



Amsterdam Young Academy



# Inside the Academic

Institutional trust, imposter syndrome  
and academic superhero

## Preface

# Who are the people behind science policy?

In September 2020, the Amsterdam Young Academy (AYA) released its first edition of the AYA magazine, in which young academics provided a perspective on the 'Recognition and Rewards' debate in academia.

In this second edition of the AYA magazine, we zoom in on the young academic. Who are the people behind science policy? What drives them, what obstacles do they experience and what support do they need to achieve success and well-being in their careers? Rather than merely looking at academic achievements, we should be mindful of various paths to academic success and personal backgrounds, motivations and needs, to enable conditions for young academics to flourish. Such needs for support vary. Examples include conversations with peers on work-life balance and setting boundaries, having a mentor for career development advice, or having access to courses – for example on how to network.

This magazine gives young academics a voice. We discuss the struggles and needs of first-generation scholars in today's academia (p. 4), share the consequences of competing with 'the academic superhero' (p. 6), and talk about the desire for institutional trust (p. 10). Among other things, you can also get a sneak peek of AYA's upcoming interdisciplinary guide.

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*The Amsterdam Young Academy is an independent group of young academics from different disciplines from the University of Amsterdam, VU University and Amsterdam Medical Centres. It was founded in 2018. AYA aims to stimulate dialogue and to develop views on science policy, interdisciplinary research and science communication that help young academics thrive.*



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# First-generation academics and the insurmountable work pressure

**Silke Muylaert**

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**During a conversation on work-life balance in academia, we realised that we both had different outlooks on the topic. We wondered what the effects were of being the first person in a family to pursue an academic career on a person's mindset and success within academia.**

There is sporadic evidence of doctoral candidates and early career scholars struggling to grasp the social and practical frameworks of academia, especially on social media. The question 'What did you wish you knew as a doctoral student' – a recurring topic of discussion among academics on Twitter – is especially prevalent among those who struggle because they never learned how to conform to the academic framework. Such struggles often result in missed opportunities and the well-known imposter syndrome. One of the main reasons why people struggle to fit in is because they never learned to do so, as their parents were not academics and maybe never even had any university experience. It takes longer to find your way, and to fit into a highly competitive environment. More attention should be paid to whether first-generation students reach the early career stage and how they experience this stage.

First generation scholars deal with questions such as: 'When is it possible to ask for help

and advice?', 'How critical can I be towards my supervisor?' and 'Is it appropriate to tell all my colleagues about my recently published article or should I be more modest about it?' Silke, for instance, struggled to figure out such social rules in academia. She was the only one in her family who had pursued a doctorate. One of her family members was even anxious about her starting doctoral studies, believing that if she failed, she would have to repay the money the university invested in her. Therefore, scared of failing and looking weak, she hardly dared to ask people for feedback or to network in case they would realise that she was an 'imposter'. Many years later, still in academia, she realised that asking for advice and feedback is an important step in knowledge creation. For Sanne –being among the first in her family to get a university degree – making her family proud was also a driving force behind building an academic career, but she also needed to find the best way to navigate the academic world, with its customs and unwritten rules. Building a network of peers and talking about the work pressure with others helped her to learn (and cope with) this.

The internet is full of blogs written by first-generation graduate students who reveal that all the fears and struggles connected to undefined



*“For first-generation scholars, it is important to realise that their perception of those academic ‘superheroes’ they look up to is often mythical.”*

rules in academia become amplified during graduate studies. Being more flexible with your working hours, by working in the weekend or evenings, might be perceived as more normal when your parents also have such a work ethic. Or being confident when presenting your work might be easier when you have family members that are more used to pitching or showcasing their work. Similarly, doctoral students and early career scholars who are not first-generation students, might be more confident at networking and reaching out for help. You do not have to have parents in academia to quickly pick up on the practices and get a feel for the field, but it certainly helps. Silke wonders how her doctoral studies might have gone if she would have had the confidence that she sees in students who are not the first scholars in their families. She realised that it is okay, and even vital, to network.

When we think of achievements and work pressure, the path to academic success – especially in the long-term – can seem like an insurmountable

mountain to the first-generation scholar. One scholarly article from 2011 even discusses attrition risks among first-generation graduate students. In the meantime, it may well be the case that higher education places greater demands on those working in academia, physically and mentally. For first-generation scholars, academic life can feel even more overwhelming than it does for those who have learned that work pressure is normal. We do not know what the drop-out rates are for first generation scholars, but we would implore the academic world to think about such aspects and offer more support. For first-generation scholars, it is important to realise that their perception of those academic ‘superheroes’ they look up to is often mythical – they also had their own winding career paths and they also experienced bumps along the way. We often talk about people’s achievements in academia, but not about the circuitous path that led towards it. And that path, with all its bumps and obstacles, should be given more attention.

## Sneak peek of the interdisciplinary guide for the AYA magazine

**Linda Douw**

*Associate Professor of Anatomy & Neurosciences,  
Amsterdam UMC*

**Interdisciplinarity is currently a major hype in academia. A large proportion of funding calls, new shiny projects and education programmes mention interdisciplinarity in one way or another. In Amsterdam, many academic and non-academic research and education initiatives seem to incorporate interdisciplinarity. But what is it, what is it good for and how do we put interdisciplinarity into practice? Very little hands-on guidance is currently available, particularly for those starting out with interdisciplinary research or teaching. Because of the lack of information available, we decided to develop a guide on interdisciplinarity.**

Through our interdisciplinary lunch events, the Amsterdam Young Academy learned that many researchers want to incorporate more interdisciplinarity into their work, but have little information on the resources available. This probably applies to any interdisciplinary newbie in the world. While discipline-specific information is widely available online for each institute and department, it is the cross-domain and cross-institute initiatives and opportunities in particular that are difficult to google. When looking for information outside your main field, the keywords you are familiar with might have a different meaning or you may simply not know the keywords to use. And how often have you found out that someone a couple of floors up is working on the same topic, but from a different perspective? In Amsterdam, we have the added complexity of harbouring two universities and two academic medical centres.

Moreover, we found that ideas on how to shape the practical aspects of interdisciplinary research

can be sourced from different viewpoints and different disciplines. Every interdisciplinary collaboration is different, but interdisciplinary researchers often share similar attitudes and interests. In the guide, we use interviews and discussions to reflect on the ‘interdisciplinary identity’. Moreover, researchers also regularly encounter similar organisational and infrastructural hurdles, such as the lack of clear career perspective for interdisciplinary researchers.

The guide offers the opportunity to learn from the shared personal experiences of several stakeholders, ranging from PhD candidates to department heads, and from educators to journal editors. Through this guide, the Interdisciplinarity group hopes to inform and inspire those interested in (starting up) interdisciplinary research and teaching. The guide will likely be published before the end of 2021. Keep an eye on our website and social media pages to stay updated.







# How mythical is the academic superhero?

**Katinka van der Kooij**

*Postdoc Human Movement Sciences, VU*

One of the beautiful aspects of academia is that it is a place where we can strive for the impossible. One generation ago, we had no idea that we would become able to look inside the functioning human brain or that we could manipulate a genetic code to create a vaccine. In a sense, academics have to believe they have mythical abilities to uncover novel truths. This is empowering and provides an escape from reality. During the pandemic, several members of the Amsterdam Young Academy referred to our meetings as an escape from the mundane reality of lockdowns. Yet, we also experience that our ambitions can be a vulnerability when we take them too far. In the #mythicalsuperhero campaign, we visualised the academic superhero to ask ourselves: are they a healthy incentive or not?

Wanting more than one can achieve is natural. Humans are driven to engage in behaviours for which there is no evidence that they will result in success. For instance, a child attempts to climb a tree without ever having done so and Columbus sailed the oceans uncertain of what he would encounter on his journey. Psychology has explained such behaviour as stemming from an intrinsic drive to learn, in which any information is better than no information. Moreover, we act based on what we *might* achieve in the future rather than based on what we are able to do in the moment. While being slightly overconfident is a healthy incentive, too much of it is the root of psychiatric disorders such as narcissism. So how mythical is the academic superhero?



The academic superhero is versatile. Our academic positions are defined in terms of research and education, but everyone knows reality includes many additional tasks, as Shari Boodt and Fleur Jongepier note in the Times Higher Education<sup>1</sup>. Besides the official categories, academic work contains an equally large category of academic service: organising conferences, writing opinion pieces and leadership, to name but a few. It comes as no surprise to learn that on average academics work 150% of their appointed hours. The academic superhero has outgrown the regular working week.

Research being financed by competitive grants with success rates of 5-15% is a driving force behind doing more and more. There simply isn't enough money for all good proposals but rather than admitting that we are subject to a game of chance, a fetishization of hard work makes us believe that we would be successful if we worked even harder. Competing on the number of publications is difficult because the winning numbers require a productive lab and little teaching obligations. Therefore, many of us try to stay in the game by excelling in as many aspects of academia as possible. The grant system is the potion that enables the academic hero to grow a mythical number of arms.

Eventually, academia becomes a place that is welcoming only to the mythical all-rounder. Yet, core aspects of science such as advanced statistical techniques, lab work, and scientific rigour in general, are only mastered when many dedicated hours are invested. The all-rounder needs to collaborate with colleagues with a greater drive to work endlessly on a single topic even if it harms their career. Research integrity might also be under pressure. I am regularly faced with the dilemma of either producing the highest quality work or publishing enough papers to stay in the game. *Publish or perish*. The mythical superhero might be slowly pushing academia into an abyss where we no longer collaborate but produce piles of sloppy science. So how can we put the genie back in the bottle? Academia needs role models who dare to focus on a single aspect of academia, who admit their mistakes, and don't work overtime, as Joeri Tijdink and Christiaan Vinkers argued in the Dutch daily newspaper Trouw<sup>2</sup>. These role models can only be found when hiring policy is changed and a belief in the merits of competition is nuanced. For the common good, the highest achiever should sometimes lose out to someone who lets others flourish.

<sup>1</sup> Shari Boodt & Fleur Jongepier, Recognition of academia's invisible labour is long overdue, Times Higher Education, June 6, 2021

<sup>2</sup> Joeri Tijdink & Christiaan Vinkers, Terwijl de wetenschap hard bezig is de pandemie te bezweren, is het de vraag hoe lang de wetenschapper het nog volhoudt, Trouw, September 4, 2020



*"I dream of a university where it is more than a place just to teach, just to research, just to meet, or just to deal with work politics."*

## The University of The Future: Building institutional trust from below

Younes Saramifar, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, VU

Future is a promise that provokes imagination, speculation, desire, and yearning for a more fitting reality, *more* pleasant or at least somehow *more* palatable than what is being experienced now. I am sure most academics have kicked back in their chair once in a while and stared into the

abyss of their computer screens to dream of the university of the future. Dreaming of how cool it will be when some old-fashioned colleague retires and a new generation steps in, or how great it would be if students were more interested, or what could be done to dismantle the tyranny of grant-giving institutions.

I dream of a university where it is more than a place *just* to teach, *just* to research, *just* to meet, or *just* to deal with work politics, but an academic home where everything and everyone are entangled and vibrantly connected to each other to create fulfilment. My hope for an academic home as a place of fecundity, flourishing and fulfilment is slipping away. So dear readers, maybe you could come along and read further to imagine the university of the future and hope for institutional trust?

Institutional trust is an informal bond which links and nurtures members of an organisation to collaborate and co-create. It is not just a pact between upper echelons of a university and those under their care, a collegial social contract or a bureaucratic agreement for promotions, benefits and compensations. Institutional trust

is a quality of the academic home interwoven into the desire for transparency and an inclusive working style. Please, read my words carefully! I stress the desire and the willingness to be transparent and inclusive, because that can create an environment of trust. Employees of the university of the future could trust and experience safety if the desire and urge to operate with transparency and inclusivity were displayed and put into practice.

Transparency and inclusivity are currently partially integrated into institutional policies of some universities. However, they remain an imposed top-down organisational feature which does not necessarily translate into practice. This feature does not nurture institutional trust because employees are not included in the trajectory of the formation of institutional policies and structure. In addition, Clare Birchall (2012), in her wonderful research on transparency<sup>3</sup>, shows how upper echelons display limited transparency to satisfy the critical minded, and that the 'actual' talks take place behind closed doors. However, this can be upended in the university of the future if the desire for transparency and inclusivity is explicitly expressed by the faculty boards, and management teams. Such expressions operate as invitations for collaboration and a means of calling on every colleague to join in and co-create along with initiators.

Desire and desiring are the keywords, because it is desire that indicates the mindset, attitudes and openness to build an academic home *together* rather than imposing the modes of operation like Ford assembly lines. Expressing the desire for transparency from upper echelons will include enabling the members of the university of the future to think along with those who have taken managerial responsibilities, rather than merely being managed. This will nurture the institutional trust and permit the university of the future to emerge bottom-up organically and in collaboration with others.

Currently, desires in Dutch universities such as Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam are dominated by a growth discourse, grant-seeking ambitions, impact-driven

research and anxiety related to a decrease or increase in student numbers, among other things. This is partly due to budget cuts and educational policies of the right-leaning government in the Netherlands.

However, the responsibility to compensate for shortcomings has been placed on the shoulders of academics who have to write more grant proposals, valorise more and more, become more socially relevant so that policy-making bodies are more inclined to rely on scientific research and find ways of being creative, with less time allocated to teaching and pedagogical activities. There is no evident desire to find inclusive solutions.

Vulnerabilities that influence the university management system, decision-making and administrative bodies need to be treated as challenges for the entire academic system. Sharing vulnerabilities involves putting a precisely elaborated problem on the table with the relevant team and expressing it as a managerial vulnerability that could be solved collectively. Not very long ago, a former head of the department of political science at VU, transparently put all available teaching hours on the table and asked all the teaching staff to strategize with him. His attempt at sharing the vulnerabilities transformed the academic unit under his care into a collective that begun to think together rather than entering into negotiations with the system individually.

Institutional trust will follow if the desire for transparency and expressing vulnerabilities are integrated into managerial discourses of universities. Without institutional trust, universities cannot evolve into inclusive platforms where everyone is able to contribute to the question of how to practice the art of living with the damaged planet. The university of the future can rise and contribute to the fulfilment of its members if institutional trust emerges from below by treating desires and willingness for change as open invitations.

<sup>3</sup> Clare Birchall, 2012, Transparency, Interrupted: Secrets to the Left, Theory, Culture & Society 28 (7): 60-84



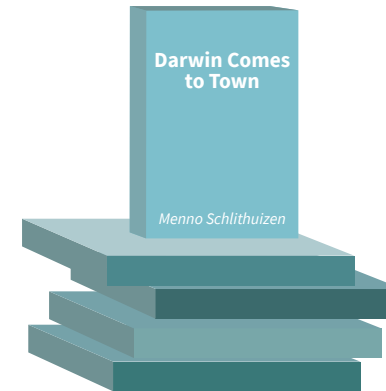
## A PhD student's comic noir



# READS



## Book recommendations by our members



Between climate change and extinction rates, many accounts of the natural world resemble memorials for ecosystems that have been, or will soon be, lost. That is not the case however for Menno Schilthuis's 'Darwin Comes to Town: How the Urban Jungle Drives Evolution'. The book covers how plants and animals are adapting to life in our cities. Each chapter takes you on a global romp from the steamy streets of Singapore to the roof gardens of Japan, and to the Netherlands itself. Read this book and acquire a newfound appreciation for the life that surrounds you when you walk down a city street. From the feral pigeons (with their darker feathers to better cope with pollution) to the plants that miraculously spring up between the paving slabs beneath our feet, each represent a marvel of adaptation - eking out their existence in the most unlikely of habitats.

A fascinating book about the parallels between the decline of the Habsburg empire and the contemporary troubles and issues of the European Union written by Caroline de Gruyter, who has been correspondent for the Dutch daily newspaper NRC in Brussels and Vienna. The description of the history of the Austrian-Hungarian empire is in itself a reason to read this book (I wouldn't be surprised if it is translated someday soon), but also some of the parallels are striking: both are empires with weak external political and military forces, consisting of a multitude of different language groups and nationalities. De Gruyter's punchline is thought provoking: instead of weakness, she presents these characteristics as qualities; they require constant balancing, compromises and 'fortwursteln'.



**Emily Burdfield-Steel**  
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### **AYA guide for sustainable meetings**

AYA cares about sustainability and developed a guide to organise meetings with low carbon footprint catering. As a result, we developed sustainable 'doggy bags' that we used for catering at home during the 2020 festive (online) inauguration of new AYA members. The guide is available on our website. Contact: Umberto Olcese ([u.olcese@uva.nl](mailto:u.olcese@uva.nl))

### **Diversity**

AYA is committed to the discussion on diversity and decolonisation. What are the goals and limits in current diversity campaigns and what are the challenges on the road to inclusivity? Contact: Younes Saramifar ([y.saramifar@vu.nl](mailto:y.saramifar@vu.nl)).

### **#MythicalSuperHero social media campaign**

To address perpetuating concepts of excellence in academia, AYA visualised the academic mythical superhero as a multi-armed genie in the bottle. To initiate informal conversations, we printed the mythical superhero on coffee mugs and started a social media campaign under the hashtag #academicsuperheroes. Join the conversation on Twitter, or send an e-mail to [aya@vu.nl](mailto:aya@vu.nl)

### **Hybrid working**

Together with the College of Deans at the VU, AYA is contributing to a vision of the university of the future, and more concretely to policies and guidelines in order to facilitate hybrid working that combines on-campus and off-campus work. Contact: Elsje van Bergen ([e.van.bergen@vu.nl](mailto:e.van.bergen@vu.nl))

### **Care**

Healthcare has been all over the news the past year, but how about other forms of care? AYA reflects on this concept and how it can be integrated into academic citizenship. Follow our website and Twitter account (@ayoungacademy) to stay updated on upcoming events on 'care'.

### **Festive inauguration of new members**

November 8th, AYA will inaugurate 10 new members.