

Student wellbeing starts with staff wellbeing

Social Safety at the Willem de Kooning Academie

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1. Introduction

Willem de Kooning Academy is nationally and internationally recognised as a leading art school. Their innovative nature in teaching and the content of their teaching programmes are also rated positively by their own staff and students. Teachers derive positive energy from the contact they have with their students. They appear to be enthusiastic people who enjoy contributing to the education and development of their future colleagues. It is also striking that they are often people who speak from the heart. This seems to be an inherent part of the creative gift. We have also noticed constructive work being done in various places at the academy that promote the social safety of students and staff. At the same time, we have come to realise that social insecurity is a daily theme in the workplace.

In April 2022, the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences' Executive Board approached us, external rapporteurs, to examine social safety at WdKA. The reason was the Analysis of the Work Experience Survey 2022. Earlier, the "We have to change" advisory report by O4I of March 2022, and the Safety Survey 2021 also highlighted the negative score on social safety. Due to various reasons, we did not start our interview cycle until November 2022 (running until January 2023). Central to the interviews with staff and students were the nature and impact of experiences of social insecurity and their influence on the learning and working climate. We tried to conduct all interviews without bias. Our task was mainly to listen and report on our findings.

It has become clear that the concept of social (in)safety in the workplace (and thus in practice) has no single definition but is experienced in many different ways. What is a trivial matter for one person turns out to have harmful effects on the overall functioning of another.

Common denominators of perceived social insecurity are the aftermath of the pandemic, complex organisation (especially in Practices), internationalisation, lack of transparency and communication. The result of all this is distrust of the leadership. The following chapters elaborate on these aspects, ending with our recommendations.

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2. Justification

To get as complete a picture as possible of the WdKA working and teaching culture, we spoke to a cross-section of the 'residents/those involved': managers, teachers, students, and staff members. They were informed of our assignment via an email from the Executive Board in November 2022 and were invited to participate. We approached the formal WdKA units ourselves and other members of the community engaged with us themselves. During the interviews, names of employees were suggested whom we then contacted ourselves. Through the formal steps, we also came into conversation with students. All working layers of the WdKA were involved. This provided us with a cross-section of WdKA, with an emphasis on teaching staff. After all, teachers who are fit for their task not only stand confidently in front of the class but contribute to a safe learning and working environment as well.

The interviews lasted one and a half hours on average. Rules of engagement were drawn up about the interviews' anonymity and safety (please see appendix). The interviewees themselves determined the best place for the interview, always at a Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences location. To further ensure security and anonymity, an external note-taker was also hired for this assignment. With the consent of the interviewees, the approved interview reports served as the basis for our analysis.

In the interviews we dealt with five basic questions:

- What is the state of one's own current well-being?
- What are the experiences of social insecurity (the nature of)?
- What causes underlie that social insecurity?
- What are the effects of this social insecurity?
- What solutions do the interviewees envisage?

The interviews were conducted in a spirit of complete trust and openness. The previous reports in combination with our interviews are an additional reason for the dialogue partners and for us to underline that there is more than sufficient reason for rapid action and concrete interventions/measures.

3. Organisation

WdKA is an academy with a great drive for continuous change, an academy aiming to exude international allure. It is a complex organisation where teaching teams and assignments to teachers are in constant flux. Students can graduate in reportedly 144 ways. All this leads to instability and uncertainty for teachers and students. And for teachers to a high workload.

WdKA is also an academy that values diversity and inclusion. This has led to many changes in recent years. With that reason, a special team 'O4I' was set up. Under the circumstances, this team does their utmost to manage developments regarding diversity and inclusion but lacks mandate and is seen not only as a 'paper tiger', and sometimes as window dressing.

From our interviews, a picture emerged of a hierarchical organisation in which there is both a great distance between management and the work floor, and a director who is pushing for more autonomy. Despite his weekly consultation hour in 'Grand Café de Willem', the director appears to be invisible to many and management is inaccessible to many. (Co)responsibility of management, structure and frameworks are all lacking. WdKA is perceived as a 'do-it-yourself' institute, where teachers in the broadest sense must find their own way.

Fear of speaking out in case of wrongdoing appears to be high; fears of reckoning and not continuing contracts. Some miss a vision for arts education. Progress in incidental areas is not yet sufficiently embedded or visible in the workplace. The long-standing soured atmosphere at the Practices is notable. All these experiences lead many to a permanent feeling of insecurity within the academy and a great lack of trust towards management.

4. Transparency and communication

In almost all our interviews, transparency and communication came back as key words. And especially the lack of it. For many, it is a contributing factor to feelings of insecurity.

There is a lack of transparency and uncertainty about human resources policies. For example, the job matrix and the criteria for promotion to a different scale are unclear to many. The so-called Planning Task Assignments are incomprehensible to many, as are the grounds on which they are changed, sometimes without consultation. Also, for quite a few teachers it is not transparent which hours are paid. In a later section, we will discuss personnel policy separately.

Lack of communication, especially non-timely communication, is also observed in providing insight into the Planning Task Assignment for the next academic year. Clarity on the PTA is regularly provided as late as September. The same applies to contract extensions. For teachers with temporary contracts, it long remains unclear whether their contracts will be extended.

For many, organisation, working methods and rules at WdKA are not clear, or too vague. Procedures are unclear or unknown. It is often unclear whether and when questions, alerts or complaints will be responded to, and feedback is lacking. Many wonder whether there are codes of conduct and protocols, and if there are, whether they provide sufficient clarity on how to act. Therefore, sometimes, people make their own rules. Management considerations often lack an adequate explanation. The 'why' of decisions is therefore quite often unclear to staff and students.

A common complaint among staff is the lack of communication, accessibility, and visibility of management. Important appointments are often cancelled shortly beforehand without any explanation, e-mails go unanswered. Teachers question whether managers know how things work in practice, which does not contribute to trust.

5. Internationalisation

WdKA has deliberately focused on internationalisation and has also recruited a considerable number of international teachers to this end, some of them during the pandemic as well. For these people, much of Dutch education is new to them. This requires extra efforts during onboarding to familiarise people with matters such as the education system, the organisation of the WdKA, the job structure, the job scales, the interview cycle, the code of conduct, etc. International teachers feel they have been left to their own devices too much and have not been given enough guidance. On the other hand, the switch to English as the language of instruction at WdKA also means an extra threshold for groups of teachers and students.

Internationalisation has certainly contributed to more diversity at WdKA. This also means more diversity in cultural backgrounds, and more diverse forms of expression. It also means that social contrasts and issues sometimes lead to fiercer classroom discussions. More diversity also means that views on inclusiveness, international conflicts and issues are more diverse and lead to more discussion and sometimes conflict. In education, and certainly in arts education, this is not unusual. To ensure that despite these contradictions, the good conversation can continue to take place, teachers must be equipped to do so. They must be able to create a safe environment. Our impression is that not enough has been done to properly equip teachers to this end. The interviews reveal that there is no safety net for times when problems arise. It is not helpful that the organisation of education in the WdKA is complex, resulting in unstable teams and groups of students. This makes it **even** more difficult to provide a stable environment in which safe conversation can take place.

6. Personnel policy

A recurring topic in our conversations was the current personnel policies. For many teachers, this is a source of uncertainty and insecurity. On the positive side, WdKA has started improvement by appointing a new HR manager with accompanying new strategic personnel policy. This new policy is a step in the right direction, but to succeed, it requires a different attitude from management towards their personnel responsibilities. Our concern is that the new policy will lead to additional uncertainty in the workplace in the short term.

A significant proportion of teachers at WdKA have small and often temporary contracts. In arts education, this is not unusual and partly a logical consequence of the desire to involve people from the professional field in teaching. But this should not lead to (too) little investment in teachers and leave them unnecessarily insecure.

To this unnecessary uncertainty we add the unclear Planning Task Assignments, which often become available late and in which tasks are shifted around in the interim, sometimes even without consultation, and in which many people are also unclear about the payment of (overtime) hours. It is also sometimes unclear why tasks and hours are shifted around. This affects staff's security of existence. For many, this is a hot topic and a source of uncertainty and insecurity. This being understandable knowing that for many teachers, income at the WdKA is essential to pay the fixed expenses.

The above feelings of insecurity are reinforced by the fact that there is no regular interview cycle at some WdKA departments, even though the norm at RUAS is that these interviews should be held. We spoke to staff members, including permanent staff, who have not had an evaluation or performance review for years. And even though this is apparently not mandatory for contracts less than 0.4 FTE, the question remains whether it is wise not to have these interviews. For many, the job structure and criteria for promotion are unclear. As a result, subjectivity is experienced when awarding a higher scale. It fuels the perception of a certain arbitrariness in personnel policy. It is then fair to ask on what basis the grading, tasks and hours are awarded. We were surprised that managers who fail in this respect are apparently not called to account.

The student population at WdKA requires a teaching team with good pedagogical and didactic skills, capable of managing the sometimes-heated classroom discussions. Discussions about discrimination, decolonisation, inclusive behaviour, and a cancel culture require a teaching team that knows how to deal with these themes. Structural support and (further) training are necessary to this end.

Lack of clarity and transparency is also experienced in the recruitment and selection of new staff. Why are requested extra FTEs granted in one department and not in another? The criteria and the way new staff are recruited are not always transparent, which can evoke the image of co-optation.

The combination of a complex organisation, lack of transparency and unclear personnel policy leads to stress, burn-out and drop-out among many teachers. Some then choose to leave.

7. Student wellbeing

WdKA places great emphasis on student welfare. And rightly so, but the concern for student welfare should have its counterpart in the concern for teacher welfare. We also note that many "points" exist where students can go with questions, problems, or complaints.

Available:

- The Exam Board
- The study career coach
- The confidential counsellor
- The student counsellor
- The Vitality office
- The Office for Inclusivity
- The internal and external complaints commission

However, it is not clear to everyone who has which expertise, which authority, which procedure applies, etc. Choosing the wrong service or point of contact may result in the student not receiving adequate assistance.

We also think the question is justified whether too many cases are not given the denominator of 'socially unsafe'. Especially in arts education, students sometimes need to be taken out of their comfort zone. Education is also about personal development. In our view, uncomfortable does not immediately mean (socially) unsafe. Teaching teams must be given the opportunity to discuss this so that a shared, supported view can emerge.

8. Conclusion

It became apparent to us thanks to the interviews certain themes were recurring, which we have shared above.

It is our impression that the WdKA staff are passionate about providing the best education to students. They work hard to do so. At the same time, many feel disrespected, unappreciated, not seen nor heard. There is a sense of a certain arbitrariness in staff policy. There is a perceived great distance to management and the director/dean. The staff questions whether the former is aware of the goings on of daily working life.

The combination of a very complex organisation, poor communication and little transparency makes many employees feel they are left to their own devices and feel they must do everything themselves. Morale is low and there is a lack of perceived equality in appreciation.

Arts education requires space for creativity and autonomy, but at the same time a solid foundation and clear frameworks are needed. The latter is absent which often results in people experiencing chaos. It is not the commitment to more diversity and inclusion that has led to increased perception of social insecurity, but the lack of proper equipping of it and embedding it in the organisation. That is our conclusion.

Student welfare begins with teacher welfare. This is where more and structural investment is needed.

9. Recommendations

The issues we encountered in our interviews are not new. They have also surfaced in previous reports, alerts, and complaints. The lack of an adequate response has led to a lack of confidence in management. We consider it crucial that a sense of urgency is shown and clear communication on how the problems will be addressed before the summer of 2023. Not everything has to be done at the same time, but there should be a clear plan with implementation starting without delay.

Our recommendation is that an approach, which is to be drawn up, should at least address the following points:

- An art academy should have a certain autonomy, room for freedom and creativity. But it must be firmly grounded, in an organisation where the basics are right and the framework clear.
- Ensure greater transparency in policy and decision-making.
- Invest in better induction (onboarding) of all employees. This cannot be optional. It should be mandatory, and hours should be reserved in the employees' schedule to that end.
- As managers and director/dean, be visible and accessible to staff and students, and make sure you know what is going on in the workplace.
- Improve communication. This starts with responding to emails in a timely manner and following up on agreements that have been made.
- Ensure that the annual interview cycle is carried out across the organisation, providing timely clarity on planning task assignments and paid hours.
- Invest structurally in staff quality. The Education Station can play a useful role in this.
- Ensure that everyone knows where to go with complaints and that there is feedback on what is done with complaints and signs.
- Give O4I a clear position in the organisation and a clear mandate.
- Take timely and appropriate action in case of repeated signs of structural problems in a department/team.

10. Thank you

Finally, we would like to thank everyone who was willing to speak to us openly and candidly. Many have dared to be vulnerable in doing so. Thank you for that. Without you, we could not have written this report.

Appendix 1- rules of conduct/interviews

Rules for interviews at Willem de Kooning

We find it important that you feel safe during this interview/conversation (and we as well). We have a joint responsibility in this and have therefore formulated six conversation rules or ground rules, which we would like to agree on with you:

1. Talking about some (intense) experiences can be very emotional. If certain situations or experiences trigger something in you, feel free to indicate this. We will take this into account.
2. Feel free to say what feels right or what you want to tell us. No message is right or wrong. It's about your story, your experiences.
3. What we discuss here will be treated as highly confidential. In concrete terms, this means that we treat what you share with us with great care. We do this by anonymising your information/story/experiences to avoid traceability.
4. Notes are taken during this conversation, processed anonymously, and submitted to you for verification.
5. The information gathered during the interviews will at some point be reported back to you and to the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences. Situations that can (possibly) be traced back to you will under no circumstances be reported back due to their (possibly) specific nature. As a result, no one can trace your individual situation or experience(s) from the feedback.
6. To ensure the continuity of these conversations and the safety of other colleagues, we ask you to be careful or cautious in sharing details of this conversation with others. Do you agree with the 'rules'? Do you have additions or perhaps comments?