

Recognition and Rewards in Academia

Young academics offer a new perspective



Edited by

Katinka van der Kooij,
AYA Board member, post-doc in Human Movement Sciences
at VU Amsterdam

Amsterdam Young Academy (AYA) is a group of young academics from VU Amsterdam, the University of Amsterdam and Amsterdam Medical Centers. It was founded in 2018 by Amsterdam-based members of De Jonge Akademie ('The Young Academy').

AYA champions interdisciplinary research, social dialogue and academic policies that help young academics to thrive.

In November 2019, a position paper was published that went to the heart of AYA. That paper, 'Room for everyone's talent', was published by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), the Netherlands Federation of University Medical Centres (NFU), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences

(KNAW), the Dutch Research Council (NWO) and Dutch national funding organization ZonMw. It called for a new system of recognition and rewards in academia, with a greater emphasis on diversity, transparency and collaboration.

The current criteria for permanent appointments seem to call for a mythical being: a world-class researcher, an excellent lecturer, a leader – and on top of all that the successful candidate is also expected to be saving the world. In the future, we need to reward academics who excel in one of those areas but who may simply be competent in the others. Removing the requirement to excel in all facets of academia will make collaboration more important than ever. That will require reform of the academic recognition and rewards system, because at the moment almost everything depends on individual NWO grants.

The coronavirus crisis has highlighted the importance of finding a new way to recognize and reward people. Academics, who are primarily assessed based on their research, suddenly had to put that research to one side in favour of digitizing their teaching. Workloads that were already difficult to manage became even heavier. At the same time, a social debate arose about the role of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), and the discussion around transparent science was placed under the microscope. Now, more than ever, science must be sound and must be careful with its intellectual capital.

This magazine gives young academics a voice. Read on to find out what we need if we want to achieve transparent science (Sander Bosch, p. 3), how career diversification can be put into practice (Jos Akkermans, p. 4), and how important it is to listen to what young academics have to say (Rik Peels, p. 6). You can even enjoy a preview of the AYA survival guide for young scientists.



Colophon

Editorial team

Katinka van der Kooij

Editors

Silke Muylaert

Rik Peels

Fernie Maas

Design

Haagsblauw commissioned
by VU Amsterdam Congress
and Media Center

Contact

Email: Fernie Maas,

aya@vu.nl

Twitter: @ayoungacademy

Open Science and Recognition & Rewards need each other

Sander Bosch,
Open Science Coordinator
at VU Amsterdam

'Open Science' envisions a more transparent way of doing and sharing science and focuses on the entire research process: planning, data collection, analysis, publication and evaluation of studies. In addition to publication, this focus also recognizes other aspects of research, such as datasets or protocols, as important outputs. An open way of working makes academic knowledge more available both to other researchers and to the general public, as well as opening up new avenues for collaboration. Moreover, transparency about the way in which our research findings were produced (for instance through sharing data, code, log books and notes) also makes it possible to review and safeguard the reproducibility and integrity of those findings. This can only be a good thing when it comes to the quality of the science we produce.

The transition to Open Science demands a cultural shift, which will take time and effort to achieve.

Improving the availability of findings, datasets and code will mean that individual researchers will no longer have to conduct every aspect of their research themselves. This makes it possible for scientists to specialize or cement their profile in specific aspects of scientific research, such as collecting high-quality datasets, developing software for research or analysing and evaluating existing datasets. This diversification in roles and functions makes room for a range of different career paths in the domain of research and is in line with the intention of the new system of recognition and rewards, to create broader profiling around the core



domains of academia: research, teaching, impact, leadership and patient care.

If individual researchers are no longer fulfilling every role themselves, they will have to collaborate more in 'team science'. This is another area where the free accessibility of research offers interesting opportunities, both for interdisciplinary collaborations with fellow academics all over the world and to engage wider society with the research. The points outlined above show how Open Science could strengthen the pillars of recognition and rewards, but the transition to Open Science will take a lot of time and effort. Researchers themselves will have to embed the principles of Open Science in their day-to-day work in order to change their research culture, and that demands academic leadership.

Because these investments and this leadership are not sufficiently represented in the current assessment criteria for research funding and careers, Open Science practices are

often seen as an extra burden and the research culture is slow to change. It is vitally important for Open Science values and practices to be explicitly included in academic evaluation criteria. The modernization of the system of recognition and rewards is inextricably linked to Open Science.

The transition to Open Science demands a cultural shift, which will take time and effort to achieve

The new VSNU evaluation protocol (SEP 20212027) incorporates Open Science as one of the four pillars for evaluating Dutch research groups and institutes. Only when academic leaders who invest in Open Science are recognized and rewarded can a cultural shift take place towards more transparent science, science that promotes diversification and quality in academia and offers new opportunities for collaboration.

Moving from #soloscience to #teamscience

Jos Akkermans, Associate Professor in the School of Business and Economics at VU Amsterdam

On 11 June 2020, AYA consulted scientists and policy-makers from Amsterdam's universities (see inset for more on the panel members) about the need for a new system of Recognition and Rewards, and the opportunities such a system could offer. Read on for a fascinating discussion of unbridled competition vs. the amazing work academics do, academics as mythical heroes, and disbanding NWO.

Why do we even need a new system?

The panel members emphasized the freedoms academics enjoy, the opportunity to do curiosity-driven research and the generally high level of intrinsic motivation. That said, there is a real need for change: talent is being unnecessarily lost due to another side of academic work. That side involves extreme competition, tunnel vision in assessment and a human resources policy that is sometimes directly dependent on external research funding, even though past success in winning grants is no guarantee of future achievements.

Everyone is expected to be a hero out of legend, but even people who achieve that may still not make the cut. This could have its own hashtag: #soloscience. That is basically what the panel concluded: everyone has to be able to do everything. Publish. Teach. Attract funding. And have impact in society. And it often seems like 'every man for himself': it's almost impossible for you to be happy for colleagues who win big grants, because it will be bad for your career opportunities if you don't 'score' one too. This makes a lot of people act strategically, based on the criteria they have to satisfy. Even if in theory you have plenty of freedom, there is rarely a lot of room to do your own thing.

Fortunately the winds of change are on their way

Or at least there's a stiff breeze. For some years now, VU Amsterdam has been developing activities in line with the philosophy of the new system of Recognition and Rewards, including diversifying careers and re-evaluating teaching.

A new Teaching Performance Framework aims to make teaching performance measurable and to reward achievements in teaching. Some faculties have already integrated this framework into their careers policy, making it possible to compensate a range of different elements when considering promotions.

Academics can become associate professors, for example, based on exceptional teaching activities, even if their research activities may not have been of the same standard (and vice versa). VU Amsterdam also employs lecturers with a teaching profile, with 10 lecturers currently fitting this description. In the view of the panel members, this shows that additional career paths are being created that make it possible to specialize. The University of Amsterdam and VU Amsterdam are also increasingly using qualitative appraisals, focusing more on the narrative of a career: your history, how your career fits together, what you stand for.

THE PANEL MEMBERS:

- **Kristine Steenbergh**, Associate Humanities Professor at VU Amsterdam
- **Mareanne Karssen**, Director of Beta Education at VU Amsterdam
- **Maartje Stols-Witlox**, Associate Humanities Professor at the University of Amsterdam
- **Jaap van Dieën**, Head of the Behavioural and Human Movement Sciences department at VU Amsterdam
- **Katinka van der Kooij**, Behavioural and Human Movement Sciences post-doc at VU Amsterdam

Other organizations are also showing promising developments. For many research proposals, NWO has dropped the traditional 'UF to A+' scoring system and now asks referees to make their assessments using qualitative arguments. NWO is also experimenting in other ways, for instance by offering more application opportunities to post-docs, through open competition in which applicants assess each other, and through the Dutch National Research Agenda (NWA) which prioritizes a connection with wider society.



ILLUSTRATION: MEREL BARENDIS

There are of course risks inherent in experiments. It is often difficult for junior academics to build large consortia, which means that the primary applicant still needs to be a 'big name'. It is also fairly easy for referees to find quantitative information about applicants. There is an additional risk, when it comes to a recognition and rewards policy, that developments could often get 'bogged down' in HR and management. However, the panel stresses that the trend is positive, and it takes time to achieve a cultural shift.

Mindsets need to change at all levels

So... where do we start?

A cultural shift does indeed take time, and yet that was the key issue the panel raised. Mindsets need to change at all levels, from policy decision-makers, funding bodies and the university to deans, managers and the people 'on the ground': everyone from PhD candidates to full professors. We need to stop using the same limited set of quantifiable output indicators to assess everyone, and start recognizing and rewarding a range of different academic career paths. If we want to change that mindset, we will also have to change our regulations and procedures. One example that comes up a lot is a review of the financing system, which could involve all kinds of options, from scaling back the 'grant war' to the rather more radical proposal to disband NWO entirely. There seems to be a consensus for the middle ground, where a certain amount of competition remains but where the universities are trusted with greater freedom in allocating the funds. They can safeguard continuity, and make sure that teams are balanced.

In addition to a different allocation of research funding, the panel also calls for a greater emphasis on the differentiation of competences. Where one person is a theoretical genius, someone else might be gifted at expressing practical value, and yet another person can have a talent for bringing people together. On their own, these academics often fall by the wayside in the current competitive framework, but as a team they can still become that mythical hero the criteria are seeking. You could call this approach #teamscience: Where diverse career paths are both possible and equally valued; where the universities themselves select research proposals more carefully and forge their own human resources policies; and where the narrative of a person's career is more important than impact factors and how much money they attract.

Finally

I am a careers researcher, and this issue is very close to my heart. In my research into career sustainability, I often study factors that relate both to the individual and to the context, and that influence people's success and well-being in their careers. Academic careers do not necessarily lend themselves to sustainability, given the high degree of competition and performance requirements. The current promising developments in recognition and rewards are making different career paths possible. Both as a careers researcher and in my role as an academic, I will definitely be following and encouraging these developments.

Heating up: Amsterdam Young Academy, one year on

Rik Peels, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion & Theology at VU Amsterdam

In 2018, I was appointed as the first chairperson of AYA. This past spring, I passed the baton to Linda Douw. Looking back, I can see that things are heating up at the university. We are changing the way we think about talent. But why is that necessary, and what is the alternative?

In the environment in which I work, young philosophers and theologians generally enjoy what they do. AYA has shown me that this is unfortunately not necessarily representative of the university as a whole. A lot of young academics are being asked to accomplish the impossible: the unmanageable teaching workloads, the interminable administration and evaluation, and the hard selection of top-level research – and especially money – by attracting grants. One important group no longer has a voice at all, because they left and are now working outside academia. There have been some problems for decades, from lecturers just sitting out their careers to nepotism and the univer-

sity's image as an ivory tower. But since Ronald Plasterk introduced hyper-competitiveness to universities – not least by handing the Dutch Research Council (NWO) a greater role in allocating research funding – we have encountered other, perhaps even more serious problems. A huge amount of time and energy is wasted on competing for research funding. The Dutch National Research Agenda rejected 19 of the 20 applications submitted. The lucky few who win the big grants get to do the research, while everyone else, the foot soldiers, give too many lectures and spend their weekends writing research proposals.



Rik Peels

The list of challenges goes on. The stress of publication and performance waters down the emphasis on research integrity, while systematic cuts mean that time and again the Humanities fall victim to utilitarian thinking in central government. I see AYA as a platform where we can really analyse these issues – and even complain about them – and as a place where we can then start helping to build a system in which academia and academics can shine. What can we do? More than you think.



Establishment of AYA in 2018

**Time to tinker,
to try new things,
to experiment,
to discuss
intriguing ideas
and come up
with new ones**

Sneak preview: AYA survival guide

Pieter Coppens,
Assistant Professor of Religion & Theology,
VU Amsterdam

In AYA's Science Policy working group, we see that many young researchers are finding it difficult to get their academic career started. They struggle with heavy workloads and the pressure to achieve perfect results, grants that have to come in at precisely the right moment and new tasks that they have to balance against their private life, at a time when that private life is often still evolving. And it's not always clear how or even whether young researchers can negotiate their own position. That's why AYA is developing a guide for new researchers who have gained their PhD, to help them consciously take their career in the right direction. Young academics share their experiences – both their best practices and their missteps. We also include research grant recommendations from the grant office for VU Amsterdam and the

University of Amsterdam, as well as a psychologist's tips for achieving a positive work-life balance.

We intend for this 'survival guide' to be given to all

brand-new PhDs at their doctoral defence, and to new VU Amsterdam and University of Amsterdam employees up to five years after they gain their PhD. We will also distribute copies among our administrators and policy-makers, to make them more aware of the often precarious position young academic staff find themselves in.

Here's our first tip:

'Most of us feel personally involved with the things we research, teach and develop, so finding the right work-life balance is a big challenge in academia. Our workload is high because of the serious scarcity of financing and academic career options. In this rat-race climate, we need to set boundaries. Try to listen to yourself, and to avoid thinking that you're missing out on opportunities when you prioritize caring for yourself or your loved ones. It is so important to find pleasure and satisfaction in your work – after all, it's how you spend the majority of your day – but that pleasure will fade if you don't take a step back from time to time and give yourself a chance to recharge your batteries.

I believe that teaching and research are a kind of vocation, but at the same time it's still a job like any other, and that involves decisions and rights about a work-life balance.' (Hanneke Stuit, Assistant Professor of Literary and Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam)

I have realized that these issues are also a worry for administrators – for rectors and deans. As young academics, what we can do is this: tell the stories those administrators can use to lay the foundations for the alternative vision they want to create. We can call for greater freedom in how we spend our time. Time that doesn't need to be spent meeting a deadline or taking one last look at the lecture slides. Time to tinker, to try new things, to experiment, to discuss intriguing ideas and come up with new ones. A relaxed, fun academic atmosphere is a breeding ground for fresh new ideas about teaching and research. We can lead the way in setting boundaries, showing our PhD candidates and post-docs that there really is another way. We can refuse to expect a person to finish an article over the weekend; in this coronavirus crisis we don't need to be afraid to let go of some tasks.

We can explore diverse talent, looking not just at the h-index and successful grant applications, but also at the vision for teaching and learning or whether someone is gifted at explaining science to the general public. We can make selections based on dedication and an ability to listen. When we are putting together teams and committees, we can focus less on including the most excellent individuals and more on which people will form the best team – that will produce very different results, believe me.

The way I see it, we are at a turning point in the university's organization. I hope that at AYA we will listen to the problems we face now, and that's what I am working to achieve. Then we will be able to put all our passion into building an academy where both research and researchers can flourish.



Making Recognition and Rewards more sustainable

Katinka van der Kooij,
Human Movement Sciences post-doc at VU Amsterdam



People who want to live more sustainably often choose to reduce their air travel. How does academia value that kind of sustainable impulse?

It's hard for academics to limit their international travel. Aspiring academics learn early on in their studies that overseas experience is a key condition for success in academia; they then go on to attend international conferences as PhD students, and when they start writing research proposals an international profile becomes a key criterion.

Successful academics fly to the US to give a talk, to Spain to sit on a Doctorate Board, and to Japan to organize a symposium. In short, flying for work is an integral part of academic success.

Flying reflects an international outlook, which is – rightly – an important characteristic in an academic. When you know what questions other people are working on, you can ask better questions yourself. When you are familiar with different academic cultures, you can find a better way to organize your own lab. And last, but certainly not least: when you communicate with other academics around the world, it's easier for you to gain access to international research grants. With all that said, I actually don't think that physical

mobility is a prerequisite for an international perspective.

The coronavirus crisis confined me to the house, and yet my work became even more international during that period. Because I had no one physically present with whom I could discuss matters, I posted my questions on Twitter. I joined an international book club and had telephone conversations with academics I met on Twitter. And I heard from others that their work had become more international too: it was easier to attend an international doctoral defence, for instance, and it could even be fun, since you could drop in on a Zoom conference without having to spend a week away from home.

Let's make the recognition and rewards of an international perspective more sustainable, by ending our focus on physical mobility. Cherish international collaboration, but stop seeing air travel as a necessary part of that. Instead of assessing someone based on the months they spent overseas, look at their international results. Structure expenses forms to get academics to justify why their journey could not have been made virtually. Introduce a sustainable VU profile, and make it clear that your preference is for virtual mobility.

More from AYA



WatLaatJijVallen

AYA campaigns against heavy workloads in academia. Why not take to social media to share which tasks you're letting go of, using the hashtag #WatLaatJijVallen (literally 'What are you dropping?').



Wetenschapper van de Toekomst (Academic of the Future)

AYA asked children what the academic of the future might be like. Their vision? Take your time, and care about the world.

Science & Society Audio Tour

What are the science-related stories hiding behind the front doors of Amsterdam? On the Science & Society audio tour, young scientists tell stories about the city, based on their own research. Go to the [izi.travel](https://www.izi.travel) app to download the tour, and check out the wealth of information on our website: www.amsterdamyoungacademy.nl



Interdisciplinary Lunches

Make interdisciplinarity work: AYA organizes lunches at which top academics share their practical knowledge about interdisciplinary research.