Date: 02 June 2023

To: Prof. Wigboldus, Prof. van Krieken, Drs. Muskens and Mr. Pe, Executive Board Radboud University
Cc: Fokke Aukema, Division director Academic Affairs

Concerns: Radboud Young Academy advice on draft educational vision

Dear members of the Executive Board,

The Radboud Young Academy is an interfaculty think tank of young scientific staff and professionals that contributes to the academic culture of our university. One of our focus areas is the evaluation of teaching (especially of young academics) and the role evaluations play in Human Resource (HR) policy. From this perspective, we would like to offer advice on the draft version of the new educational vision.

While we subscribe to the general message and content of the vision, we would caution against the way student evaluations of teaching (SETs) are now included in the document. Under the heading of “9. Erkennen en waarderen”, the vision states “Onderwijsevaluaties en de voortgaande ontwikkeling als docent komen in onze jaargesprekken aan bod”. As the annual talks (jaargesprekken) are meant to monitor the functioning of (teaching) staff, the implication is that SETs are used to measure the quality of teachers. Indeed, it is current policy at our university to use SETs as a tool for HR purposes such as awarding permanent contracts, promotions, etc.

However, research shows that SETs may not be the valid instruments for HR decisions that they are often presumed to be. Primarily, evidence shows that SETs are more likely to measure student satisfaction than teaching quality, which can be a significant distinction when evaluating the effectiveness of teaching. Factors such as the difficulty of the subject matter, the academic level of the course, and whether the course is compulsory or optional have all been shown to influence SETs (Arthur, 2019). These factors highlight the inherent bias in SETs, as they are unrelated to the actual quality of teaching.

Moreover, the impact of gender bias on SETs is a glaring issue. Students appear to assess teaching competence based on the stereotype of the white male professor, and there is a clear correlation between perceived charisma and positive evaluations (Kierstead et al., 1988; Basow et al., 2006; MacNell et al., 2014; Boring, 2017; Chisadza et al., 2019). This prejudice can potentially disadvantage women and people of color in academic positions. Furthermore, SETs are also heavily influenced by the students’ maturity, gender, and grade expectations, factors that are beyond the control of the teaching staff (Denson et al., 2010; Spooren et al., 2013). This raises further questions about the fairness and validity of SETs as a tool for measuring teaching quality. These concerns become even more significant when considering that SETs often influence promotion and contract renewal decisions in universities. This implies that hiring and promotion processes may unintentionally perpetuate bias against women and people of color. This lack of impartiality in SETs underscores their unsuitability for HR purposes.

While SETs could serve as valuable tools for course improvement, their limitations render them inappropriate for assessing the overall performance of teaching staff. Their inherent biases and extraneous influences can skew the results, leading to potentially unfair outcomes. We therefore advise to change the text in the vision accordingly.
We hope you will take this advice into consideration in the formulation of the final version of the educational vision. Of course, we are happy to clarify and further discuss these issues.

Best regards,

On behalf of the Radboud Young Academy,
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References


