Maastricht Young Academy

Position Paper

on

Recognition and Rewards

Academics are experiencing increasing work pressure, a trend that is expected to persist. Various surveys have reported the consequences of factors such as insecurity in career development and limited financial means from the state combined with the increasing competition for external research funding and the ever-present mandate to publish. The experiences of the last year have only underlined the need for this discussion. All of academia is overwhelmed by, for example, pressure to deal with online education, and substantially increased work pressure that comes from this more limited possibilities to carry out research in various fields, such as laboratory research or research with human subjects.

To deal with these and other challenges, a global discussion in academia has started centering on the idea of taking better care of the people that carry out the work. In the Netherlands, this discussion takes, *inter alia*, the form of a policy discussion on Recognition and Rewards. This policy proposal seeks to change the way by which universities perceive and reward staff members for the work they carry out. At the basis of this policy initiative lies a broader perspective of what a fulfilling career is beyond – but not excluding – the track towards a full professorship.

At Maastricht University (UM) this development is led by the work of Rector Magnificus Rianne Letschert and a group of academics from its faculties. The work until now has resulted in four narratives that will steer the university-wide discussion on how to move forward together.

The Maastricht Young Academy (MYA) is an independent and interfaculty body of academics established in 2017 and provides advice to the UM Executive Board and Faculty Boards whenever it finds this necessary. This MYA position paper deals with Recognition and Reward and is intended as a general contribution to the debate at UM in particular, but also seeks to contribute to the national and international discussion on changing the way in which academic careers are thought of and how growth in academia is structured. The position paper is also a direct response to the four UM narratives that were created to start a UM wide discussion.

Overall, we believe the Recognition and Rewards (R&R) policy will lead to more fairness and diversity and a much needed change in culture over the role of academics and the evaluation of their performance. This will not be easy and there are many questions and uncertainties that surround its implementation. As MYA we stand strong for the change the R&R policy seeks to bring about, and are deeply committed to contribute to achieving its objectives. However, that does not mean that we are without criticism on the current state of the policy and the debate that surrounds it.

1. Something is not right.

More than in other sectors, working at a university means the pursuit of excellence in multiple diverse tasks. In research, the competition is fierce; from research papers to grant proposals, measuring one's performance against that of others is the norm. Metrics – be it h-indices, citation indices or otherwise – were originally designed to track research activity, but have instead become the measurements that shape careers. As a result, researchers strategically spend their (limited) time towards achieving the metrics that will allow them to progress. In doing so, other tasks – for example teaching and management – are often neglected. Those who do carry out significant teaching and management tasks are often perceived as less ambitious or qualitatively inadequate to progress in their career. The traditional focus on metrics, especially research-oriented ones, has led some away from the tasks they do best (and that the university needs to function).

Why do we say something is not right? Too many decisions are based on performance in just one part of the job, regardless of the talents an individual possesses nor the need of the team they work within. When the other activities still need to be done, they take place in the evening and weekends, resulting in an overworked body of staff that eventually may not deliver quality on any of the tasks they carry out.

In addition, academics work in a very hierarchical organisation that does not always present itself as such. Answering to seniors for our work and our choices, who at the same time also decide – often alone – on our progress and our career paths, and in some cases indirectly benefit from maintaining a hierarchy, has created a very difficult system to work in. This raises questions of fairness, inclusivity and diversity, and amplifies the issue of how to assess whether a staff member is performing well.

2. What do we think needs to be done?

At UM, a R&R task force has produced four narratives on how *research*, *education*, *leadership* and *impact* should be considered from now on. We appreciate the discussions that led to these four narratives, and now hope to see the formation of an overarching vision on how UM views their combination and implementation. Moreover, within the narratives there is a substantial discussion and insight into how we can *recognise* different tracks, but comparatively little on what we can or need to do to *reward* them. We believe there should be an urgent discussion on how to reward academics. This may require a cultural shift that begins with determining the aspiration of an individual staff member, aligning them to the

objectives of a unit and then assessing them accordingly. We believe this would represent a break with the current system centered on assessment without consideration of the goals of individuals and their role in a team.

3.   What is our common vision on what constitutes a fulfilling career?

The underlying, highly personal question of what it means to have a fulfilling career has been completely overpowered by a focus on what the next level of promotion is. The reality is that the UFO (university job classification) defines academic roles and how they relate to each other, which is strongly connected with 'formation plans' that decide how many of each category of positions can exist in a certain unit or department. It follows that individual aspirations driven by individual competencies are poorly reflected by this categorization. We must return to the idea that a staff member is an individual with their own strengths and weaknesses. What is fulfillment for one may not be for the other. We know that striving for a promotion and achieving the next level will feel great for a moment, but that feeling is likely to wear off very soon and make room for the ambition to reach the next level as soon as possible.

The R&R policy proposes to recognise staff members for their contribution to the more holistic picture of what a team needs to achieve. That can mean differentiating the tasks individuals on the same team perform, in consort with the opportunity to provide staff members the opportunity to do what they do best. But this is not sufficient to address the question of how to facilitate a fulfilling career. The focus in doing this should not be on the team, but on the individual strengths of the staff member. A fulfilling career can certainly come from contributing to a team, but should always be looked at from the perspective of the individual staff member.

4.   On the interaction between the four areas (research, education, leadership, impact).

We believe that academics should have some degree of skill in research, education, leadership and impact. To be a professional in all of these areas is part of the modern academic landscape. However, just as it is not the intention of the R&R policy that one person excels in just *one* of these areas, it should also not be the intention that one person excels in *all* these areas.

The R&R policy should be about expanding the possibilities for reward, including career advancement and development, beyond what has traditionally been considered excellence. Qualities in one area should therefore not come at the expense of qualities in other areas because it is not a zero-sum game, but should instead be part of a conversation with the staff member on what is part of the

fulfilment of their career. Importantly the planned changes should not come at the cost of increased work pressure.

The interaction between the four core areas needs to be addressed specifically with an overarching vision that goes beyond the general R&R policy document. It needs to specifically address the two core questions that we have identified above by centering on academic fulfillment and highlighting the necessity to recognize individual strengths.

5.   On the current UM narratives

The MYA applauds the work that has been carried out by the various working groups preparing the four UM narratives. Recognising that this was not their primary task, we advice that future coordination between the various working groups will result in more coherent narratives in terms of the following two elements: (1) How will these narratives be used to promote growth and advancement, and (2) how can an individual come to know what is expected of them.

Once more, this is a question of the use of standards and metrics. In our current culture quantitative metrics still play an important role (despite agreements like DORA), and most of us have been trained to use these to assess the quality of research and education. There are perhaps situations where quantitative metrics are the only external source of information available. However, the R&R policy goes beyond this and the use of quantitative metrics should represent the beginning of a dynamic and continuous discussion between the person (academic) and the institution (supervisory panel or tenure- or career track committees), with a primary focus on development. Outsourcing any evaluation of an individual to grants, prizes, or similar measures should be regarded with suspicion. The UM should develop its own criteria of what it considers excellence for research, education, leadership and impact. These criteria should find reflection in local criteria at different faculties, institutes, and departments that should be comparable across the roles of an academic (i.e., criteria for research and leadership at a middle level should be comparable in scope and difficulty).

5.1 On the research narrative
As previously stated, metrics on research output have long been present and debated. We fear the current document falls short by providing a far too specific checklist of criteria that may only result in increased work pressure and is unlikely to build teams. The talent of various staff members cannot be seen if everyone must comply with the same checklist of criteria. While attempting to distinguish qualitative and quantitative aspects, the narrative is unfortunately confused as many of the qualitative criteria can easily be related to quantitative ones. As an

example, the number of PhDs supervised is directly linked to funding which are *de facto* quantitative metrics used in the evaluation process (often implicitly).

While arguing that a career as a 'full professor' is not the 'holy grail', the current narrative does not yet describe the alternatives. We believe these considerations are *per se* general (and not specific to a research narrative) and would be best considered in an overarching vision across the narratives.

5.2 On the education narrative
Currently the narrative seems to imply a dichotomy between education and research. Surely it is not the intention of R&R to foster an environment in which a single aspect of academic life is considered. In this respect, the narrative actually represents the very problem that R&R faces: to what degree one needs to be well-versed in other areas of academic life while focusing on one? In this respect, it is indeed true that recognizing educational professionals is needed (and timely), but the key will be how education will be in balance with other relevant areas. Competence is mentioned as a specific requirement for an educator, but it is unclear how competence (in a specific field) is maintained and evaluated. In addition, while research in education is undoubtedly relevant, it represents a specific field of study that requires specific expertise. We wonder to what degree it should be expected from all excellent educators to be versed in researching educational approaches (which is implied by the narrative).

5.3 On the leadership narrative
The MYA supports the distinction made between management and leadership and the emphasis that every staff member can take a leadership role in their activities. The leadership narrative offers a detailed overview of what different types of leadership exist. We signal that there is currently a disconnection between the research and leadership narrative. While the former (see above) is enumerating criteria, the leadership narrative abstains from this (i.e. it does not read like a long checklist). Whether either one of the two reflects more accurately the overarching vision is unclear, but it is obvious from this example that the narratives will require harmonizing. With respect to the leadership narrative per se we would advise to include some ideas on *how* leaders should operate (not only describing the kind of teams they operate in).

5.4 On the impact narrative
The current narrative on impact could improve by including more direct specifications, e.g., with respect to its relation to inclusivity and diversity or the type of activities unrelated to the (personal) field research. The narrative could also benefit from a stronger tie to team work thus fostering the fundamental collaborative aspect of academia as opposed to stressing the role of an individual. We would also welcome clarification on how (who) sets the 'grand societal

problems' that the narratives refer to, as well as broadening to some degree the economic view that is reflected in the document. When referring to external sources, we would advise to do so in relation to those that are closer to academic work (NWO or the European Commission [Horizon Europe] instead of UK-based ones).

The narrative is distinctly lacking ideas on how to weigh impact in relation to other areas of academic life (e.g. research or education) and what relevance it should have in selecting new recruits. In relation to this, as impact can take many forms, we wonder whether the UM has the ambition of excelling at all aspects of impact or it should perhaps concentrate on some.

6.   The implementation of R&R at UM.

Apart from the content of the four narratives that will certainly contribute to a university-wide discussion on the merits of the R&R policy, the most important issue moving forward is the way in which R&R will be implemented at our university. While central direction and monitoring will be necessary to avoid six different faculty-interpretations of what R&R is, diversity will be necessary depending on the field and (perhaps) even the specific team. Accomplishing this – homogenizing intent while allowing more diversity than even faculty-wide rules – requires clarity on the objectives that will be incorporated in the overall vision.

As indicated before, the UFO system will limit many aspects of the implementability of R&R. The university finance model is connected to this, and also influences formation plans that foresee a hierarchical structuring. R&R brings with it, an urgency to have a discussion centering on the balance between individual career fulfillment and institutional formation. In other words, what is required to reconcile budgetary and formation considerations with the recognition and reward of academics? What drives the assignment of tenure positions? Currently, in many cases, this is driven by external stimuli such as the award of a grant. But when doing so, is the institution prepared to support the potential growth of the academic in question beyond the initial step (at the assistant level position)? The necessity of aligning individual fulfillment and growth with the current hierarchical structure calls for planning and an open and transparent discussion around these plans. The obvious counterargument is that not everyone can become a full professor and therefore the formation principle can no longer be maintained when we are dealing with the conversation about fulfilling careers.

7.   The MYA vision on how to move forward

In moving forward we believe that providing a coherent and well structured overall vision of R&R at UM is of paramount importance. We hope this will harmonize current narratives, perhaps allowing them to forego their view on the need for R&R, as they all do in their initial paragraphs (often providing different [dissonant] views). This vision document should also clarify the relationship that R&R will have to formation.

We are looking forward to the faculty-based discussions that are soon to take place. With respect to this, we hope R&R will allow both homogeneity of intents (across faculties) and diversity of practices (to a finer scale than the faculty one, perhaps even at the level of units). Above anything, we believe R&R calls for transparency about decisions that should not be made by supervisors alone, but rather by a committee to which the staff member presents their own file periodically on their own initiative. Diversity in the composition of such committees will be crucial for their success. Direct supervisors (such as PIs) should preferably not be involved in decision making and rather maintain a consultative role in the evaluation process. Supervisors know their supervisees well and their voices therefore should be heard, but they should not have the final decision making power alone.
The measurement to assess the performance of staff members should be completely reconsidered. We would propose to speak of competences in this regard. A competence is an ability of someone to carry out a certain task. Once a staff member demonstrates that he or she can perform a certain competence (in the context of their career level), it should be considered achieved. For example, this could relate not to the number of PhD researchers supervised, or the number of courses coordinated, but rather to the competence of PhD supervision or course coordination.

The MYA is prepared to contribute to the making of an overarching R&R vision at UM and hopes to offer a contribution to its making with this position paper. UM is not the only institution in the world dealing with these issues and there is therefore no need to reinvent the wheel. Instead, much more collaboration, especially on an international level is preferred. Inspiration can be gained from various other places both in and outside of the Netherlands. Perhaps the COVID19 circumstances can actually contribute to organising more international online events to discuss aspects of R&R, especially to learn from other initiatives.