

Recognition & Rewards testimonial – Debby Beckers

Debby Beckers is Associate Professor of Work and Organizational Psychology, and recently she was also appointed the Deputy Director of the university's Behavioural Science Institute. In recent years she has been involved in drawing up the strategy for the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSW), which includes the faculty vision and ambitions on recognition and appreciation. 'I'd like to see real diversity in people's career paths, that they can excel in the tasks that give them the most energy and that they can consequently continue to develop.'

Beckers has been affiliated with Radboud University since the start of her academic career. "Yes, I'm one of those people who's been in Nijmegen my entire working life. I began here in 2003 as a PhD candidate. Although I obtained my PhD in 2008, I'd already started working as an assistant professor in 2007. My official work consisted of a range of educational and research tasks, but because there was a staff shortage, I actually spent a lot of time on teaching."

That was fine at first, says Beckers, but slowly and surely it began to cause some degree of despair and uncertainty. "My work became quite one-sided, and I had the feeling that my career had come to a standstill. And that bothered me: I like taking on new challenges, and I wanted to devote more time on research and developing my potential in a broader sense. As I approached my 40th birthday, I decided it was time to think carefully about the career path that I wanted to take. Because once you have an idea about where you want to go, you can really create opportunities that match your ambitions." In 2018 she became an associate professor and, at the same time, she was offered the opportunity to temporarily take on the role of interim head of her department. And that turned out to be a unique opportunity: "I discovered that I was quite suited to that type of work and found that I wanted to devote myself more to working at the managerial and strategic level, in addition to being a scientist."

Open discussion

"After my period as interim manager ended, I took the initiative and approached the dean. We had a useful open discussion about how I could still gain more experience in carrying out administrative tasks, even though I had not yet attained the position of full professor. I was told that there were certain faculty dossiers to which I could lend my support, and these included the faculty strategy. For this purpose, I was given a part-time appointment of advisor to the faculty board, next to my academic appointment of

associate professor; I held this advisory position for two years in addition to my research and reduced teaching duties. I was allowed to take part in all of the faculty board meetings, I completed a leadership course, I co-wrote the faculty strategy with the dean, and I was able to contribute ideas and advice on policy matters. It was a great learning experience, and it was also really wonderful to be able to offer added value and a diversity of perspectives. It also helped me realise that I'm quite suited to administrative work. And it certainly gave me the confidence to take the step to apply for the position of deputy director at my research institute."

Beckers realises that the career steps that she was able to take are not within everyone's immediate reach. "As a starting academic, you allow yourself to be guided by the usual research and educational standards. Many young academics don't have permanent tenure and feel pressured to excel in their area of research. As everyone will tell you, it's essential excel in research, but teaching is also very time consuming. There are other tasks that you often won't be able to gain a perspective on, because they might not always be recognised or acknowledged in your environment. At some point I just asked myself: What do I need to do to make sure that I keep enjoying my work and keep developing my potential? Being personally proactive certainly helps, but at the same time you also need people who offer opportunities in line with your ambitions. For me, it was a combination of capabilities, proactivity, luck and colleagues who offered those sort of opportunities."

Room for every talent

In previous years, Beckers was involved in drawing up the Faculty of Social Sciences' strategy, which also incorporates the vision on recognition and appreciation of scientists. To this end, the faculty gathered as broad a range of information as possible: questionnaires were distributed, the plenary meetings that were held were open to everyone, and plenty of consultations were held with other groups, including a Steering Committee. "It was important to us that, in addition to academic staff, students and support staff were also involved in these activities. For the latter group, it's vital that attention is also paid to a broader, more challenging range of tasks and new growth opportunities in their jobs."

What are the priority areas in the strategy? "The strategy contains ten priority areas, but one of the key elements is that there must be room for everyone's talent. Firstly, for scientists, this means that it's vital that there is equal recognition and appreciation for education and research. And secondly that, in the interests of career paths, administrative tasks and valorisation/impact also need to be taken into account. The

strategy also underlines the importance of the appreciation of team science, which is an achievement that stems from collaboration with others. And that quality in education and research will be recognised more: good work takes time, so simply and merely tallying up the number of publications in a CV, for example, is too one-sided an assessment. The most important thing is an achievable, healthy career path with an eye for the individual ambitions and strengths of the employees.”

Beckers agrees that these are great ambitions, but there are still some challenges that stand in the way of achieving them. “This shouldn’t become one of those strategies that ends up in the back of a drawer, but something that makes is actively pursued by everyone in the coming years. The vision on recognition and appreciation needs to seep through to every institute, every department, and every employee. We must also ensure that people don’t think that they can only continue to grow in their careers if they excel in every single area. You can’t expect someone who excels in administrative tasks to also excel in the areas of education, *and* research *and* valorisation, or vice versa. Before you know it, people will still be expecting the impossible, and they’ll be afraid that they’ll be left behind if they don’t know how to live up to such an unrealistic ideal. If everyone gets the chance to excel in the areas with which they have the most affinity and they enjoy what they’re doing, then we’re definitely on the right track.”