



Rotterdam, 8 March 2023

The Executive Board's response to the research report 'Student wellbeing starts with staff wellbeing'

On 8 February 2023, the Executive Board received the research report 'Student wellbeing starts with teacher well-being' from Ingrid van Engelshoven and Peggy Wijntuin, who were commissioned by the Executive Board to investigate social safety at the Willem de Kooning Academy (WdKA). The board is grateful to van Engelshoven and Wijntuin for conducting this research and for sharing their findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Below, you will find our response to the report. Firstly, we do so by outlining the reasons for the study, providing our interpretation of the results, and addressing the steps we will take to implement their recommendations.

Research background: reason and research brief

In spring 2022, the reports on the Safety Survey 2021 and the Work Experience Survey 2022 were published. The results of these two regularly held surveys by Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences prompted the Executive Board to conduct an external survey on social safety at Willem de Kooning Academy.

Safety survey

The safety survey is conducted tri-annually among RUAS students and staff and is about internal safety, both how it is perceived and appreciated. The results of the survey were published on Hint intranet and the external website, discussed with the Central Representative Board and the Institute Representative Board, and shared with the Supervisory Board.

The results of the safety survey showed a different situation for the Willem de Kooning Academy compared to the rest of the organisation for both 'victimisation' and 'perceived safety'. This prompted the Executive Board to commission a further analysis of the results, which was carried out internally by the Safety & Security team. The analysis revealed that there were a number of issues that had a negative impact on perceived safety at the Academy: on the one hand, a greater awareness of diversity and inclusion was reported; on the other hand, there was a perception of a 'woke' and 'cancel' culture that made respondents afraid to speak out. An insecure working culture was also reported which is linked to the aforementioned issues and to the way management operates as well.

Work Experience Survey

The 2022 Work Experience Survey showed that Willem de Kooning Academy employees deviated negatively from the general picture in a number of areas, such as working from home, collaboration between teaching and support staff and work pressure. However, the score for employee wellbeing had improved compared to 2021. It was also notable that 70% of teachers at WdKA were (very) satisfied with their work at the Academy and 12% were (very) dissatisfied. This indicated that while the

average level of satisfaction was high, there was also a relatively large group of colleagues who were dissatisfied. In-depth questions in the work experience survey indicated that there was a need for greater clarity of responsibilities, tasks and decision-making, and that staff felt they were not being informed (in a timely manner).

External research

Apart from the immediate trigger of these two surveys, there were other indications of dissatisfaction and feelings of insecurity at the academy in the period leading up to the two surveys. The Education Inspectorate drew the attention of the Board to the fact that there were indications of social insecurity, and information was also received through the confidential counsellors. The Inspectorate's questions were included in a study within higher education on arts education. A few incidents were investigated by an external agency. On the basis of the results of the two periodic surveys and the other indications of dissatisfaction and insecurity, the Board concluded that there appeared to be a breeding ground at the Academy that encouraged increased victimisation and feelings of insecurity. However, it was not clear from the surveys how to interpret the various indications and how to address them. The Executive Board therefore decided to commission an external study on social security at the Willem de Kooning Academy, with the aim of getting a clear picture of the causes of persistent signs of dissatisfaction and perceived insecurity, explicitly asking whether there was a systematic problem of (sexually) transgressive behaviour or systematic discrimination. With this survey, the Executive Board wanted to gain insight into the background and reasons for the high percentage of 12% of colleagues who indicated that they were (very) dissatisfied in the above-mentioned survey, and in particular into the wording of the (very) dissatisfied themselves. In addition, the survey aimed to provide advice on how the Academy's management could adopt an approach that would lead to an improvement in (perceived) social security.

The assignment was worded as follows:

A further investigation into the culture of the academy, which will identify the reasons for the persistent indications of victimisation and perceived safety. And will provide clear direction for improvement actions aimed at prevention. This includes prevention of two issues: (sexually) transgressive behaviour and the way in which (alleged) abuse can be discussed safely (in this case not via social media). Advice for the long term is explicitly requested to achieve a sustainable improvement in the learning and working climate.

In April 2022, the Executive Board asked Ingrid van Engelshoven and Peggy Wijntuin to conduct the external study on social security at the WdKA. They carried out their survey in 2022 and in January 2023. They conducted interviews to get an idea of how different students and staff perceive the WdKA working and teaching culture.

Interpretation of Research Report

The Board notes that the research has not shown that there is a systematic problem of (sexually) transgressive behaviour or systematic discrimination. Nor does the research show that it is the culture as such that is at the root of the problems and dissatisfaction, or the decision to consciously pursue diversity and inclusion within the organisation. As the research report states: 'It is not the commitment to greater diversity and inclusion that has led to increased feelings of social insecurity, but the lack of adequate resources and embedding in the organisation'.

The research report shows, among other things, that the aftermath of the pandemic; a lack of transparency; a lack of timely and clear communication; the impact of internationalisation, and the organisational complexity and – in some cases – sloppiness of WdKA have created a breeding ground for feelings of insecurity and dissatisfaction. This has led to a great deal of uncertainty among colleagues, particularly in relation to personnel policy.

The Executive Board concludes that a robust organisational issue exists at the academy, with the effect of harming individual staff members in the form of dissatisfaction, sickness, or absenteeism. We also conclude that this issue is causing a strain on the sense of community at WdKA, and that in time this will further erode the foundation for good dialogue on important issues within the academy. The Executive Board sees the situation at WdKA as grave and believes that – incidentally, partly in line with measures already taken by WdKA's Management Team (AMT) – measures must be taken forcefully.

The research report points to a fundamental issue, namely when a situation can be described to be socially insecure. According to the researchers, the term (in)security at work is used in many different ways. The Executive Board considers this to be a legitimate and relevant question. On the basis of the report's findings, the Executive Board would argue that organisational sloppiness and, in the perception of colleagues, inadequate communication have led to dissatisfaction in the academy, which initially was not (always) related to social insecurity. However, because there has been insufficient attention and recognition of this dissatisfaction and its underlying causes for a long time, the feelings of dissatisfaction have become entrenched and have developed into feelings of social insecurity. The Executive Committee wishes to discuss how this underlying mechanism operates across the organisation, with a view to drawing lessons for all study programmes and organisational units.

The Executive Board agrees with the researchers that it is of utmost importance to address the issues as soon as possible, in order to improve social safety and restore student and staff confidence. We therefore fully adopt all the committee's recommendations.

Link to previous findings and improvement actions

The Board notes that the findings and conclusions of 'Student well-being starts with teacher well-being' are consistent with, and add detail to, the view already expressed in the Safety Survey. The recommendations provide concrete starting points to address the situation that has arisen. The Board also notes that these recommendations are consistent with the actions and areas for improvement already initiated by the Academy's management over the past year. The Executive Board notes that it is an awkward fact that some colleagues feel that certain policies are lacking, even though the AMT of WdKA has taken these steps in the recent past. The Executive Board labels this as 'awkward' because they do not wish to detract from the value of what has been communicated, but also because there are apparently good policies in place, but they are not perceived as such by colleagues. The recurrent lack of transparency may be to blame.

Important elements of what has already been set in motion are the new strategic personnel policy, the leadership training, workshops, and knowledge sharing on personnel matters, increased attention to onboarding, the vitality programme, strengthening of the communication department, attention to multi-voiced decision-making and adjustment of the meeting culture and consultation approach. In doing so, the Executive Board believes the Willem de Kooning Academy management team has taken a good direction and this gives us confidence that the AMT can and will take the necessary steps.

The Executive Board's Measures

The research report clearly shows that the action steps that have been initiated are the right ones but have not had sufficient effect to improve the sense of safety within the academy. The Executive Board is therefore taking the following measures.

Firstly, we ask the director and management team of the Willem de Kooning Academy to invite all members of the WdKA community to discuss the research report. It's important to create a safe environment that allows everybody to express themselves. The board members will also engage in dialogue with WdKA staff about the report's findings and recommendations.

Secondly, the board instructs the director and the AMT to draw up an action plan based on these discussions. This action plan will include all of the recommendations in the report and make them concrete. In order to allow sufficient time for proper consultation with the WdKA community, we give the director and the AMT one month to produce this action plan. We are mindful of the researchers' observation that new policies should not create additional uncertainty. We will therefore communicate each step of the process with the utmost transparency, and we explicitly instruct the director and the AMT to do so as well.

Finally, the Executive Board will add an additional member to the Academy Management Team whose explicit task will be to strengthen, guide, implement and/or initiate the improvement process and communicate about it - together with the AMT - towards the academy community. It is good to know that a coaching process was already started in December 2022 with the task of supporting the strengthening of communication between the AMT and the WdKA community. The Executive Board will engage with this coach and refine the coaching assignment where necessary, so that it is in line with the lessons from the research report and the actions to be taken.

The measures we are going to take must actually start leading to a better sense of safety among students and staff. Therefore, in the coming period, we will assess the findings of the research report among the members of the WdKA community by engaging in discussions on the report and then on the plan of action. The AMT will also have to periodically account for their progress on the plan of action. We will define the times and manner in which this accountability will take place in the action plan. We will also assess the results of our efforts by having an interim survey of the perceived sense of safety at the academy conducted by our internal Safety & Security Team. Finally, we look forward to the results of the 2023 Work Experience Survey, which was held recently (February 2023), to assess whether the measures already initiated are already having an effect.

Collective and individual sense of responsibility

With the investigation, the Executive Board wanted to acknowledge the relatively large group of colleagues who are (very) dissatisfied with the way things are going at the Academy. This is unsettling, but we now know the background to the dissatisfaction and action can be taken.

For this process to be successful and to actually improve the feeling of safety within the academy, we need to collectively intervene: the voice of all students and staff is important. It is important to share what is not going well, but also to name what is going well and to celebrate successes together. Everyone should also be given the freedom and responsibility to speak out and together ensure that the WdKA remains what it is: a fantastic art academy with a unique educational concept in a special relationship with Rotterdam.

The urgency to address social safety within the academy is clear. It is not up to the Academy Management Team alone to solve this problem. Creating a safe learning and working environment is a joint responsibility of managers, staff, and students. It is therefore up to the entire academy, to the entire community, to address this issue. In this context, the Executive Board finds it important to mention that many good things are also happening at WdKA and that job satisfaction is high on average and that students also feel at home in the academy. Staff put their heart and soul into providing students with the best arts education. We therefore appeal to the collective responsibility and therefore also the individual responsibility of each staff member to carry the improvement process, together with the Academy Management Team.

Finally, in a separate communiqué, the Board notes that Jeroen Chabot has expressed his willingness to accept the challenge of taking the necessary steps together with his AMT. In the near future, he sees good opportunities to write the Action Plan in open dialogue with the WdKA community, a plan that will take the Academy forward. At the same time, he states that the healing process will be a longer-term one and that he grants the Academy a new director in implementing this plan after his twelve years of his leadership. The Board has learned of this with more than the usual respect. Jeroen Chabot has done a fantastic job in putting the Willem de Kooning Academy on the map and creating a jewel in the landscape of art institutions.

On behalf of the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences Executive Board
Ron Bormans, Chairman of the Board