer, is more representative of our diverse and increasingly connected societies, leads to better research, and strengthens our ability to address global challenges. Despite the good work that is being done to make academia more diverse, investing in inclusivity demands our continuous and collective commitment.

What needs fixing?

Increasing participation in academia of students and early-career researchers from the Global South is a persistent challenge for many countries in the Global North, including the Netherlands. Scholarships for competitive graduate programs are scarce, and prospective students face barriers such as lack of a network, limited access to advanced training, and high cost of living in cities like Amsterdam. These obstacles make it difficult for them to compete on equal footing in systems that are driven by merit. Moreover, in selecting international Master's students, admission boards struggle to fairly judge grades awarded by institutions from different higher education systems and understand the content and academic rigor of applicants' prior degrees.[24] The case of African students is particularly striking. Despite rapid population growth and increasing numbers of young people in Africa – estimated to comprise over one third of the world's youth aged 15-24 by 2050[25] – only a small fraction of international students in Dutch universities come from the African continent.[26]

In the current climate, we fear that access to Dutch higher education for talented students from the Global South will be further reduced. Public sentiment around migration in the Netherlands and other parts of the Global North has become increasingly negative over the past two decades. As a result, the discourse around the internationalization of Dutch academia has shifted dramatically.

24 Mastermind Europe, *Admissions to English-Taught Programs (ETPs) at Master's Level in Europe: Report 2: Procedures, Regulations, Success Rates and Challenges for Diverse Applicants* (2017), www.mastermindeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Report-2-Admissions-to-ETPs.pdf.

25 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2022: Summary of Results*, UN DESA/POP/2022/TR/NO. 3 (New York, 2022), www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/World-Population-Prospects-2022.

26 Statistics Netherlands (CBS), "Where Do International Students in the Netherlands Come From?" (2023), longreads.cbs.nl/the-netherlands-in-numbers-2023/where-do-international-students-in-the-netherlands-come-from/.

Rather than having self-evident value, internationalization and diversity must now be actively defended. International students are blamed for the housing crisis in Amsterdam, and in anticipation of new legislation, universities are scaling down English-taught Bachelor's programs in efforts to "rebalance" internationalization.[27]

Despite this apparent turn of the tide, increasing diversity and accessibility is crucial for a sustainable and responsible academic ecosystem. The literature highlights a range of arguments to support this. We will limit ourselves to three key points here. First, there is a moral imperative to increase access to academia in an increasingly globalized world and within demographically changing societies, in which there is a growing acknowledgement of the need to decolonize higher education.[28] Deep-rooted practices – such as measuring academic success through citation metrics and requiring English proficiency for participation in conferences and editorial boards – tend to reinforce systemic advantages for institutions in the Global North.[29] In the Netherlands, knowledge and awareness of the country's violent colonial history is growing. Academic institutions are in a great position to take a leading role in translating this into addressing and disrupting enduring colonial dynamics and legacies, inter alia by fostering broader participation and inclusivity.

A second argument connects to the negative influence of a lack of representation, and the positive influence that increased diversity has on the quality of higher education and research. It has been argued that "the domination of a few in academia" hampers dialogue on tackling urgent global challenges and "will push the community and the whole system to an unhealthy, unsustainable, alternative

27 Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, "Universities Rebalance Internationalisation," April 15, 2025, www.vu.nl/en/news/2025/universities-rebalance-internationalisation.

28 Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, eds., *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).

29 Gabriel Nakamura et al., "Three Pathways to Better Recognize the Expertise of Global South Researchers," *NPJ Biodiversity* 2, no. 17 (2023).

state."[30] Moreover, there is evidence that diverse teams produce better research.[31]

A third argument builds on this by emphasizing the necessity of broader participation in addressing global and demographic challenges. Issues such as climate change and the transition to clean energy require inclusive, global collaboration.[32] Attracting young talent from Africa could contribute to addressing both the demographic challenges of aging societies in the Global North,[33] and the widening prosperity gap between the Global North and South.

30 Akira S. Mori, "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Academia to Guide Society," *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 37, no. 1 (2022): 1–4.

31 Kendall Powell, "These Labs Are Remarkably Diverse: Here's Why They're Winning at Science," *Nature* (blog), June 6, 2018, www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-05316-5.

32 Elsevier, *Pathways to Net Zero: Global South Research in the Transition to Clean Energy* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2022), www.elsevier.com/connect/net-zero-report.

33 Marcelo Knobel, "The Shifting Center: The Global South's Rising Role in Future Higher Education," *International Higher Education* no. 123 (2025): 39–40.

What has already been done to address this issue?

Dutch universities, including the UvA and VU Amsterdam, have expressed a commitment to fostering more diverse and inclusive academic environments.[34] In recent years, both Amsterdam universities have launched a range of initiatives aimed at reducing disparities in access to opportunities, providing exchange, academic mentorship and other support to students coming from the Global South. Among the many successful initiatives in this direction, we would like to mention the UvA's ASPIRE program of the Anton Pannekoek Institute for Astronomy,[35] which organizes annual summer schools for students from underrepresented backgrounds and the Aïda Paalman-de Miranda exchange program for students from Suriname,[36] dedicated to the first female professor in mathematics in the Netherlands, who was herself of Surinamese origin. The VU has strategic alliances with universities in Indonesia and South Africa,[37] and offers fellowships through the VU Fellowship Program and the NL Scholarship, the latter of which focuses on students from outside the European Economic Area who are applying for the first year of a Master's program in the Netherlands.[38]

Over the past years, we have been involved in some of these and other initiatives. As coordinator of academic

34 University of Amsterdam, "Diversity Policy of the University of Amsterdam," n.d., www.uva.nl/en/about-the-uva/about-the-university/diversity-and-inclusion/policy-framework/policy-framework.html; Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, "Diversity at VU Amsterdam," n.d., www.vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/diversity.

35 University of Amsterdam, "Astrophysics Summer Program for International Research Experience (ASPIRE)," n.d., https://aspire.science.uva.nl/.

36 University of Amsterdam, "Aïda Paalman-de Miranda Exchange Program," Faculty of Science, n.d., www.uva.nl/shared-content/programmas/en/exchange/science/paalman-de-miranda-scholarship/paalman-de-miranda-application/application.html.

37 Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, "Focal Countries: South Africa and Indonesia," n.d., www.vu.nl/en/about-vu/research-institutes/centre-for-international-cooperation/more-about/cis-focal-countries.

38 Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, "Scholarships for Incoming Master's Students," n.d., www.vu.nl/en/education/more-about/incoming-master-scholarships.

collaborations with the Global South for the faculty of Science at the UvA,[39] one of us is currently mapping initiatives in the faculty and creating an active network among colleagues involved in projects in Global South countries, ranging from research collaborations to students and staff exchanges. On a smaller scale, one of us was involved in setting up a diversity scholarship to bring early-career academics in international criminal justice over to Amsterdam for a month, to build a network and visit organizations and institutions.

While these initiatives are successful and highly valuable, they often operate with limited funding and tend to target the most academically outstanding students. As a result, there is a risk that "success" is measured primarily by traditional academic metrics, which may inadvertently favor candidates who have already managed to lower their barriers to access, for instance because they have already had access to educational opportunities in the Global North. This can undermine the broader goal of expanding access and reinforcing equity.

Improving access for students and early-career academics from the Global South to institutions in the Global North is, of course, only a partial approach to addressing a complex and multifaceted structural issue. Many countries in the Global South face significant challenges related to brain drain, and it is natural to question initiatives – such as the relocation of talented students – that may inadvertently contribute to this problem. A key element of any long-term solution lies in building local research capacity, particularly at the graduate level. There are some promising examples in this direction, such as the "sandwich PhD programs," implemented already in some Dutch universities,[40] that allow for engagement with a local student and a local supervisor

39 University of Amsterdam, "Global South Plan," Faculty of Science, n.d., www.uva.nl/en/about-the-uva/organisation/faculties/faculty-of-science/research/science-projects/global-south-project/global-south-plan.

40 Wageningen University & Research, "Wageningen Graduate Schools Sandwich PhD Programme," n.d., www.wur.nl/en/education-programmes/phd-programme/practical-information/funding-financial-support/wgs-sandwich-phd-programme.htm; University of Groningen, "Sandwich PhD," n.d., www.rug.nl/about-ug/profile/internationalization/global-focus/latin-america/phds-in-the-university-of-groningen/sandwich-phd?lang=en.

while at the same time building more long-standing partnerships. Creating North-South research networks, such as the recently established Africa-Europe Cluster of Research Excellence in Mathematics,[41] also provides an important pathway to create contacts and engage in joint training opportunities. Additionally, we believe that broader participation enhances representation and can generate a positive ripple effect: scientists in the diaspora often serve as valuable resources and advocates for their communities of origin.

41 Africa-Europe Clusters of Research Excellence, "Africa-Europe Cluster of Research Excellence in Mathematics," n.d., www.africaeuropecoremath.org/.

What more should be done?

Students and early-career academics from the Global South wanting to continue their academic career in the Netherlands and other parts of the Global North face significant barriers. While some of these barriers may be seen as functional – given that scientific progress often relies on competition among the most innovative minds – this dynamic also leads to the underrepresentation of certain groups. As previously discussed, this underrepresentation is partly the result of systemic disadvantages, making it an undesirable outcome. Efforts to reduce these barriers, though valuable and often successful, tend to be merit-based and may apply Global North academic standards to students in the Global South, and access to such initiatives may depend on individual contacts. Securing sustainable sources of financial support, especially in the current global scenario where funding for academic projects is being cut in several countries and diversity efforts are directly under attack, is becoming increasingly difficult.

As emphasized in the first section, a crucial step is establishing a fair and equitable system for assessing candidates from the Global South – one that avoids perpetuating systemic inequalities. Instead of relying on positive discrimination, which can compromise fairness and equal opportunity, we advocate for a more nuanced approach: rethinking how talent and suitability are evaluated in certain contexts, and creating additional pathways for underrepresented scholars to enter academia. For admission decisions in Master's programs, we believe the toolkit developed by Mastermind Europe to be useful,[42] which contains "resources that can support academic directors of Master's programs with an interest to improve their admission system" and create a more diverse classroom. For instance, it provides guidance on determining what admission criteria are relevant, what level applicants should meet and how this can be assessed, how transparency can be improved

42 Mastermind Europe, n.d., www.mastermindeurope.eu/.

and how predictive value can be monitored. It also offers access to a pool of experts for advice and a repository of academic resources on admission.

We acknowledge the difficulty in selecting students with diverse backgrounds and we understand the somehow unavoidable need to impose some sort of metric and selection criteria. Concerns such as protecting the student from ending up in a situation where they are likely to "fail" may also be legitimate. However, we believe that moving away from the traditional view of academic merit in some instances might be important in initiatives aimed at improving diversity of the student and researcher populations. Exchange should be recognized as a value per se and not just be evaluated in terms of output and via a meritocratic lens. Summer schools and other forms of exchange can be valuable means to lower barriers and gain experience with studying at Global North universities while putting less emphasis on merit. Universities could also encourage programs and departments to take a broader approach to "talent" when involved in admission and hiring processes focusing more on future potential rather than previous academic outcomes.

The several valuable – and often grassroots – initiatives we presented are already having a positive impact in the academic environment of our universities. Despite the difficult political and social climate, it is essential that financial and structural support is extended and increased. Exchange opens doors that would otherwise remain closed and can, therefore, be very powerful. Coordinated action should be taken at different levels. Research groups should be encouraged to take geographical diversity into account during hiring processes and should be provided with specific tools and training to do so effectively. Departments and faculties should provide support and recognition for individual researchers working on building sustainable partnerships with institutions in the Global South. At the institutional level, universities should create a structural framework to collect and enhance individual and transdisciplinary initiatives to guarantee greater impact and an

improved sustainability in the longer term. On the national and international level, universities should collaborate to mobilize political will in governments and international organizations to support and encourage these types of initiatives, also through the creation of dedicated funding schemes and scholarships.

We encourage the leadership of all Dutch universities to adopt a forward-looking and strategic vision that recognizes and embraces the growing diversity and complexity of young talents – many of whom will increasingly originate from the Global South.

3.

Funding Research Better by Abolishing Competition

Dion Kramer

Writing in 2011, John Ioannidis made a bold assertion that "scientists don't have time for science anymore." Not because of their heavy teaching loads, admin work or media activities, but because "writing, reviewing and administering grants absorb their efforts."[43] His conclusion that the research funding system is "broken" might be even more valid today, given the further proliferation of competitive funding schemes, massification of higher education and austerity cuts that universities experience worldwide. In this climate, the acquisition of research grants plays a major, if not critical role in contemporary academic life. Slowly but steadily, "getting grants or perish" is taking precedence over "publish or perish," the other institutional force central to contemporary academia.[44] This chapter reflects on this development by arguing that competitive funding is inefficient and prone to inequality and instability on the work floor. Taking stock of an unprecedented experiment in unconditional grants for starting Assistant Professors by the Dutch government, the chapter makes the case for baseline grants as an adequate alternative to competition while also warning against their potential pitfalls.

43 John P.A. Ioannidis, "Fund people not projects," *Nature* 477 (2011): 529–531.

44 For an early observation of this shift, see Phillip Vannini, "Dead Poets' Society: Teaching, Publish-or-Perish, and Professors' Experiences of Authenticity," *Symbolic Interaction* 29, no. 2 (2006): 235–57.

What needs fixing?

Competitive funding is a relatively recent form of allocation. In a distant past, universities used to be places dedicated to education in the fields of law and medicine; research was mostly done outside universities and sponsored by private benefactors. The 19th century saw the growth of research-oriented universities across Europe, whereby universities enjoyed considerable autonomy in the way they spent the "block funding" for research they received from governments. In a context of economic growth and massification of higher education, this model arguably peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, after which universities were confronted with budget constraints and governments increasingly decided to allocate research budgets in the forms of competitions under the influence of the philosophy of New Public Management.[45] In the Netherlands, for example, the direct "lumpsum" budget available to universities to finance their research has remained stagnant over the past three decades.[46] The result is that government funding per student has decreased, from around EUR 19,500 in 2001 to around EUR 15,500 in 2021. As a consequence, academic staff have less and less baseline funding for their research. Whereas the government admits that 40% research time should be the norm, actual research time turns out to be (much) lower in practice.[47] Given the central position of research output for evaluation, tenure and promotion decisions, overwork during evenings, weekends and holidays

45 Aldo Geuna, The Economics of Knowledge Production: Funding and the Structure of University Research (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1999); Jian Wang et al., "Funding Model and Creativity in Science: Competitive versus Block Funding and Status Contingency Effects," *Research Policy* 47, no. 6 (2018): 1070–83.

46 Folkert Kootstra, "De bekostiging van Nederlandse universiteiten: Een reflectie op verleden, heden en toekomst," in *De bekostiging van de universiteiten in Nederland: Heden, verleden en toekomst*, ed. Paulina Snijders et al. (Tilburg: Open Press TiU, 2023).

47 The Young Academy, "You Cannot Lighten the Workload with a New Competition," June 29, 2022, www.dejongeakademie.nl/en/publications/2252746.aspx.

is therefore a structural feature in Dutch universities.[48] Simultaneously, the Dutch government has continued to invest in and shift research funding towards competitions organized by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) based on the idea that the quality of research largely depends on individual excellence and that this can be evaluated by means of peer review.[49] As the key mechanism of scientific quality control, it is thought that peer review incentivizes researchers to improve their work and forms an effective and accountable way of deciding how (scarce) public money is being spent.

Here, I highlight three key problems of the current system. First, competitive research funding is, in fact, inefficient and a drain on resources. Large review studies notice the remarkable lack of evidence about the effectiveness of peer review in research funding while evidence about the burden this system imposes on all the academics involved is growing.[50] From preliminary research to writing and revising the proposal and practicing presentations and interviews, applying for grants is indeed hugely time and energy consuming. If I were to apply for an ERC grant, for example, I would have to decide to spend at least half – if not all – of my yearly research time on an application with a 6% success rate.[51] Comparing the combined salary costs of the time applicants spent on grant writing and the total amount of

48 Nederlandse Arbeidsinspectie, *Psychosociale arbeidsbelasting universiteiten* (Den Haag: Nederlandse Arbeidsinspectie, 2024).

49 Rathenau Instituut, "Dertig jaar publieke onderzoeksfinanciering in Nederland," August 1, 2007, www.rathenau.nl/nl/kennis-voor-transities/dertig-jaar-publieke-onderzoeksfinanciering-nederland. For an insightful critique on the Dutch funding system I recommend Rens Bod et al., *40 Stellingen over de Wetenschap* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2020), 68-73.

50 The comparative effectiveness of peer review is near impossible to demonstrate for lack of comparators as no funding agencies have made significant use of alternative systems, see Susan Guthrie, Ioana Ghiga, and Steven Wooding, "What Do We Know about Grant Peer Review in the Health Sciences?," *F1000Research* 6 (2017): 1335.

51 Given my 0.25 FTE research time, I have around 460 hours to spend on research per year if one excludes holiday time. Research applications are estimated to cost between 300 and 500 hours. See Danielle L. Herbert et al., "On the Time Spent Preparing Grant Proposals: An Observational Study of Australian Researchers," *BMJ Open* 3, no. 5 (2013): e002800.

funding to be distributed, funding competitions are highly inefficient to the point that they "effectively cost the academic funding system a substantial amount of money."[52] On top of this comes the work done by the grant evaluation panels, who evaluate proposals and conduct interviews for days. Another non-negligible strain on financial and other resources is the work done by grant advisors within universities and the specialized industry of external consultants that are hired by universities to offer trainings to make their grant applicants succeed. Finally, we can consider the overhead costs of operating a grant agency like the Dutch Research Council, which fluctuates between 6 and 10% – coming down to around EUR 116 million in total in 2023.[53]

Second, the dynamic of competition leads to inequality. Rather than distributing research funding equally across academic researchers, competitive funding seeks to concentrate resources in the hands of a few, typically framed as the "most excellent" amongst researchers or proposals. The very premise that research funding should function on a meritocratic basis to reach effective outcomes for science and society is questionable. In fact, evidence suggests that the peer review process sustaining the merit-based system is largely arbitrary as well, and success largely depends on the composition of the review panel.[54] Also, groundbreaking research on the early-career Veni grant confirms the existence of a so-called Matthew effect[55] in competitive research funding: applicants who won an early career grant by the smallest margin were roughly two-and-a-half times more

52 Martin Dresler et al., "Effective or Predatory Funding? Evaluating the Hidden Costs of Grant Applications," *Immunology & Cell Biology* 101, no. 2 (2023): 104–11.

53 Rathenau Instituut, "Inkomsten en uitgaven NWO," July 18, 2024, www.rathenau.nl/nl/wetenschap-cijfers/geld/inkomsten-en-uitgaven-van-kennisinstituten/inkomsten-en-uitgaven-nwo.

54 Elizabeth L. Pier et al. "Low Agreement among Reviewers Evaluating the Same NIH Grant Applications," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 12 (2018): 2952-57.

55 "Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them," Matthew 25:29 (New International Version).

likely to win a midcareer award than those who fell just short of winning an early career award, without a noticeable difference in scientific output in the intermediate period.[56] Beyond funding chances, grants in the "talent line" (*veni, vidi, vici*) come with a prestige – a certain recognition of "excellence" – that set the individual researcher on track towards a successful career in academia. In the words of Peter Paul Verbeek, the current Rector Magnificus of the University of Amsterdam, the Veni grant has developed into an "access ticket" to an academic system that does not allocate chances fairly.[57] Competitive research funding, in sum, risks producing an academic system where funding is not the means to an end, but the goal in itself.

A third critique to competitive funding could be summarized as generating systemic instability. Grants land into a specific system of organizing and dividing labor within a faculty or department. Academics have medium to long-term commitments towards the courses they teach, the programs they manage and other institutional duties they perform. By bringing in funding to conduct a specific research project, grant winners theoretically earn the temporary right to increase their research time (and reduce other responsibilities) or hire and manage a research team. If not managed well, competitive funding makes universities and departments places of constant negotiation, causing frictions and tensions that occasionally escalate to the point of breakup. It also tends to lead to a bifurcation of academic staff, where some are able to conduct in-depth research, manage research groups, supervise PhD students, travel to conferences and take research sabbaticals, and others simply cannot. In sum, competitive funding does not necessarily make universities places that are stable, pleasant and fertile for the types of collaboration that lead to scientific discovery, solidarity and service to the community.

56 Thijs Bol et al., "The Matthew Effect in Science Funding," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 19 (2018): 4887–90.

57 The Young Academy, "De Jonge Akademie lanceert podcast Aan de top!," November 14, 2022, www.dejongeakademie.nl/nieuws/2345908.aspx.

What has already been done to address this issue?

Ideas to counter the negative consequences of competitive funding abound, ranging from adjustments to the peer-review system to career-based grants, lotteries and baseline grants for everyone.[58] Before advocating the expansion of baseline grants, I will discuss two recent developments in the Netherlands.

Incremental change has taken place within the context of a competitive funding system to address some of the issues related to time and inequality. To reduce workload among researchers and assessors, the Dutch Research Council has implemented a two-phased assessment for its Veni grants for starting researchers. In the first round, applicants are only required to submit a narrative CV and a list of key output. In the second round, a selection of applicants is invited to submit a fully-fledged research proposal and appear in front of a panel for an interview. Another measure by the Dutch Research Council seeks to stimulate equality by asking applicants to estimate the time they spent on research, enabling assessors to assess research output relative to "research years." However, while not completely insensitive to the concerns about parameters of the competitions, a grant agency like the Dutch Research Council can obviously not transform the system itself. As the Dutch Research Council explains, its very raison d'être is to allocate scarce research funding through competition based on "excellence."[59]

A rather radical initiative to systematically transform research funding in the Netherlands was kickstarted in 2022, when the Dutch Minister of Education announced to

58 The article by Ioannidis is still a good starting point. John P. A. Ioannidis, "Fund People Not Projects," *Nature* 477 (2011): 529-531.

59 Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO), "Wetenschappelijk onderzoek van wereldklasse bevorderen: Reactie NWO op opinieartikel dr. Raymond Poot," January 10, 2024, www.nwo.nl/nieuws/wetenschappelijk-onderzoek-van-wereldklasse-bevorderen-reactie-nwo-op-opinieartikel-dr-raymond-poot.

earmark EUR 156 million to so-called Starting Grants: funding made structurally available to assistant professors to reduce their workload and to stimulate "unbound" research. Interestingly, the plan was to create more "calmness and space" in the system by making researchers less dependent on competitive funding by the Dutch Research Council. During the first years, eligible researchers could feely spend their EUR 300,000 Starting Grant within a period of six years. This "personal work capital" could be spent on research time for themselves or colleagues, appointing a PhD student or acquiring small-scale research facilities.[60] The Starting Grants, in other words, could be seen as a historical experiment in baseline grants to counter the negative effects of competitive funding.

However, the implementation of the Starting Grants also serves as a cautionary tale. It quickly became clear that the number of grants available was not sufficient to fund all starting researchers, leading to a situation of scarcity that triggered most universities, faculties and departments to make selections or impose extra restrictions. A survey conducted for this chapter among 43 eligible assistant professors reveals that the initial outcomes did not align with the intentions of the minister.[61] The far majority of respondents had not been able to freely choose how to spend their grant and were explicitly or implicitly forced to recruit a PhD student – sometimes in collaboration with a colleague who was not eligible for the grant. Also, a large majority of the respondents express dissatisfaction with the degree to which they were informed about (70%) and could participate in (80%) internal Starting Grant decision-making processes. Moreover, 75% indicated that receiving the grant did not result in a reduction of their workload; in many

60 Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, "Bestuursakkoord hoger onderwijs en wetenschap," July 14, 2022.

61 The Amsterdam Young Academy conducted the survey between April and June 2024 among 43 respondents from the University of Amsterdam and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and were eligible for the Starting Grants in 2022, 2023 or 2024. I particularly thank Tessa Blanken and Evgenia Lysova for analyzing the results with me.

instances, getting the grant did not imply extra research time but extra supervisory tasks instead. Most shockingly, some respondents report that their department decided not to allocate the grants at all for financial considerations and were simply added to faculty funds. The implementation of the Starting Grants therefore reveals the frictions caused regarding transparency, restrictions to the freedom to spend the funding, and the emergence of new and existing forms of competition and inequalities between colleagues. In response to similar signals from the field,[62] the minister decided to lower the Starting Grant to EUR 150,000 and emphasize that recipients should be able to spend the grant money freely.[63] At the moment of writing, the future of the Starting Grants is politically uncertain.

62 These findings align with the findings by the evaluation committee established by the government, see Commissie Starters- en Stimuleringsbeurzen, "Investeren in de basis: Advies van de commissie starters- en stimuleringsbeurzen aan de minister van OCW en aan de besturen van de universiteiten en de umc's," June 15, 2023, https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/dpc-ba9bace69894b68edeeeb30e3dc5461b8e7749ae/pdf.

63 Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, "Kamerbrief met beleidsreactie op rapport van de adviescommissie starters- en stimuleringsbeurzen," December 22, 2023, www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2023/12/22/reactie-op-rapport-investeren-in-de-basis-van-de-adviescommissie-starters-en-stimuleringsbeurzen.

What more should be done?

Competitive funding is expensive, inefficient and prone to unjustified forms of inequality. Amongst the alternatives, only one solution stands out as feasible, which is to shift all or at least a substantial part of competitive funding to so-called baseline grants. That is, to send each university researcher a direct grant and leave judgment of research qualification to the universities. This proposal is not novel, original or radical in any sense and by far the cheapest, most efficient way of distributing research funding. It will not only lead to a more stable and pleasant academic environment but also give governments, and taxpayers, more "bang for their buck." Baseline grants provide a high degree of researcher autonomy, allowing freedom to increase research time or plan research sabbaticals, hire a PhD or a Postdoc, or combine funding with colleagues – as long as this is coordinated with and transparently communicated within the research unit. I will defend this position by responding to a number of possible objections that could be validly raised.

A first objection could be that shifting research funding from the "happy few" to the "happy many" in egalitarian fashion could lead to the available money quickly "evaporating" instead of generating substantive returns. Robust research shows it actually will. Writing in 2017, Krist Vaesen and Joel Katzav calculated that each qualified university researcher (assistant, associate and full professor) would be able to spend EUR 390,000 (or EUR 223,000 in low-cost sectors and EUR 515,000 in high-cost sectors) over a five-year period if all the funding allocated to Dutch universities via Dutch and European competitions (EUR 420 million from NWO and EUR 287.4 million from ERC) were to be transformed into baseline funding.[64] All of this does not even include the significant "hidden" costs involved in grant writing, peer review and training necessary for funding

64 Krist Vaesen and Joel Katzav, "How Much Would Each Researcher Receive If Competitive Government Research Funding Were Distributed Equally among Researchers?," *PLOS ONE* 12, no. 9 (2017): e0183967.

competitions. It is financially feasible, in other words, to distribute funds much more widely through an egalitarian system that funds every qualified researcher than is currently the case via funding competitions that allocate large sums to a low percentage of "excellent" researchers.

A second objection is grounded in the idea that competition by means of peer review works well as prior quality control and channels funding towards top, productive and innovative research projects. Baseline funding might take away the performance-based incentives that are central to competitive funding. Evidence proves otherwise. In fact, it is highly uncertain whether the peer review system actually works at the initial idea or discovery stage[65] and mounting evidence suggests that competitive funding leads to biases towards orthodox research questions and stifles truly novel but riskier research.[66] On top of this, the necessity of assuring quality control is frankly absurd: competition creates a largely arbitrary division between "winners" and "losers" among a group of scientists who are already carefully selected through quality hurdles like obtaining a PhD, and hiring, tenure and promotion decisions. In fact, the outcomes of research are already subject to various forms of quality control, and peer review and careers are likely to stagnate without tangible achievements. As Gordon and Poulin remark, "in no other profession than science is one given a salary and space and asked to beg outsiders [...] for the means to do one's work."[67] It goes without saying that the pressure of securing grants with low success rates in order to be able to do what one is appointed to do can be highly demotivating for young scientists and actually causes a lot of energy, knowledge and innovation to leak away from the

65 Lutz Bornmann et al., "A Meta-Evaluation of Scientific Research Proposals: Different Ways of Comparing Rejected to Awarded Applications," *Journal of Informetrics* 4, no. 3 (2010): 211–20.

66 Jian Wang et al., "Funding Model and Creativity in Science: Competitive Versus Block Funding and Status Contingency Effects," *Research Policy* 47, no. 6 (2018): 1070-83.

67 Richard Gordon and Bryan J. Poulin, "Cost of the NSERC Science Grant Peer Review System Exceeds the Cost of Giving Every Qualified Researcher a Baseline Grant," *Accountability in Research* 16, no. 1 (2009): 13–40.

system. Baseline grants, instead, will enable every qualified researcher to contribute to science without impediments.

A third possible objection is that universities cannot be trusted to allocate baseline grants in a fair, transparent and collaborative way. The survey results about the implementation of Starting Grants demonstrate how hierarchical decision-making within universities may stand in the way of ensuring that all qualified researchers receive stable and reliable funding to conduct research in the way they see fit. This is a valid objection and may remind us that individual grants obtained through competitive funding can also have an emancipatory function, enabling starting researchers to secure tenure or start their own research group as "principal investigator." While this might plead for the continued existence of some competitive funding schemes for starting researchers, it mostly requires us to think about the way in which universities should develop more transparent and participatory mechanisms to reliably allocate research funding. This would transform the university from a place of competition for resources to a place of collective distribution of resources in a way that enables researchers to do what they can do best – research.

4.

Recognizing Young Academics by Broadening Promotion Rights

Laura S. Dreissen

In the Dutch academic system, *ius promovendi* – the right to formally supervise PhD candidates as their official promotor – symbolizes institutional recognition, responsibility, and prestige. Traditionally, this right has been reserved only for full professors (HLs), but recently it was also extended to associate professors (UHDs). Assistant professors (UDs), however, who frequently shoulder the practical and intellectual responsibility of PhD supervision, are excluded from this formal status.

At the two universities in Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam and Universiteit van Amsterdam (UvA), assistant professors enjoy the same privilege as HLs and UHDs to develop and pursue their own research agendas. They may initiate PhD projects, obtain funding, and lead the research process as principal investigator (PI), yet they must defer the formal supervisory title to a more senior colleague. This systemic misalignment between responsibility and recognition risks confusing lines of accountability and undermines both motivation and morale for PhD candidates and supervisors.[68]

68 Rathenau Instituut, *Balans van de wetenschap 2022* (Den Haag: Rathenau Instituut: 2022).

What needs fixing?

The current *ius promovendi* policy is particularly problematic in light of the broader movement across Dutch higher education to modernize career paths, promote social safety, and provide recognition for a wide range of academic contributions. It runs counter to these ideals and the broader goals of the nation-wide program Recognition & Rewards, which was launched in 2019.[69] It sustains a rigid and hierarchical model of academia that does not reflect the collaborative, team-based nature of modern research. Worse still, it may contribute to unhealthy power dynamics and reduce transparency in the supervisory relationship.

The *ius promovendi* issue is just one manifestation of a deeper structural reliance on hierarchy within academia that often undermines fairness, innovation, and well-being. The hierarchical structure of academia can be traced back to the early modern university system, which was organized around elite professorial authority and reinforced by traditions of symbolism and seniority. While such hierarchies can serve useful purposes, providing clarity of responsibility and accountability, their rigidity can also hinder the collaborative and diversified nature of contemporary academic word. Academic titles and ceremonial practices, such as gowns and formal processions, have long served not only to assign formal responsibility but also to reinforce institutional legitimacy and prestige.[70] Universities often hold tightly to these traditions even though the academic landscape is changing and the day-to-day nature of academic work has become more collaborative and diversified. Symbolic distinctions, such as who may wear a gown – the traditional academic robe – or the honorific title "professor," continue to carry significant weight within institutions. Within the context of the defense ceremony, assistant

69 Recognition & Rewards, *Recognition & Rewards Program* (2019), www.erkennenenwaarderen.nl, accessed August 13, 2025.

70 Danielle Guizzo, "Ceremonial Economics: A Social-Institutional Analysis of Universities, Disciplines, and Academic Positioning," *Journal of Economic Issues* 58, no. 2 (2024): 397–423.

professors are denied such symbolic privileges, regardless of their actual supervisory role. While these distinctions may appear merely ceremonial, symbolism carries significant weight in academia. It signals who belongs and who leads.

According to surveys by the Rathenau Institute and the Dutch Network of Women Professors (LNVH), the lack of transparent career structures and limited recognition for non-professorial roles are among the key sources of stress and demotivation in academia. These patterns are further supported by the 2020 report from the Dutch Inspectorate of Education,[71] which cites structural hierarchy and unclear expectations as significant contributors to psychological pressure among university staff.

One of the key arguments against extending *ius promovendi* and the corresponding ceremonial practices to assistant professors is that supervision requires experience and institutional maturity. Although experience is an important aspect of professional development, universities nowadays enable assistant professors to follow dedicated training courses in PhD supervision, research integrity, and social safety before taking on supervisory responsibilities.[72] These institutional policies give young academics the opportunity to prepare themselves far more effectively for mentorship, meaning that today's early-career academics are, on average, better equipped for the responsibilities of PhD supervision than many of their predecessors were at the same career stage.

In fields where PhD cohorts are small, such as law or philosophy, formal supervision by senior faculty may still be the norm. But in many cases, particularly in the natural sciences, assistant professors are expected to acquire competitive grant funding for PhD positions, making them both the intellectual and financial driving force behind the project. In such situations, denying them *ius promovendi* further disconnects formal authority from the actual leadership of

71 Inspectie van het Onderwijs, *De Staat van het Onderwijs 2020* (2020), www.onderwijsinspectie.nl.

72 Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, "Better Supervision of PhD's: Adapted Development Paths & Training," September 25, 2024, www.vu.nl.

the project. While practices may differ from field to field this should not be a reason for denying *ius promovendi* to all assistant professors. Rather, it highlights the need for a clear and transparent policy: one that gives room for the possibility of granting *ius promovendi* to assistant professors as a natural and appropriate step when the circumstances of the project support it and the assistant professor chooses to pursue it.

Some PhD candidates may feel more confident under the guidance of a seasoned full professor with a strong academic network. But granting *ius promovendi* to assistant professors does not exclude more senior staff from supervision. On the contrary, PhD supervision is most effective as a team effort, where junior and senior staff complement one another. Projects involving multiple supervisors with varying degrees of experience and involvement has become the norm rather than the exception. Instead of undermining this collaborative model, a more flexible *ius promovendi* policy would support it: allowing assistant professors to supervise formally would not erase the role of the full professor, but instead acknowledge the division of labor and responsibility already in place.

What has already been done to address this issue?

It is worth noting that the current position of associate professors holding *ius promovendi* was itself the result of a relatively recent policy shift. For a long time, only full professors were granted this right. As academic work became more distributed and associate professors increasingly took on independent research leadership and supervisory roles, this restriction was challenged. The eventual reform to grant *ius promovendi* to associate professors acknowledged their substantive role in supervising PhD candidates and managing research groups. This historical change was supported by a national shift in perception about the role of associate professors and their increasing responsibilities, as documented in evaluations by universities and national policy discussions on academic reform.[73] For instance, the 2017 amendment to the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) formally allowed universities to designate associate professors with *ius promovendi*, recognizing their contributions to research and doctoral supervision.[74] The current discussion about assistant professors follows a similar trajectory, where responsibilities have evolved but formal recognition has not yet caught up. Just as the inclusion of associate professors helped modernize the system, extending *ius promovendi* to qualified assistant professors represents the next logical step toward a fairer, more inclusive academic environment.

Nationally, momentum is growing to rethink *ius promovendi*. In 2023, The Young Academy launched the "Iedereen Professor" initiative, calling for an end to the symbolic and structural barriers that prevent assistant professors from receiving the recognition they deserve.[75] Shortly after

73 Vereniging van Universiteiten (VSNU), "Gezamenlijke verklaring over ius promovendi door UHD's" (2017), www.universiteitenvannederland.nl.

74 Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (WHW), amendment permitting UHDs to obtain ius promovendi (2017).

75 The Young Academy, "Iedereen Professor" (Amsterdam: The Young Academy, 2023), www.dejongeakademie.nl.

this initiative from De Jonge Akademie, some universities took action. Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) and the University of Groningen (RUG) now extend the right to wear a gown, the title of professor, and *ius promovendi* to assistant professors, provided they meet clearly defined criteria, such as having supervised at least two PhD candidates as a subject-matter expert through to the completion of the dissertation and obtaining a formal supervision qualification.[76]

These examples demonstrate that reform is not only desirable but feasible. Institutions that take these steps expect that it improves morale, creates a better alignment between supervision and recognition, and increases clarity for PhD candidates about their mentorship. This policy change also resonates with the broader ambitions of the Recognition & Rewards initiative, which seeks to diversify academic career paths and ensure that all forms of academic labor are valued.

76 Eindhoven University of Technology, "Iedereen Professor Brengt Meer Gelijkheid en Erkenning," October 23, 2024, www.tue.nl, accessed August 13, 2025; University of Groningen, "UG to Extend Ius-Promovendi to Assistant Professors" (2024), www.rug.nl, accessed August 13, 2025.

What more should be done?

It is time for all Dutch universities – not just the pioneering few – to follow suit. They should adopt a more modern approach to *ius promovendi*, one that reflects the realities of contemporary academic life and aligns with the goals of Recognition & rewards.

Before 2017, the law dictated that only full professors could be granted *ius promovendi*. In 2017, however, the legislation was amended to extend this right to any university staff member holding the degree of Doctor or Doctor of Philosophy and "(...) who in the judgment of the doctoral board is deemed sufficiently competent to act as a promotor (...)"[77] As a logical consequence, universities should now asses *all* academic staff members on their competence to determine whether they meet the criteria for *ius pomovendi,* and do so on the basis of transparent and consistent policies. To start, Dutch universities should define clear, transparent and consistent criteria that determine eligibility. As a starting point, they can adopt the models established by TU/e and RUG, where upon the initiative of the assistant professor a standardized, institute-wide application form for *ius promovendi* is submitted to the college of promotions, who assess eligibility against transparent and clearly defined criteria. These include successful completion of the formal PhD supervision training, demonstrated experience in supervising at least one PhD candidate as the main supervisor and content owner of the project, and positive 360° feedback from colleagues and doctoral candidates. Such benchmarks would allow assistant professors across the Netherlands to apply for *ius promovendi* through a standard and accessible process, rather than relying on unclear or ad hoc procedures, which currently vary significantly between faculties and departments. For instance, at UvA and VU, assistant professors may only be granted *ius promovendi* on a one-off basis for a specific PhD project, often without

77 Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek (WHW), art. 7.18, vierde lid.

a clear rationale or pathway.[78] This can cause uncertainty, stress, and favoritism. By implementing a standardized and transparent framework for granting *ius promovendi*, universities can foster a more inclusive and merit-based policy that acknowledges early-career academics and supports them in their development as future academic leaders.

Ideally, the proposed policy should remain sensitive to disciplinary differences e.g. on a "comply or explain" basis. Certain academic fields may require tailored criteria or processes due to structural or methodological factors. Such variability should not hinder reform; rather it presents an opportunity to collaboratively design systems that promote fairness while respecting disciplinary contexts.

At the same time, universities should reform the ceremonial aspects of PhD defenses to better showcase the collaborative nature of academic work. All members of the PhD committee, including co-promotors and assistant professors, should be allowed to wear a gown and participate in the ceremony with equal status. The ceremony should represent the collective effort involved in producing a PhD thesis, not reinforce outdated academic hierarchies. This symbolic step could be the first towards a future-proof academic system.

78 University of Amsterdam, "Policy on Ius Promovendi" (2024), www.uva.nl, accessed August 13, 2025; Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, "PhD Supervision Regulations" (2024), www.vu.nl, accessed August 13, 2025.

5.

Taking Better Care of Over-burdened Academics

Evgenia I. Lysova

> "I really like the scientific field, but that is mostly because of my intrinsic motivation for my research topic and the autonomy that I have in this type of job. On the other hand, the way our academic system works is very negative."[79]

The quote above, from a postdoctoral Dutch social scientist, is a fitting illustration of how many Dutch academics would describe their work experience. The autonomy that academia provides makes it especially attractive and a dream-like workplace. It promises great opportunities for academics to experience their jobs as meaningful because working in academia allows them to engage in activities that are personally significant and worthwhile to them.[80] However, the academic system can also be very demanding in terms of the number and range of different activities the work involves. When left unchecked, these demands can lead academics to become overburdened, challenging their pursuit of meaningful work and negatively impacting their mental health.

79 Inge van der Weijden and Christine Teelken, "Precarious Careers: Postdoctoral Researchers and Wellbeing at Work," *Studies in Higher Education* 48, no. 10 (2023): 1595–1607.

80 Evgenia I. Lysova et al., "Fostering Meaningful Work in Organizations: A Multi-Level Review and Integration," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 110 (2019): 374–389.

What needs fixing?

There are certainly times when academics experience their work as meaningful and rewarding. Peak experiences may include activities like mentoring students, making important discoveries, or translating research findings to practice. However, satisfying the diverse demands of the academic system can also cause academics to feel overburdened. Indeed, in a recent report[81] on the psychological workload at Dutch universities, 78% of respondents reported having to work "very hard," and for 74% of respondents, heavy work pressure led to the experience of stress. This report points to the main causes of work pressure, including heavy task loads, educational demands, publication pressure, personal ambitions, hierarchical structures, and undesirable behavior by superiors. Being overburdened, and therefore, not being able to deal with the workload, has direct consequences for problems with mental health among academics.[82] As noted in the Research Mental Health and Well-being Manifesto, "when comparing different occupational groups, academics rank among those with the highest levels of common mental disorders: the prevalence of common psychological disorders is estimated to be between 32% and 42% among academic employees and postgraduate students, compared to approximately 19% in the general population."[83]

To illustrate how overburdening works in academia, let us look at the complexity of academic work and its many stakeholders, including students, program directors, research directions, supervisors, colleagues, co-authors, reviewers, editors, and society at large. Each of these stakeholders has unique needs and requests that they communicate, without being aware of or acknowledging other stakeholders' demands. The individual academic will be

81 Nederlandse Arbeidsinspectie, *Psychosociale arbeidsbelasting universiteiten* (Den Haag: Nederlandse Arbeidsinspectie, 2024).

82 Katia Levecque et al., "Work Organization and Mental Health Problems in PhD Students," *Research Policy* 46, no. 4 (2017): 868–879.

83 Gábor Kismihók et al., "Researcher Mental Health and Well-Being Manifesto" (2021), https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5559806.

confronted with many stakeholders inside and outside their institution, and their (urgent) demands at the same time.[84] In parallel to these often conflicting demands and interests, especially junior academics find themselves in precarious work conditions due to a lack of support infrastructure and job insecurity. On the one side, the intrinsic desire to pursue meaningful work in academia is what drives academics and helps them to cope with conflicting stakeholder demands and academic work precarity. On the other side, it forces academics to comply with the rules of the "academic game,"[85] leading them to accept overwork as a necessary sacrifice for career advancement within the academic ecosystem.

Demanding effort without appropriate rewards can be labeled as exploitation. Exploitation, or the action of taking unfair advantage of others in order to benefit from their work, can be found to exist at many levels and in many forms in academia. Examples include commercial publishing houses making unbounded profits while exploiting the free labor of researchers through peer review (see also Chapter 9),[86] or senior professors burdening junior researchers with excessive teaching and administrative tasks.[87] While commercial publishers exploiting research and senior academics exploiting junior colleagues are clear examples of exploitation, the broader academic ecosystem generally involves many diverse stakeholders with competing demands, making identifying who benefits and who is exploited much more complex and nuanced.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on overburdening. I argue that academics often accept being

84 Kasja Weenink et al., "'I Need a Grant but Spend Time on Teaching': How Academics in Different Positions Play Out the Teaching–Research Nexus in Interdependence with Their Contexts," *European Journal of Higher Education* 14, no. 3 (2024): 489–507.

85 Senia Kalfa et al., "The Academic Game: Compliance and Resistance in Universities," *Work, Employment and Society* 32, no. 2 (2018): 274–291.

86 Jon Tennant, "Time to Stop the Exploitation of Free Academic Labour," European Science Editing 46 (2020): e51839.

87 Michelle W.T. Cheng and Man-Lai Leung, "'I'm Not the Only Victim…': Student Perceptions of Exploitative Supervision Relation in Doctoral Degree," *Higher Education* 84, no. 3 (2022): 523–540.

overburdened for two related promises: *the promise of meaningful work* (purpose, impact), and *the promise of future advancement (*promotion, status). Given the fact that academics face overburdening from multiple stakeholders, I refer to the "academic system" as a source of the problem. However, I also acknowledge that I only unpack some problematic aspects in academia that may lead to exploitation. This is because next to the problem of managing diverse stakeholders (journal editors, peers, students, funders, etc.) and juggling multiple tasks (teaching, research, public outreach, academic citizenship, grant writing, etc.), the broader academic system is historically built on different aspects of inequality (gender, family background, socio-economic status, etc.)[88] and has rarely questioned the rules of the "academic game" (i.e., publish or perish).

First, let us look at the promise of meaningful work. Universities ask academics to do many tasks beyond teaching and research, including tasks connected to research (e.g., grant applications, funding searches), impact activities (e.g., public outreach) as well as service roles or so-called citizenship tasks. Let me elaborate on the latter. Academics are often asked to perform citizenship-focused service (e.g., accreditation panels, program committees, task forces). Aligning academic appointments with individuals' meaningful activities creates a win-win. The Dutch Rewards and Recognition (R&R) program, a national initiative to diversify and vitalize academic careers[89] beyond just publications, valuing research, teaching, leadership, impact, and patient care (in medical centers) as key domains for meaningful academic pathways, is an example of this. However, in academia, win-lose scenarios are much more common.

Citizenship is an important task expected to be fulfilled by all members of the institution. However, unless citizenship tasks are formally integrated in the "leadership"

88 Luisa Martín Rojo, "Hegemonies and Inequalities in Academia," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 267–268 (2021): 169–192.

89 Recognition & Rewards, "Overview of Career Paths: Some Conclusions," n.d., www.recognitionrewards.nl/practices/overview-of-career-paths-some-conclusions/.

career path, they are just extra, supplementary activities. Of course, citizenship can be deeply meaningful through service to others. When the same people are always asked to do these tasks it can, however, become problematic. They may be seen as being too agreeable, service oriented or loyal, while first and foremost, it is the structure of the academic system that assigns citizenship tasks to the same academics, often leading to heavy workloads. This raises questions related to procedural and distributive fairness: are citizenship tasks assigned following fair and transparent procedures or on an ad-hoc basis, and do all contribute equally or do some receive disproportionate amounts of requests?

Second, let us examine the promise of future advancement. Many academics feel pressured to say "yes" to extra roles and tasks, driven by institutional expectations for promotion. Most often vague promises, like "this will increase your chances of promotion," are made instead of clear, specific commitments. Sometimes extra tasks or responsibilities are given to individuals to grant them higher standing, or recognition (status). Some academics are frequently invited to engage in prestigious roles like journal editorships, media contributions, and public debates. While this extra work offers intangible rewards (status, exposure) it can create a problem as the institution may not formally recognize these tasks as a time investment eligible for compensation in time. Even though some institutions might nominally "compensate" time for editorial roles, the core system still exploits unpaid service as essential for academic prestige. Most academic journals do not provide monetary compensation, and if journal editors do receive pay, compensation is often minimal relative to the significant time invested. Furthermore, primarily established, post-tenure academics secure editorial roles due to their extensive experience. These academics may have already been successful in securing some sort of balance between academic tasks. Consider the example of an academic who is contracted for 50% teaching and 50% research. Even if institutions with a policy that mandates a minimum of 50% teaching time provide a general compensation of 10% of research time for

editorial activities, the academic cannot benefit from this time compensation. If the academic uses that 10% for editorial work, their teaching time effectively drops, violating the 50% minimum teaching rule. In essence, the system creates a catch-22, forcing academics to take on these roles in their free time to maintain their status.

What has already been done to address this issue?

The aforementioned report on overburdening at Dutch universities also evaluated different measures implemented by universities to address the issue. Measures included reducing teaching load (e.g., less lecturing, less committee work, reuse of course materials), obtaining additional staff and support to ease the burden (e.g., research assistants, new employees), and providing a series of training courses (e.g., time management courses). However, only one-third of all respondents were aware of the measures, with a small fraction of those who *did* use them finding them moderately effective (between «neutral» and «somewhat effective»). The universities also launched the Recognition & Rewards program, which aims to address the administrative and teaching tasks. However, due to varying levels of program integration across universities, the report has not yet been able to gauge the effectiveness of the measures. What adds to the complexity is that different university departments interpret and apply the program uniquely, leading to inconsistent execution and diverse outcomes: overall, academics in departments with transparent and serious implementation strategies seem more equipped to deal with overburdening.

Other measures, such as providing mentoring programs, may have indirectly contributed to addressing this problem. Although the value of mentoring has been long recognized for accelerating career growth, the study[90] at Dutch universities shows that junior professors receiving mentorship generally experience a more positive view work environment, manage research more actively, and secure more grant funding. Dutch universities like VU Amsterdam and UvA have significantly expanded Mentoring Talent Programs in recent years. While these programs have not been developed to challenge the system, they offer structure and provide access to coping mechanisms for academic

90 Inge van der Weijden et al., "How Do Young Tenured Professors Benefit from a Mentor? Effects on Management, Motivation and Performance," *Higher Education* 69, no. 2 (2015): 275–287.

stress and overburdening through informal peer learning, where junior faculty gain practical wisdom about managing workload and pressures by sharing experiences with senior colleagues across different faculties and schools. Mentoring can also be a way to gain awareness of systemic treatment. Being in mentoring conversations helps mentees recognize when they are being asked to do too much service or when their teaching passion is being exploited. These conversations can serve as powerful moments for exchanging experiences, where, for example, younger academics can learn how to master negotiation and polite refusal without harming their reputation.

What more should be done?

There is not a single "golden" solution for addressing the issue of overburdening in academia. We all know that academic reform is challenging due to deeply ingrained systems or resistance to change. Therefore, I will focus on providing practical as well as feasible ways to address academic staff overburdening.

The issue of academic overburdening is often understood as the result of tension between individual academics and the academic system. However, this obscures two issues. First, individual academics are fundamental to the academic system – they form its core. Second, it does not take into account the crucial role of social context and hierarchical relationships (peers, supervisors) in individual experiences. Research shows that junior academics receiving strong supervisory support report significantly more positive work experiences.[91] I argue that supervisors should go beyond providing basic support and serve as "protectors" from overburdening. Having a supervisor who is focused on well-being can act as a crucial buffer against exploitative systems, protecting academics from undue pressure. Rather than overtly protesting the system, supervisors can act as gatekeepers to prevent overburdened academics from taking on more responsibilities when they are already stretched thin. They can shield them from additional stress by managing the influx of requests and setting boundaries, reducing the need for young academics who struggle to say "no" to feel the guilt of refusing.

Another way to battle the overburdening of academics, in particular highly motivated academics, could be by fostering greater transparency and fairness in academic citizenship. How many sections and departments track uncompensated, citizenship-focused activities, for example? Making this information transparent and in open access could help prevent the same people from being chosen for

91 Inge van der Weijden and Christine Teelken, "Precarious careers: postdoctoral researchers and wellbeing at work," *Studies in Higher Education* 48, no. 10 (2023): 1595–1607.

these roles. Transparency not only reduces burden on individuals by promoting fairer task distribution, it also boosts awareness by revealing who does what.

Lastly, as we take a step towards promoting Recognition & Rewards in Dutch universities, I believe the academic system also needs to evolve beyond traditional roles to truly support academics by recognizing different positions that need to be created in order for them to flourish, fulfilling the promise of meaningful work. Many career development and leadership-focused administrative positions are grounded in teaching-focused coordinating roles, which can be explained by the fact that a university's primary traditional function is teaching. However, for research and impact-focused roles to thrive, universities must create parallel career paths with equivalent internal positions to program coordinators, offering similar recognition and advancement opportunities for academics wanting to advance in these profiles. In this way, universities truly fulfil the promise of meaningful work by providing opportunities for personal growth and self-actualization for academics in the domains they find most meaningful. Next to creating more acknowledged internal roles, universities can and increasingly should structurally acknowledge external roles (like editorial/conference leadership) in career evaluations. Recognizing diverse academic contributions (research, teaching, impact, citizenship) with fairer systems for workload allocation is crucial for better work conditions, making universities more just and attractive workplaces.

6.

Facilitating Parenting and a Career in Academia

Callista Mulder

Picture the stereotypical academic and an image might come to mind of a hard-working, focused professor who spends long hours in the lab, crunching numbers, having deep thoughts and the occasional *Eureka!* Academics like this generally do not shy away from switching university or country of residence every few years. They are passionate. They go where opportunities lie, establish valuable collaborations abroad. They have full autonomy over their agendas, complete freedom and authority to decide their own priorities, tasks, and schedule. Overtime and working on weekends? Not an issue.

Take this stereotype, and throw parenthood into the mix. Suddenly autonomy is restricted to daycare opening hours and Saturdays revolve around sports events and playdates. What's more, pregnancy can bring significant changes to the brain as well. In humans, a reduction in gray matter volume, the stuff we need to process information, persists up to six years postpartum.[92] Even if the long-anticipated *Eureka* moment to jumpstart your scientific career may seem a thing of the past, you are still a passionate academic at heart and the person you were before you had children. In this chapter, I will address the challenges that come with balancing parenthood with academia, make suggestions to improve job security after parental leave, and elaborate on existing extension programs for grants.

92 Laura Pritschet et al., "Neuroanatomical Changes Observed over the Course of a Human Pregnancy," *Nature Neuroscience* 27, no. 11 (2024): 2253–2260.

What needs fixing?

Let me start with a personal anecdote. Allow me to take you back to November 2022. I am a postdoctoral researcher on leave after having given birth to our second child. He is five weeks old. I love the newborn phase – the joy of caring for this innocent and sweet tiny human being – still in reality it is often exhausting. My husband and I take turns holding and rocking our son through the night, almost every night.

I get a call from my supervisor. She reminds me that a prestigious scientist from the U.S. will be visiting our lab and asks me if I can give a short pitch about my work. I can even bring my baby along. I am a bit reluctant, our son has a good set of lungs and I don't want to disturb the meeting. She suggests to do the presentation on my behalf. A surge of academic passion wells up inside me: I don't want someone else presenting my work! So, I prepare the pitch while my son is napping. The next day, I take him to the meeting and do the presentation with him sound asleep in a carrier. It was a powerful moment for me: I could be a mom while acing it in academia.

My non-academic friends were confused when I sent them pictures of this rare event ("Are you back at work already?"). I guess it's true that a scientist's work never truly stops – not even on maternity leave. Wanting to excel at two jobs – science and parenthood – is a constant struggle. It is a major challenge for many parents, but the strain of "parenthood juggling" seems especially hard for early-career researchers working in academia. How inclusive is academia for young parents? Does being a parent reduce the chances of academic success? In other words, are the kids alright in academia, or aren't they?

Modern, 21st-century academics are increasingly expected to be "jacks-of-all-trades." Their multifaceted roles extend beyond research: they need to have strong communication skills, be effective teachers and mentors, be good at navigating institutional politics – and academics with children need to balance these demands with nurturing family life.

Women in the Netherlands are 30.4 years old when they have their first child, on average.[93] First-time fathers are typically a few years older. The increasing age of parenthood is largely due to our current societal architecture, which has pushed the age of financial independence higher, directly delaying parenthood. Especially female fertility declines with age, significantly dropping after 35, leading to a tighter window for biological motherhood, and this can cause friction.

In Dutch, the term *tropenjaren* (tropical years) refers to those intensely busy, challenging years when parents have young children. For parents in academia, these years are extra demanding. In the Netherlands, the mean age for obtaining a PhD is 33 years.[94] For those who aspire a life of learning in academia, it takes on average 17 years from PhD graduation to full professorship. Fixed-term postdoctoral contracts, tenure-tracks without job security, or project-based contracts are not uncommon. At Dutch universities, tenured professorships can often only be obtained after acquisition of one or more large competitive, personal grants. Examples include the NWO (Dutch Research Council) Veni, Vidi, Vici program which funds researchers at different career stages, up to 15 years post-PhD.

In practice, combining motherhood and academia means that while you are facing DORA,[95] your children are enjoying *Dora the Explorer*. It means trying to keep your sleep-deprived brain that is plagued by gray matter loss focused on a prestigious grant deadline. It means juggling breastfeeding and work, struggling to attend conferences abroad, and having "mom guilt" as you chase your professional goals. It means dealing with the frustrating experience of being "scooped" because another research group

93 Statistics Netherlands (CBS) "Moeders Iets Ouder bij Geboorte Eerste Kind," July 8, 2025, www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2025/19/moeders-iets-ouder-bij-geboorte-eerste-kind.

94 Rathenau Instituut, "Van Promovendus tot Promotie," 2025, www.rathenau.nl/nl/wetenschap-cijfers/wetenschappers/van-promovendus-tot-promotie, accessed August 8, 2025.

95 DORA is the abbreviation for the San Francisco Declaration On Research Assessment. More information can be found on: www.sfdora.org/.

published similar findings before you could due to parental leave or not being able to do experiments, losing your publication chances at *Nature*. It means feeling stuck between the dwindling dream of a stable permanent job and the need for family financial security. No wonder that nearly half of female scientists leave full-time science after the birth of their first child.[96] The statistics show that 23% of new fathers leave academia after having a child. Apparently, running two races simultaneously is not sustainable for them either.

Before addressing potential solutions, I would like to acknowledge a few important matters. First, this chapter focuses on parenthood and academia but it is important to acknowledge individuals who face difficult paths to parenthood or struggle with infertility. The grief from involuntary childlessness is a profound, often invisible loss because society rarely acknowledges or supports it. It can significantly impacts individuals' lives, disrupting expected life paths, including academic trajectories. Second, we should not have to choose between parenthood and academia. The desire for parenthood is deeply personal and varies greatly, just as the choice to remain childfree is equally valid. Life choices related to parenthood can thrive separately from professional drive. Third, there is a significant and undeniable biological disparity in the burdens of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. There is a discrepancy in the division of housework and free time as well.[97] Still, parenthood is not solely a women's issue. It extends beyond conventional roles, encompassing diverse family structures like adoption, surrogacy, and blended families. The challenges discussed in this chapter are faced by all parents in academia.

96 Erin A. Cech and Mary Blair-Loy, "The Changing Career Trajectories of New Parents in STEM," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 10 (2019): 4182–4187.

97 Londa Schiebinger and Shannon K. Gilmartin, "Housework Is an Academic Issue," *Academe* 96, no. 1 (2010): 39–44.

What has already been done to address this issue?

In the Netherlands, parental leave provisions are relatively good compared to other high-income countries. Also, the expansion of paternity leave is starting to lift gender disparities in childcare by encouraging fathers' involvement. Nevertheless, the reality is that parental leave often strains research progress.

In the Netherlands, the paid benefits for maternity leave and parental leave are funded by the Dutch Employee Insurance Agency (UWV). Many academics on temporary contracts are unaware they can extend their contracts for parental leave. Universities in the Netherlands and research institutes obtain funds through the UWV system for paid parental leave. Still, being away from the lab for a couple of months can be detrimental to experimental progress, especially in competitive fields. The Netherlands Cancer Institute (NKI) has found an innovative solution to this problem: the "roving scientist."[98] A roving scientist is a versatile, highly skilled scientist who temporarily fills in across different research labs, supporting colleagues on leave to prevent career interruptions, ensuring continuity in scientific work. It goes without saying that parenthood extends far beyond parental leave, evolving into a lifelong commitment of guidance and support. Balancing parental responsibilities can slow down research productivity long term, potentially hurting grant competitiveness.

Luckily, major funding bodies like NWO and the European Research Council (ERC) offer grant extensions or allow for longer eligibility after PhD graduation for parents. NWO's implementation of a parental leave compensation scheme, following legal action taken by UvA professor Christina Eckes who had to write a rebuttal for a Vidi grant application just days before going into labor,[99] demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity. The scheme offers flexibility

98 Netherlands Cancer Institute, "Meet Our Roving Scientist," 2025, www.nki.nl/news-events/news/meet-our-roving-scientist/, accessed August 8, 2025.

for researchers applying for grants if they are hindered by parental leave. In a brief e-mail exchange in May 2025, NWO confirmed no formal evaluation of their parental leave extension clauses or compensation scheme has been done to date.

Next to general health and safety conditions for employees across all sectors, such as workplace accommodations for nursing parents (lactation spaces and time) and high-quality childcare, there are key issues needing attention for academics specifically. For example, in academia, invited talks are crucial for CV building and fostering new research collaborations. Attending and participating in international conferences can be a burden, especially for researchers with young children. Gordon Research Conferences (GRC) accommodate academics with young children by providing childcare, lactation rooms, and a family-friendly environment. (Not to worry, the sessions, including coffee breaks and networking times, are generally designed as baby-free environments.) GRC conferences serve as examples for others in setting benchmarks for parent-friendly policies and demonstrate that combining academia with family life *is* possible. What's more, taking children to the occasional conference can also be beneficial for them. I believe that seeing a parent thrive and be happy at work teaches children valuable life lessons about fulfilment, fostering their own future confidence and work ethic as they observe positive role modeling.

99 Sterre van der Hee, "Hoogleraar Christina Eckes Won Haar Zaak Tegen NWO: 'Het Grote Probleem Is Sekseongelijkheid'," *Folia*, 2018, www.folia.nl/actueel/125418/hoogleraar-christina-eckes-won-haar-zaak-tegen-nwo-het-grote-probleem-is-sekseongelijkheid, accessed August 8, 2025.

What more should be done?

In my opinion, parenthood can be a powerful asset for academics if practical and thoughtful academic adjustments are made to relieve the disparities between parent academics and child-free academics.

First of all, a foundation of mutual understanding, collegiality, and clear communication is crucial for successfully balancing parenthood and careers, especially in demanding fields like research. Parenthood is a unique journey for everyone, and it is completely normal for some parents to struggle more than others. Some young mothers are OK with giving a presentation while on maternity leave while others can't even muster the energy for e-mails. For some, a lab or office provides a much-needed mental break from constant caring, whereas for others being a parent transcends everything else. Some hire nannies or au pairs to get in-home childcare, allowing more time for work, other choose to work part-time. Whatever your approach, the reality is that parenting is rewarding but hard. Unsolicited advice from colleagues rarely makes it easier.

Second, there are practical issues that need to be addressed. Flaws in the academic system – the intense scarcity of secure, permanent science jobs and the hyper-competitive funding landscape – negatively impact all academics, not just parents (see also Chapter 3). Currently, a temporary, project-based contract extension in the Netherlands isn't automatically transferred to the researcher's project. This needs to change. In countries like Finland and Germany, this is already standard practice with strong laws offering job protection after parental leave. In addition, parental leave systems should be designed to allow division of parental duties between parents, or families. Furthermore, the NKI's roving scientist initiative deserves widespread implementation in other institutions. Although the above changes may seem like a drop in the ocean, they could be catalysts for an inclusive academic environment for parents.

While NWO and ERC extension programs aim to support researchers, including parents, to bridge the gap with

non-parenting peers, improvements can be made. For example, to qualify for the extension of NWO and ERC grants, the applicant's child must live with them at least 50% of the time. In my opinion, extension requests should be more inclusive and personalized as there are numerous situations where this requirement cannot be met (e.g., in the case of parents facing fertility treatment failures, miscarriages, stillbirth, or child loss). In addition, proper evaluation of the extension program and compensation scheme by the NWO is crucial to further remove disparities between parents and non-parents.

Lastly, I believe that parenthood in academia should be reframed from a burden to a strength deserving recognition. We have created a world where parents are expected to work as if they don't have children and raise children as if they don't work. This is a Herculean task. The skills honed through parenting, like time management, communication, problem-solving, adaptability, and resilience, are powerful, transferable assets that significantly benefit academia. It is no coincidence that thoughtful communication (e.g., active listening, I messages) is highly effective in parenting as well as in work situations. Answering your child's questions in simple language is excellent practice to simplify complex topics for laypeople. And that reduction of gray matter in your brain? Studies suggest pregnancy can enhance "Theory of Mind" abilities, the skill to understand others' beliefs, desires, and emotions – the perfect skill for supervising students or while navigating academic politics. Skills gained through parenting should be valued as much as those derived from extracurricular activities like sports or political engagement. Recognizing and valuing diverse strengths in academia fosters inclusion and productivity. Positive role models balancing parenthood and academic success are crucial in this respect., showing that juggling these roles is achievable and valuable. After all, there is nothing better than a warm hug from your child after a long day at work.

Academia can become more accommodating for parent-scientists through systemic and mindset changes and policies supporting equal opportunities for both parent and child-free academics. *Yes, the kids are definitely alright in academia!*

7.

Training Academics to Become Better Writers

Gea Dreschler

There is a weird contradiction in how academics view their work: they may not describe themselves as professional writers, yet much of what they do professionally requires writing. Research doesn't count if it's not published. Getting funding for research is not possible without writing grant proposals. Impact and open science require writing for a general public. Even so, many academics see themselves mostly as researchers; writing articles is just a means to an end. This ambivalence leads to a work culture that does not support the work of writing in a way that professional writers need. While this affects all academics, it is particularly relevant for PhD candidates, for whom a lack of support most dramatically influences their career perspectives. There have been repeated reports[100] that highlight delays or dropouts in PhD trajectories as well as issues related to PhD candidates' wellbeing – often related to issues with a lack of appropriate support in various aspects. Two recent developments raise additional questions about what it means to be a professional writer in the 21st century: the role that impact plays in current academics' work, and the wide availability of Generative AI tools for writing.[101]

100 Promovendi Netwerk Nederland, *PNN PhD Survey: Asking the Right Questions* (2020); Promovendi Netwerk Nederland, *Four Years of Contract, Five+ Years of Work: Factors Hindering and Supporting a Timely PhD Completion* (2025).

101 The ideas in this chapter are based on my personal experiences during the past 15 years as a researcher, writing teacher, and writing coach, as well as on a personal library of books on both writing and productivity. I am also indebted to many insightful conversations with fellow writing experts and feedback on an early draft from the editors.

What needs fixing?

One reason for a lack of appropriate support is that we underestimate the leap that PhD candidates have to take between finishing their Master's degree and completing a PhD thesis. During their PhD project, most PhD candidates are for the first time writing for publication, which requires a different set of skills than writing a course paper or Master's thesis. They have to deal with different opinions about their work: rather than submitting an assignment to one teacher, they have to balance the opinions of their supervisors while still maintaining ownership over the text. PhD candidates are now writing for a real audience of critical peers, whose knowledge and expectations need to be considered. They have to learn about the unspoken rules for academic publishing in their field and develop their own personal style. They have to manage a big writing project, often juggling several subprojects at the same time which all go through several revisions, without having the clear goalposts that undergraduate degree programs provide.

What makes this transition harder is a general lack of attention in academia for good writing habits. In academia, the focus is usually on output (how much we write and publish) rather than process (how we spend our days and writing sessions). In addition, we tend to have a very narrow view of writing, counting only hours spent typing, and we may not realize how wildly different – but equally effective – people's writing habits are.

Helen Sword's book *Air & Time & Light & Space*,[102] which draws on 100 interviews with successful academic writers, provides a wonderful illustration of how academics write. For instance, Sword shows the diversity of academics' writing practices: the different places, different times and lengths of writing sessions. She also explores various aspects of the actual writing process, highlighting how some academics use strategies like developing ideas through

102 Helen Sword, *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

multiple drafts while others plan extensively beforehand. Sword's book not only focuses on the struggles of writing, but also highlights what academics enjoy about writing. However, for PhD candidates, it may be hard to develop good writing habits because their supervisors and senior academics have a completely different work schedule, leaving less room for practical questions: How do you structure writing sessions? What are good strategies for developing your argument? How much time, or words, can you reasonably expect yourself to write each day? How much work goes into producing an academic article from start to finish?

The main problem in this respect is the fact that writing support comes to a large extent from PhD candidates' supervisors, who may not always have the skills to support their PhDs in the varying aspects of writing. A recent report by the Dutch network for PhD candidates (PNN/ Promovendi Network Nederland) mentions examples of supervisors not making time for supervision, not reading the PhD candidate's work, or "micromanaging" the PhD candidate by commenting on every single detail in the text.[103] The core tension in PhD supervision lies in the fact that the supervisor must be both a supportive mentor, guiding development, and an objective assessor, judging the final work, creating inherent conflict. When faced with a messy draft, for example, a supervisor or reviewer might simply judge the work by stating that the text lacks structure, whereas a writing coach will help a writer identify the causes of poor structure (e.g., the lack of clear topic sentences or signposting) and provide tools to work on those aspects. A writing coach may also simply ask a writer to explain their ideas, acting as a guide to help them develop their own argument, which will automatically lead to a more structured text. A writing coach will focus on helping the writer make progress rather than judging the work or the writer.

Two recent developments underline the importance of taking writing skills seriously. First, 21st-century academics

103 Promovendi Netwerk Nederland, *Four Years of Contract, Five+ Years of Work: Factors Hindering and Supporting a Timely PhD Completion* (2025).

are also increasingly asked to communicate with a wider audience of non-specialists. For instance, the Recognition & Rewards program,[104] places an emphasis on impact and open science. And indeed, at a time when academia is under threat in various ways, it is more important than ever for academics to leave their "ivory towers" and engage with audiences beyond universities. Writing for public or general audiences demands a different set of skills than purely formal, standardized or research-based texts for academic peers. It requires a more engaging style with flexibility in argument, sentence structure, and vocabulary. To benefit their careers, PhD candidates should receive training in writing for different audiences. An added benefit of such training is that it may also lead to more creative and engaging academic texts; many writers discover, or rediscover, the joy of writing when working on texts that give them more freedom.

Second, the availability of Generative AI places new demands on writing skills. These tools will undoubtedly simplify some aspects of writing, especially for non-native writers, by offering grammar help or rephrase suggestions. But the fact that Generative AI output may look convincing at first glance does not mean that all AI-generated writing is good. The idea that ChatGPT "writes" texts reduces writing to a final written product. But in fact, writing is about much more than the words on the page; it is about the thinking process that precedes it, and ultimately, about communication with a reader. Professional writers need to remain in the driver's seat in terms of what they want to say and they need to know how to use AI tools ethically. Crucially, this requires a lot of knowledge about specific language choices, the targeted audience, and effective communication. In time, standard practices in academic publishing may change: perhaps articles will become shorter; perhaps there will be a greater emphasis on personal, authentic writing. What is certain is that every professional writer needs the skills and awareness to respond effectively to these new demands.

104 Recognition & Rewards, accessed September 3, 2025, www.recognitionrewards.nl.

What has already been done to address this issue?

In essence, what PhD candidates need to learn is to improve writing quality and develop good writing habits. Some good supporting practices are already in place. There are supervisors who effectively combine roles by providing subject expertise (content), guiding motivation and time management (process), and assisting with drafting and refining language (writing). Most PhD students receive some training on how to create a clear text structure and to write clearly and concisely. All Dutch universities have dedicated language centers or similar departments that offer courses on academic writing and usually also specialized language editing or proofreading services for non-native speakers. The institutional context for PhD candidates has improved in recent years with the introduction of more formal requirements regarding training plans and the professionalization of Graduate Schools, which provide a clear support structure for PhD candidates. Some Graduate Schools also organize writing retreats and "Shut up and Write!" sessions to build community and boost productivity.

With respect to the writing process, we know plenty about the specific types of support writers need. There is an extensive library of research and self-help publications on writing, with some focusing on work habits,[105] others on strategies for approaching different writing tasks,[106] and others yet on the psychology of writing.[107] Moreover, there is a well-tested practice of writing coaching, mostly at the student level, which many universities in the Netherlands offer to students for free. Peer writing coaches help students to identify issues in their text, for instance related to clarity,

105 Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2016).

106 Rowena Murray, *How to Write a Thesis*, 2nd ed. (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006).

107 Joan Bolker, *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis* (New York: Owl Books, 1998).

structure and style, and empower them with strategies to improve their own texts. They also help students with the writing process by showing them how to break up large writing tasks into manageable chunks or how to get "unstuck" when they are stuck in their writing. Some university Writing Centers also offer this type of writing support and coaching for PhD candidates, and some Dutch universities provide courses specifically on managing the writing process, in addition to courses on writing quality.

What more should be done?

If we want to train PhD candidates to become better – and happier – professional academic writers, it is essential that we start thinking differently about writing: we need to see ourselves as professional writers, which in turns means that we need to build structures that support professional writers. A helpful metaphor for shifting thinking is the notion of craftsmanship, which is used by several writing experts, including Joli Jensen in her book *Write No Matter What*.[108] Craftsmanship embodies skill acquisition, mastering tools and knowledge transfer, and also suggests a system of mentoring and training. It not only makes writing less mysterious – by viewing it as an ability that is learned through practice rather than an innate skill – but also frames writing as a journey from novice to expert, with students as apprentices and PhD candidates as master apprentices. They are on their way to becoming independent scholars but they also still need training and support, not because they are not good enough but because a journey where students progress from novice to expert is the normal route.

So, what does professional support look like? Professional support looks like having clear expectations regarding the amount and quality of written work. It looks like providing academic writing courses for PhD candidates focused on writing for both specialist and non-specialist audiences. It looks like making space for discussing ethical use of GenAI and encouraging writers to develop their own style. It looks like professional editing and proofreading support, especially (but not only!) for non-native speakers. It looks like planning a PhD project in such a way that there is enough time for training writing skills and finalizing a manuscript within a contract, as advocated in a recent PNN report.[109]

In addition, I believe supervision teams should include a non-expert whose sole role is to provide PhD candidates

108 Joli Jensen, *Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

109 Promovendi Netwerk Nederland, *Four Years of Contract, Five+ Years of Work: Factors Hindering and Supporting a Timely PhD Completion* (2025).

with writing support. Ideally, this person is a trained writing coach, but they could also be a faculty or department colleague. It is crucial that they are recognized for their role by the supervision team but they should not be involved in the formal evaluation.

Most importantly, all initiatives aimed at supporting PhD candidates' writing need to be backed by senior management and formalized in the organization. Too often initiatives fail because they rely too heavily on one person or are treated as temporary projects rather than strategic, sustained efforts. This makes such initiatives vulnerable, especially in times of budget cuts. A shift in thinking about PhD candidates as professional writers in training will help consolidate the structures that are necessary for clear expectations, support and growth. If we start with PhD candidates now, we will end up with a new generation of researchers who are in a good position to tackle 21st-century academic writing challenges.

8.

Under-standing the Influence of Industry on Academic Visibility

Tiago R. Matos

In my work, I bridge the corporate and academic worlds. I work at a pharmaceutical company where I lead clinical research to develop new therapeutic options for patients worldwide, while also holding an affiliation with an academic hospital as a lecturer and researcher. Industry work comes with a focus on efficiency and clear outcomes, whereas academia allows me to engage with broader societal questions, such as promoting equitable career development for young and underrepresented groups, advocating for preventive healthcare, and deepening our understanding of social impact. I collaborate with and speak at industry-sponsored events as an academic, at times perhaps viewed as a key opinion leader (KOL). In my industry role, I also invite both KOLs and non-KOL academics to collaborate and speak at industry initiatives.

Given my work, I often find myself reflecting on the dynamics that determine whose academic voices are amplified: how the entanglement between academia and industry shapes who becomes visible, who gains influence, and whose voices remain unheard. This chapter presents findings from my attempt to better understand these questions, while remaining far from a complete analysis and acknowledging my potential conflicts of interest.

What needs fixing?

Academic integrity is a cornerstone of credible scholarship. It entails a commitment to honesty, transparency, and methodological rigor, ensuring that knowledge production remains fair, evidence-based, and socially valuable. This integrity is vital not only for the internal functioning of academia but also for its role in society. Citizens, policymakers, and institutions rely on the academic community to provide insights that are not only intellectually sound but also as minimally as possible affected by bias or external pressures.

Against this background, concerns have been raised about the influence of so-called KOLs, possibly aligned with commercial interests.[110] Originating from the corporate world, the term "KOL" refers to influential people, often academics, whose opinions can shape practices, policy decisions, and even public perception. While KOLs can play a vital role in translating research into real-world impact, they can also become central figures in industry strategies to communicate scientific messages. The main concern is that industry appears to have the capacity to strategically create and promote KOLs, often selecting individuals who are willing to publicly support their products or positions. These selections are not neutral: they tend to favor senior academics from well-known universities with strong English communication skills, a polished or media-friendly appearance, and an existing presence on social media or public platforms. Moreover, because the United States represents the largest commercial market in many sectors, companies often prioritize U.S.-based KOLs for international visibility and influence. This may lead to a relatively homogeneous set of individuals being identified as KOLs.

KOLs can also serve as effective bridges between academia, industry, and the public. Their visibility allows

110 Sergio Sismondo, "Key Opinion Leaders and the Corruption of Medical Knowledge: What the Sunshine Act Will and Won't Cast Light On," *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 41, no. 3 (2013): 635–643.

research to reach wider audiences, shape clinical practice, and attract attention to unmet medical needs. When operating within transparent and well-regulated frameworks, KOL engagement can contribute to both scientific progress and patient care. However, the selective elevation of spokespersons carries the risk of influencing the global research agenda toward commercially favorable narratives. At Dutch university medical centers, industry-sponsored symposia often showcase a narrow group of professors, repeatedly invited to comment on the same topics, reinforcing the perception that influence and not merit, determines visibility.

The consequences are far-reaching, particularly for early-career academics. KOLs often receive increased funding, enabling them to pursue further or novel research, along with greater media attention and opportunities to influence national research agendas. Their inclusion in industry-driven scientific publications and presentations expands their CVs with high-profile work, which in turn may lead to major public research grants, invitations to industry-funded projects, and appointments to prominent advisory boards. Younger scholars who do not align with (ideas promoted by) these established figures, or their commercial backers may find it increasingly difficult to gain recognition or secure funding. This strengthens the position of established power structures and makes it more difficult for critical scholarships to emerge.

The integrity of biomedical literature is increasingly challenged by practices such as ghost management and honorary authorship, both of which obscure the true origins and interests behind scientific publications. Companies may produce scientific articles through a process of "ghost management," whereby external writing agencies design, analyze, write, and strategically place manuscripts that ultimately bear the names of independent academic authors.[111] This not only influences the scientific discourse in favor of

111 Sergio Sismondo, "Ghost Management: How Much of the Medical Literature Is Shaped Behind the Scenes by the Pharmaceutical Industry?," *PLoS Medicine* 4, no. 9 (2007): e286.

commercial products but also fosters publication bias by privileging positive outcomes and suppressing unfavorable data. Ghost management and writing, together with AI-assisted writing tools, aim to support scientists who increasingly face severe time constraints due to growing workloads and responsibilities. Without such support, publication timelines may be delayed, risking the work becoming obsolete or, in some cases, never being published at all.

On the other hand, reviewers and editors of academic journals often score lower, reject, or distrust manuscripts authored solely or predominantly by industry-affiliated scientists. As a result, honorary or guest academic authors are often added to manuscripts, despite limited or no substantive contributions to the research or writing, thereby increasing the perception of neutrality and academic credibility. Such nominal authors tend to be the same established KOLs. Examples include research on the antidepressant sertraline, where between 18% and 40% of publications from 1998–2000 was ghost-managed by a single firm on behalf of the company. Other important examples are the publications from the citalopram CIT-MD-18 pediatric depression trial, which misrepresented efficacy and safety data by deviating from protocol criteria, omitting procedural violations, overstating effect sizes, and reducing clarity regarding adverse events. Company employees and ghostwriters prepared the manuscript, with academic researchers added as nominal authors.[112]

Together, these practices compromise transparency and accountability. Also, they may weaken public trust in clinical research. The core problem is the concentration of influence: when the same senior academics serve as gatekeepers for research funding, conference invitations, and journal special issues, the definition of "excellent science" becomes narrowly tailored. This marginalizes critical, interdisciplinary, or socially engaged research that does not align

112 Jon N. Jureidini et al., "The Citalopram CIT-MD-18 Pediatric Depression Trial: Deconstruction of Medical Ghostwriting, Data Mischaracterisation and Academic Malfeasance," *International Journal of Risk & Safety in Medicine* 28, no. 1 (2016): 33–43.

with dominant commercial narratives. From the perspective of young researchers, the landscape feels constrained. Junior scholars in public health and environmental studies, for instance, have noted that speaking out against dominant industry narratives, such as the safety of certain chemicals or food additives, can lead to subtle blacklisting from collaborative projects. A study published in 2019 in *Nature Communications* found that early-career researchers who coauthor with top-cited scientists significantly increase their likelihood of becoming top-cited themselves.[113] While these collaborations can provide mentorship and visibility, they may reinforce academic gatekeeping, especially when those top-cited scientists double as KOLs fostered by industry.

The case of KOLs in biomedical sciences is representative of wider questions about academic integrity and external influence. It is important to distinguish between *integrity* and *independence*. Academic integrity does not necessarily require full independence. Academics inevitably work within cultural, institutional, and financial frameworks, and complete detachment from external influences is not realistic. In this context, independence means being free from inappropriate or excessive influence, whether from governments, businesses, religious institutions, or prevailing ideologies. Integrity is demonstrated when scholars maintain critical distance and intellectual honesty *despite* these embedded positions. For the same reason, the presence of external funding or affiliations within universities does not inherently compromise academic integrity. However, when externally financed chairs begin to outnumber those funded directly by the university, there may exist a risk that institutional independence and the wider academic culture become disproportionately shaped by external interests. Such concerns surfaced, for example, when journalistic investigations revealed that a considerable number of the tax professors at the University of

113 Wei Li et al., "Early Coauthorship with Top Scientists Predicts Success in Academic Careers," *Nature Communications* 10, no. 1 (2019): 5170.

Amsterdam were also partners at eminent law firms, which in turn financed their academic chairs.[114]

Ultimately, transparency of roles is essential, along with strong safeguards for peer review and governance, and the cultivation of a critical academic environment where open debate and intellectual independence are protected. Academic integrity, therefore, serves as a necessary anchor to ensure that, even in settings where full independence cannot be guaranteed, scholarly work remains trustworthy and of value.

114 NOS Nieuwsuur, "Hoogleraren Gesponsord door Zuidas-Kantoren: Zorgen over Onafhankelijkheid," April 29, 2022, www.nos.nl/nieuwsuur/collectie/13896/artikel/2426949-hoogleraren-gesponsord-door-zuidas-kantoren-zorgen-over-onafhankelijkheid.

What has already been done to address this issue?

Some efforts have emerged to counterbalance the dominance of industry-defined KOLs and offer more equitable support structures for young scholars. For example, initiatives like Franklin Women in Australia provide mentoring and leadership programs specifically for women in health and medical research. Founded by Melina Georgousakis, the organization seeks to elevate voices of women, who are often sidelined in traditional academic hierarchies. In Germany, the German Scholars Organization (GSO), led by Anne Schreiter, supports early-career researchers both inside and outside of academia. Through training, networking, and policy engagement, the GSO helps scholars to pursue socially relevant and independent career paths. Both initiatives highlight the need to support academic independence and diverse career paths.

In the Netherlands, actions remain fragmented. While university codes of conduct require researchers to disclose conflicts of interest, these measures often lack enforcement or are treated as box-ticking exercises. Still, some Dutch universities have introduced integrity courses and annual reporting requirements for faculty, but compliance is uneven, and data are rarely made public.

There have been growing calls for greater transparency and independence in professorial appointments and research funding. Some universities have launched internal working groups on research integrity, but without broader structural reforms, these remain limited in scope. Despite limited visibility and resources, they continue to contribute where possible to influence local and national policy.

By foregrounding these efforts, we see that academic integrity is not merely about individual behavior but requires systemic support for scholars, particularly early-career researchers or underrepresented groups, who seek to navigate and examine entrenched power structures. These efforts are crucial to sustaining a comprehensive and publicly accountable academic landscape.

What more should be done?

First, universities must continue to develop and enforce robust policies on transparency and conflicts of interest. These policies should not only require full disclosure of all industry ties but also include the creation of public databases where such affiliations are accessible to students, peers, journalists, and the broader public. Similar systems already exist in the United States, such as the Open Payments database run by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. Universities could further mandate that funding sources and personal financial ties be listed on all public academic output, including conference slides and op-eds. Addressing these issues requires more than disclosure; it demands structural reform in authorship criteria, editorial oversight, and institutional incentives. Rules alone are not enough to enhance integrity, a point raised by ethicist Bruce Macfarlane, who argues for a broader and more substantive focus. He proposes a virtue-based approach, emphasizing qualities such as sincerity, humility, and courage to guide scholars through complex, discipline-specific ethical dilemmas, especially where formal rules fall short.[115] Such values can help researchers to make decisions when confronted with questions such as "Should this finding be published if it contradicts funders' interests?" and "How to write up conclusions without overstating the evidence?".

Second, the academic reward structure can be rebalanced. Young academics should not be penalized for pursuing independent, critical, or community-engaged research. Funders and universities may diversify their criteria for excellence, valuing integrity, originality, and societal impact alongside citation metrics. Initiatives that reward team-based research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and mentoring of early-career scholars can help shift the incentive structure away from individual star power.

115 Bruce Macfarlane, *Researching with Integrity: The Ethics of Academic Enquiry* (London: Routledge, 2009).

Third, academic journals should consider a blind first-round review process, for both editors and reviewers, removing author names and affiliations. This would help reduce favoritism toward predominant academic authors, elite universities, or certain countries, leading to fewer ghost-writing practices and less incentive to add nominal authors who did not contribute to the manuscript, thereby curbing the continued promotion of a small group of established KOLs.

Fourth, academic media and conferences should actively work to diversify the voices they platform. This includes not only gender and ethnic diversity, but also epistemic diversity, valuing different methodologies, disciplines, and institutional affiliations. Editorial boards and organizing committees should commit to rotating leadership and open calls to break the cycle of insular networks. National scientific associations could implement speaker equity audits and adopt policies that ensure varied researchers are included in high-visibility panels.

Fifth, young researchers themselves can organize for change. Collective action through early-career networks, unions, or interdisciplinary platforms can pressure institutions to take meaningful steps. This includes demanding seats at decision-making tables and co-developing policies that reflect the needs of the next generation. Recent grassroots mobilizations, such as the nationwide protests against budget cuts to Dutch higher education, have shown that collective mobilization can bring issues of precarity, fairness, and academic integrity into national debate.

Sixth, effective academic communicators develop strong presentation, writing, and social skills, enabling them to understand their audience and convey information clearly, engagingly, and with impact (see also Chapter 7). KOLs frequently combine these abilities, enabling them to engage with diverse audiences and disciplines, including navigating well between industry and academia. Mastering language (e.g., pronunciation, accent clarity, eloquence, pacing, and voice projection) is a core part of presentation skills, alongside effective storytelling, confident body language, and a professional appearance. It is important to note that

scientific impact and communication excellence can be distinct strengths, and that individuals contribute to the field in diverse and complementary ways, very much in line with the principles of the Recognition & Rewards movement,[116] which emphasizes the need for a diversity of talents in academia.

Seventh, beyond integrity-related concerns, there may also be economic reasons to stop adding KOLs as honorary authors or presenters when they have not contributed significantly to a study. For instance, it would be valuable to examine whether selecting high-profile KOLs, either as presenters at scientific meetings or as honorary first/last authors on publications, impacts product sales. A comprehensive analysis could determine whether the honorary authorship of well-known experts in clinical-trial publications leads to increased sales of the specific drug. If such effects prove limited, this may support more accurate attribution of credit to the researchers who conducted the work.

In summary, the interplay between academia and industry may shape whose academic voices are amplified, particularly through the strategic elevation of KOLs. Companies may favor certain academics, often chosen for their visibility, communication and social skills, or alignment with commercial interests. These dynamics risk narrowing research agendas, reinforcing existing hierarchies, limiting diversity, and weakening trust in scholarly output. Academic integrity therefore depends on structures that promote transparency, independence, and equitable opportunities across the research community. Practices such as ghost management, honorary authorship, and weak enforcement of conflict-of-interest policies further undermine confidence in the academic process. Addressing these concerns requires stronger transparency, fairer evaluation systems, more diverse platforms for scientific voices, support for early-career and underrepresented researchers and their communication skills, and a broader recognition of varied academic talents.

116 Bruce Macfarlane and Damon Burg, *Rewarding and Recognising Academic Citizenship* (Bristol: University of Bristol; Winchester: University of Winchester, 2019), www.brucemacfarlane.weebly.com/uploads/8/5/4/1/85415070/academic_citizenship_report.pdf.

9.

Challenging the Dependence on Commercial Academic Publishers

Berend van der Kolk

"It's hard to imagine a sweeter business than publishing academic journals." This was the first sentence of a 1995 *Forbes* article on academic publishing, which still rings true today. Large, listed publishers[117] make exorbitant profits while academia pays not double, but triple. First, academics and universities pay by delivering millions of hours of specialized, unpaid services to publishers (i.e., researching, writing, peer reviewing, and serving as editors). Second, together, Dutch universities also (!) pay about EUR 50 million per year to read (subscriptions) or publish (processing fees) their research. Third, academics and universities deliver large amounts of behavioral data to publishers that is used to feed analytics tools, which are then sold to... universities, governments and corporations. This allows publishers such as Elsevier (part of RELX group) to sustain extreme profit margins (33.9% in 2024), beating tech firms such as Apple (10.8%) and Amazon (31.4%). No wonder: universities pay, publishers collect revenues. Sweet for publishers, but sour for science and society. Have universities become too dependent on a small number of large, listed publishers? And are there alternatives? I interviewed seven experts,[118] established contact with three others, and reviewed numerous reports and figures to address these questions in this chapter.

117 Publishing practices and traditions differ per academic discipline. Here, I focus mainly on the top five largest players in international scientific publishing, based on numbers of academic journals they publish: Elsevier (part of RELX Group), Springer (part of Springer Nature), Taylor & Francis (part of Informa), Wiley (part of John Wiley & Sons), and SAGE (part of SAGE group). Together they published 11,682 journals in 2024. Source: SciLit, "Journal Rankings by Publisher, 2024," www.scilit.com/rankings?year=2024, accessed June 16, 2025.

118 I would like to thank all experts who provided me with insights on the academic publishing landscape and/or gave feedback on earlier versions of his chapter: Paul Boselie (professor and Chief Open Science, Utrecht University), Stephen Smith (professor, Oxford University, editor-in-chief Imaging Neuroscience, and former editor-in-chief NeuroImage), Birte Forstmann (professor, University of Amsterdam, former editor-in-chief NeuroImage Reports), Hilde van Wijngaarden (Chair UKB, and Head of Library Services, VU Amsterdam), Arjan Schalken (program manager, VU Amsterdam and SURF), Sophie Stadhouders (journalist, Follow The Money), Darco Jansen (Manager Open Science, UNL), Ludo Waltman (professor, Leiden University, CWTS), and two anonymous interviewees at Elsevier and SpringerNature.

Universities and commercial publishers serve different goals. While most Dutch universities are semi-public and typically state they are "committed to being of service to people and society" (website VU Amsterdam), the largest commercial publishers are shareholder-owned and pay their CEOs for maximizing the value of their shares. The annual CEO compensation of EUR 15 million some listed publishers suggests they are doing this well: they are among the best paid executives in the Netherlands.[119] So, what does their business model look like?

The traditional and well-known model is subscription-based. Academics write scholarly papers and carry out unpaid quality control (reviewing and editing work), publishers offer the journal infrastructure (print or online), and sell it to readers for substantial fees. This is a "pay-to-read" model. A major problem with this is that it stifles innovation by limiting information exchange, and thus hampering progress, and it puts research paid for by taxpayers – in the case of public universities – behind paywalls.

The academic publishing landscape is, however, changing. Particularly since 2013, when the Dutch State Secretary Sander Dekker announced that publicly funded research should be publicly available. In the last two decades, the "pay-to-publish" model gained traction. How does that work? Academics still carry out the work on research and quality control, publishers still make the journals available, but now researchers (or their funders) pay an "article processing charge" (APC) to a publisher to make their work accessible for everyone. The APC allegedly is there to cover the costs of the platforms and infrastructure necessary to store and disseminate the scientific output and carry out checks related to research integrity. In my own discipline

119 CEO of Elsevier (RELX group): EUR 15.7 million, CEO of Wolters Kluwer: EUR 15.6 million. Source: De Volkskrant, "Dit zijn de best beloonde topbestuurders van in Nederland gevestigde bedrijven," 2024, www.volkskrant.nl/kijkverder/v/2024/dit-zijn-de-best-beloonde-topbestuurders-van-in-nederland-gevestigde-bedrijven~v1165752/, accessed May 13, 2025.

(economics and business), publishing Gold Open Access[120] in Elsevier journals with a strong reputation costs about EUR 3,500 to EUR 4,000. In other fields, the APCs can be much higher – publishing Gold Open Access in *Nature* (by Springer Nature) would have cost you EUR 10,690 in 2025.

But in the past decade, a new business model emerged that builds on extracted data. Let's take Elsevier as an example. Through Elsevier products like SSRN (a preprint repository), Mendeley (a reference manager), Hivebench (an electronic lab notebook), Scopus (a scientific abstract and citation database), and Pure (registration software for universities), Elsevier can extract personal and behavioral data from every single part of the knowledge production process. SciVal, another Elsevier product, uses collected data from over 16 million researchers and 20,000 institutions and calculates 300 trillion metric values per week, which are repackaged and sold back to, among others, universities, as essential tools to benchmark and "evaluate research performance".[121] To paraphrase Shoshana Zuboff, this may be seen as an act of "surveillance publishing," where behavioral user surplus data is monetized. But the business model goes beyond academia. LexisNexis (also part of Elsevier's parent company RELX) sold personal data to ICE (the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency) for USD 16.8 million, who can use this "to target people who may potentially commit a crime – before any actual crime takes place."[122] And, perhaps less surprisingly, publishers also have started selling some of their academic content externally, for instance, to companies who use it to train their AI systems. For instance, Informa (parent company of publisher Taylor & Francis) sold the content of their

120 Open access comes with a plethora of labels and terms. The most relevant labels are Green Open Access (a manuscript is made available in an open access repository), Gold Open Access (an article is published in a hybrid or open access journal, an APC may be charged), and Diamond Open Access (a subtype of Gold Open Access, no APC is charged).

121 SciVal, www.scival.com/, accessed August 7, 2025.

122 The Intercept, "LexisNexis is Selling Your Personal Data To ICE So It Can Try to Predict Crimes" June 20, 2023, www.theintercept.com/2023/06/20/lexisnexis-ice-surveillance-license-plates/, accessed February 9, 2026.

3,000 journals to Microsoft and received about EUR 10 million for this in the first year.[123]

Taken together, the business model of publishers thrives on more publications, more data, and more reliance on products and side products. Paul Boselie, Chief Open Science at Utrecht University, calls the publishers' business model a "cash cow" and stresses that large publishers are "much better organized" than universities. Can anything be done to challenge the status quo?

123 Inside Higher Ed, "Taylor & Francis AI Deal Sets Worrying Precedent," July 29, 2024, www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/research/2024/07/29/taylor-francis-ai-deal-sets-worrying-precedent, accessed August 7, 2025.

What has already been done to address this issue?

Dutch universities are increasingly collaborating to strengthen their collective power against large publishers. Also, Dutch policy to increase the number of open access publications through collective "big deals" has been quite successful: from 2016 to 2024, Dutch universities managed to increase the percentage of open access publications from 42% to 95%.[124] This may be good news for researchers too, as open access articles have been found to receive 18% more citations than average.[125] Yet, various problems remain. For instance, the high APCs of prominent academic journals create and sustain inequalities. They make open access publishing something only wealthy institutions and their researchers can do. Who can pay over EUR 10,000 to publish one article?[126] This problem is acknowledged by the Council of the European Union as well, which stated in its Conclusions of 23 May 2023 that "the increasing costs of paywalls for access to scientific publications and for scholarly publishing cause inequalities and are becoming unsustainable for public research funders and institutions accountable for the spending of public funds, decreasing funding available for research."

The increase in Gold Open Access publications is positive, but many journals remain fully or partly behind paywalls, making a full transition to open science difficult. Hilde van Wijngaarden, head of VU Library Services, states that this was not what universities hoped for when they started the open access initiative. "We've found ourselves

124 Universities of The Netherlands (UNL), "Percentages Open Access Publicaties 2016–2024," 2025, www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/percentages-open-access-publicaties-2016-2024, accessed November 11, 2025.

125 Heather Piwowar et al., "The State of OA: A Large-Scale Analysis of the Prevalence and Impact of Open Access Articles," *PeerJ* 6 (2018): e4375.

126 Both anonymous interviewees who work for large publishers indicated waiver programs and discounts exist for researchers from, for instance, developing countries. Although this does not take away the full barrier, these initiatives may mitigate some inequality-related problems.

in a squeeze with a system in which nobody is happy," she states, "We've created some sort of dependence on commercial parties and we have to pay a very large amount for that every year." ALLEA, the collection of academies from 40 EU and non-EU countries, also point in this direction, highlighting that the new deals with publishers do not deliver on what was promised: "In particular, they have not led to a reduction in the exorbitant costs to the academic community incurred in the process of research publication."[127]

On the issue of "surveillance publishing" described above, I have not seen public announcements by Dutch universities at the time of writing. From the interviews I conducted with experts in the field, however, it becomes clear that "digital sovereignty," i.e., becoming less dependent on external parties such as publishers and Big Tech, is an emerging theme. Various universities are contemplating strategies to address these issues, including cancelling subscriptions and developing their own infrastructures.

127 ALLEA, "ALLEA Statement on Open Access Publication under 'Big Deals' and the New Copyright Rules," www.allea.org/portfolio-item/allea-statement-on-open-access-publication-under-big-deals-and-the-new-copyright-rules/, accessed June 24, 2025.

What more should be done?

The relation between academia and large publishers is a complex puzzle: the more interviews I conducted, the more I realized there are no easy solutions. One expert I spoke to indicated there are broadly speaking two options: trying to optimize "within the current system," for instance by negotiating better contracts with publishers, and developing new, independent infrastructures. The costs of transitioning to other forms of knowledge dissemination can be high both for individuals and institutions, particularly because reputations and research cultures do not change overnight. To achieve anything, collaboration on a national and international level is essential. That said, there are some promising directions, which I highlight below.

In my own research, I often look at how performance is evaluated, and what the incentives are that shape perceptions and behaviors in organizations.[128] The signals we provide to academics at all levels matter. This is why the Recognition & Rewards movement in the Netherlands is so important. Besides changes at the systemic level – for instance by changing the incentives so that not only research, but also education and impact activities are well rewarded – the publishing culture itself must also change. "Exclusively focusing on publishing papers is an outdated approach," argues Ludo Waltman, professor of quantitative science studies at Leiden University, "we must somehow transition to a system where we take a more holistic view. What does each and everyone – be it an individual, a unit, or an institution – truly add?" We need to break with the narrative that more is always better when it comes to research, and embrace forms of science not aimed at producing, but aimed at understanding.

We also need to think very critically about the scientific publication infrastructure, and raise awareness of the inherent problems of the current system. Working together

128 Berend van der Kolk, *The Quantified Society* (Amsterdam: Business Contact, 2024).

with for-profit organizations is not a problem in itself: if they add value to the process, if there is no monopoly, if the fees they charge for their services are reasonable, and if they operate under conditions set by the academic community, it can work well.[129] But an overdependence on a small number of large and powerful publishers creates problems. We find ourselves currently in a "vendor lock-in" – we have become very dependent on an oligopoly of large, listed publishers, and the switching costs are very high. "I think the publication model as exists today has been remarkably resistant to change," an interviewee working for a large publisher reflected. Yet, change is possible.

Take the case of *NeuroImage*, an academic journal published by Elsevier. In 2021, *NeuroImage* had an APC of USD 3,450. Stephen Smith, an Oxford biomedical engineering professor, who became the journal's editor-in-chief in 2022, reflected: "It became increasingly clear to us [the editorial board] that the high level of profit implied by this APC is unethical and unsustainable." Comparable journals had APCs lower than USD 2,000, so the *NeuroImage* editors asked Elsevier to lower its APC. Elsevier refused. Following the failed negotiations, the entire editorial staff of *NeuroImage* resigned and founded a new, open access journal at the not-for-profit publisher MIT press: *Imaging Neuroscience*. This new journal has an APC of USD 1,600, and the move of the entire editorial team suggests that the prestige and authority of the original journal will transfer to the new one. Birte Forstmann, one of the editors and a professor at the University of Amsterdam, highlights the "very positive" response from the community "including scientists on all levels in their career." As the journal's reputation traveled with the editors, she explained, all of her colleagues now favor the new journal, *Imaging Neuroscience, over the old NeuroImage.* The result? Lower APCs, reduced publication barriers for younger scholars and those from less wealthy institutions, and less dependence on large, commercial publishers.

129 An interviewee who works at SpringerNature stressed that academics usually "underestimate the amount of work related to publishing and dealing with integrity issues."

Community-controlled infrastructures and repositories are essential in the transition, but change is often costly, slow, and painful. But there are inspiring initiatives: *arXiv*, for instance, facilitates open access sharing of preprinted papers in eight disciplines mostly in the physical sciences, is operated by Cornell University staff, and funded by donors. *European Papers* is an open access e-journal that disseminates research on law and integration. The journal is not hosted by a large publisher, but is presented as a "European project" operated by the community.

An even more radical initiative is the Publish-Review-Curate model, an open, decentralized publishing approach adopted by eLife and MetaROR, among others. Ludo Waltman, editor-in-chief of MetaROR explains: "This involves articles first being published online, after which reviews are invited. The reviews are also published online, and authors are able to respond." This way, the community keeps ownership of the research findings, the process is faster and more transparent, and everything is open access. eLife is an independent non-profit organization, and MetaROR is funded by donors, both are independent from large publishers. While these are promising initiatives, they remain small compared to the traditional publishing industry.

In 1995, Forbes predicted the internet would end the business model of academic publishers. They could not have been more wrong – if nothing else, the internet facilitated a new business model, based on surveillance publishing. I am not going to make any predictions, but I hope that universities and academics who currently pay triple will stop accepting the status quo. The fact that an increasing number of institutions both in the Netherlands and abroad signed the Barcelona declaration, which urges for a change in the research infrastructure, is a hopeful sign that there is a growing commitment to reform.[130] Change is possible, as the cases in this chapter show, but it takes courage and coordination to make it happen.

130 Barcelona Declaration on Open Research Information, www.barcelona-declaration.org/, accessed August 11, 2025.

Epilogue: Reimagining Academia

Dion Kramer & Berend van der Kolk

A rather gloomy picture of the state of academia might prevail after reading this book. There are indeed many issues that need to be fixed. Yet, we would like to end on a more optimistic note, emphasizing the hope we have for the future of academia. When we "zoom out", it is possible to see more clearly how some themes have developed in recent history. All chapters highlight efforts by, among others, academics, support staff, and policymakers to make progress on a wide number of themes. And progress has indeed been made. Take, for instance, higher education accessibility, which has significantly improved compared to some 50 years ago when socio-economic status still heavily influenced access (Chapter 1), or the availability of research (Chapter 9): a recent report indicates that 95% of peer-reviewed scientific papers published in 2024 were open access, aligning with broader trends showing increased availability.[131]

Acknowledging progress on many agendas is an important starting point to further continue to reimagine and rebuild academia. While the title "Fixing Academia" implies quick solutions, we understand that true solutions involve defining, analyzing and implementing strategies, not just applying quick patches. That being said, we hope that the suggestions offered in this book will inspire policymakers, academics and other decisionmakers to strengthen academia in at least two dimensions that surface in different forms in most chapters.

First, there is the issue of fairness. The book addresses the perceived fairness of systems and mechanisms for accepting students and researchers into programs and allocating positions (Chapters 1 and 2), awarding grants and extension programs (Chapters 3 and 6), allocating promotion rights and assigning academic citizenship tasks (Chapters 4 and 5), awarding undue influence in academia (Chapter 8), and delivering unremunerated work to commercial publishers (Chapter 9). Challenging the fairness of the systems and

131 Universities of The Netherlands (UNL), "Percentages Open Access Publicaties 2016–2024," 2025, www.universiteitenvannederland.nl/percentages-open-access-publicaties-2016-2024, accessed November 11, 2025.

mechanisms identified in these chapters requires the courage to speak up, increase awareness and coordinate actions.

The second theme concerns the relationship between academia and society. Several chapters question this relationship explicitly: "Are we preparing academics sufficiently to communicate effectively with the broader society?" (Chapter 7), "Do universities actively recognize and reward engagement in societal debates?" (Chapter 5), and "How can academics work with industry without compromising integrity?" (Chapter 8). As pointed out in the introduction, universities do not operate in isolation but are deeply embedded in social, political, and economic contexts. This creates challenges, think of navigating the ivory tower tension discussed in the introduction. For universities, this nexus presents both responsibilities and chances for positive change.

A 2025 report from the *Rathenau Instituut* confirmed that academia remains the most trusted public institution in the Netherlands, and that this trust has grown over the past decade, leaving the court system, the media and the political institutions far behind.[132] Regardless of the tensions and challenges identified in this book, it seems that the general public highly values scientists and generally trusts their work. We hope that this book, by identifying weaknesses and areas needing improvement within universities and science in general, reinforces existing trust in academia. If we can freely speak to our own institution and critique it to raise awareness and hopefully trigger positive change, this can be seen as an indicator of a healthy academic climate. We hope the academic freedom we practice by writing this book strengthens the academic climate in the Netherlands and indeed helps improve our universities.

Clearly, we do not see this book as a final statement or the conclusion of a debate. Rather, we hope this book inspires more dialogues and debates surrounding the question of what academia is, how it functions, and how it should develop in the century ahead of us.

132 Rathenau Instituut, "Vertrouwen in de wetenschap door de Nederlandse burger," www.rathenau.nl/nl/wetenschap-cijfers/impact/vertrouwen-de-wetenschap/vertrouwen-de-wetenschap, accessed August 14, 2025.

Author biographies

All authors are members of the Amsterdam Young Academy (AYA), an independent platform where talented young scientists from different disciplines meet to develop views on science, scientific policy and how to build bridges between science and society in Amsterdam.

Dr. Maarten Bolhuis is Assistant Professor of Criminology at the Faculty of Law of VU Amsterdam. As coordinator of an English-taught Master's program, he contributes to facilitating international academic exchange through the Center for International Criminal Justice.

Dr. Yusuf Çelik is Assistant Professor of Digital Humanities & Islam at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of VU Amsterdam. His research explores the history of ideas and mentalities through a computational analysis of sources drawn from various religious traditions.

Dr. Laura S. Dreissen is Assistant Professor of Quantum Metrology & Laser Applications at the Faculty of Science of VU Amsterdam. Her research focuses on using quantum technologies for ultra-precise tests of fundamental physics.

Dr. Gea Dreschler is Assistant Professor of English Linguistics at the School of Humanities at VU Amsterdam, and director of the VU's Academic Language Programme. She is a researcher of written language, from the earliest English manuscripts to Generative AI, as well as a writing teacher and coach.

Dr. Evgenia I. Lysova is Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at the School of Business and Economics of VU Amsterdam. She has made it her mission to understand how to enable and sustain meaningful experiences in work and careers with the help of organizations.

Dr. Callista Mulder is Assistant Professor and Principal Investigator at Amsterdam UMC. Her line of work focuses on the development of novel fertility treatments to help people with infertility conceive. She has two young children.

Dr. Berend van der Kolk is Associate Professor of Management Accounting and Control at the School of Business and Economics of VU Amsterdam. His research and teaching activities relate to performance measurement in organizations.

Dr. Dion Kramer is Assistant Professor of EU Law at the Department of Transnational Legal Studies of the Faculty of Law of VU Amsterdam. He teaches EU law and conducts research on the law and politics of European integration.

Dr. Diletta Martinelli is Assistant Professor at the Korteweg-de Vries Institute for Mathematics at the University of Amsterdam. She serves as coordinator of academic collaborations with institutions in the Global South for the Faculty of Science at the University of Amsterdam.

Dr. Tiago R. Matos is a dermatologist at Amsterdam UMC and Global Project Head at Sanofi. His work aims to advance treatments for immunologic diseases, while bridging academia and the pharmaceutical industry.

Acknowledgements

This book has benefitted from the input, support, and feedback from a large community. We thank Ilke Jacobs of VU University Press for her valuable support, specifically her initial excitement and insightful advice on the book's content and form. We enjoyed our conversations and appreciated your ideas and clarity.

We thank the authors of the chapters in this book for their contributions, feedback and flexibility. You worked hard to write strong chapters on a wide variety of important topics, and we hope that your sharp observations, calls to action, and reflections have a positive and constructive impact on academia in the Netherlands and abroad.

We also thank the two reviewers who provided us with positive and constructive feedback, which helped us to present our thoughts more convincingly. We should not forget that working in academia is a privilege and can be incredibly rewarding and joyful, one reviewer said, and we agree. What we want to achieve with this book is raising awareness on various aspects on which academia can improve, benefitting both those working in academia and society at large.

We thank all members of Amsterdam Young Academy (AYA) for their input during various discussion sessions, and the AYA grant committee for their support in funding this book. We also thank Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam for supporting AYA, which brings together young scholars from a variety of disciplines.

We are thankful for all academia has given us. We hope this book encourages efforts to preserve the university as a place of discovery, disagreement, and shared learning for future generations.

Dion Kramer and Berend van der Kolk

All authors are fellows of the Amsterdam Young Academy, an independent think tank for young academics of VU Amsterdam, the University of Amsterdam, and Amsterdam UMC.

Dr. Maarten Bolhuis is Assistant Professor of Criminology at the Faculty of Law of VU Amsterdam.

Dr. Yusuf Çelik is Assistant Professor of Digital Humanities & Islam at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of VU Amsterdam.

Dr. Laura S. Dreissen is Assistant Professor of Quantum Metrology & Laser Applications at the Faculty of Science of VU Amsterdam.

Dr. Gea Dreschler is Assistant Professor of English Linguistics at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at VU Amsterdam.

Dr. Berend van der Kolk is Associate Professor of Management Accounting at the School of Business and Economics of VU Amsterdam.

Dr. Dion Kramer is Assistant Professor of EU Law at the Faculty of Law of VU Amsterdam.

Dr. Evgenia I. Lysova is Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at the School of Business and Economics of VU Amsterdam.

Dr. Diletta Martinelli is Assistant Professor of Algebraic Geometry at the Faculty of Science at the University of Amsterdam.

Dr. Tiago R. Matos is a dermatologist at Amsterdam UMC and a Global Project Head at Sanofi.

Dr. Callista Mulder is Assistant Professor of Reproductive Biology at Amsterdam UMC.

Are our universities still fit for purpose? While academia struggles to meet expectations in times of rapid political and technological change, the "ivory tower" critique sadly still hits home. Also internally, universities are under immense strain: the publication model is cracking, the academic funding landscape has become a rat race with more losers than winners, and systemic inequalities profoundly restrict access to higher education.

Fixing Academia is a timely and provocative collection of essays by ten young scholars. In a series of sharp, evidence-based, and constructive reflections on a selection of pressing themes, they diagnose some of the structural flaws in 21st-century Dutch universities. They also offer the tools for repair – tackling everything from the influence of Big Pharma on scientific integrity to the urgent need for better work-life balance for academic parents.

Actionable yet visionary, this book hopes to stimulate conversations on how to "fix" academia and help universities strengthen their bonds with society.

ISBN 978 90 8659 918 9

VU University Press