

APPENDIX

Report of findings based on the analysis, conclusion and recommendations of the report by Bezemer & Schubad on the learning and working environment of the Willem de Kooning Academy.

The management of the Willem de Kooning Academy commissioned Bezemer & Schubad to investigate the alleged undesirable and/or transgressive behaviour of one specific teacher. This step was taken in response to signals expressed through social media.

From the outset, there was some degree of uncertainty regarding the nature of this investigation. Investigation of a report usually focuses on formal reports against one or more persons. In this particular case, though there had been a number of posts on social media, originally no report had been communicated to the management of the Academy.

Still, the investigator was commissioned to contact a number of people, after the Academy had requested their participation in the investigation, based on their posts on social media or otherwise. It is worth noting that none of these people had reported an incident through traditional channels.

In order to provide additional context about the circumstances and general environment prevailing at the Willem de Kooning Academy, the investigator examined broader circumstances in addition to the actual reports about the teacher in question. This was partly because the investigator believed that it would have been neither fair nor accurate to conduct a targeted investigation of one single person, based on social media posts and on reports requested by management retroactively.

As a result, this report instead addresses the broader context of the social environment of the Willem de Kooning Academy. A second report will specifically address the reports of alleged transgressive behaviour of one teacher.

Regarding the investigation

Though all respondents recognised the value and necessity of this investigation, they also pointed out a complex additional factor. Since this investigation was prompted by a number of posts on social media, one may well question to what extent an organisation is required to act on the basis of accusations made in this way. Respondents also indicated an understanding of the organisation's dilemma: if these accusations are indeed shown to be justified, then action will have to be taken in order to guarantee social safety.

This touches upon a much broader problem that organisations, including the Willem de Kooning Academy, will increasingly be confronted with in the future. Some of the mostly

young people who have expressed their dissatisfaction with the Willem de Kooning Academy through social media, will have considered this a completely legitimate channel for doing so. For these people, this form of communication has a different value than it does for the established order, and perhaps also for those who are not so young anymore. Recently, the investigator heard a young person (in another context outside the WdKA) express disappointment that their social media posts had not been acknowledged or responded to by their management: 'You can't reasonably expect us to send an e-mail, this is how we communicate nowadays'. This way of thinking was shared by a respondent who indicated that traditional channels, such as submitting a formal complaint or meeting in person with the management, will no longer be used.

This might clash with the norms and values of the older generation, who believe that you should address yourself directly to the person whose behaviour you are dissatisfied with. But even this older generation knows how hard it can be to give feedback, especially from a position of dependency. Seen from that perspective, expressing such signals through social media is perhaps something that should be embraced.

This does require a serious discussion of which modes of expression do or do not adhere to the values and norms of the Willem de Kooning Academy. Should people be able to post anonymously about the Willem de Kooning Academy? What if these posts include the names of others? Should the Academy appoint a staff member to respond to posts from students or staff members of the Willem de Kooning Academy? If we accept that communication through social media is unavoidable, then it would make sense to discuss with students how best to ensure that this form of communication takes place in a way that is both respectful and safe.

What do you see as positive aspects?

The investigator has nothing substantive to add to the answers of respondents. Still, the investigator wishes to note that the enthusiasm of respondents about what the Willem de Kooning Academy offers them, seemed authentic as well as positively contagious.

How do you experience interacting with each other?

In general, respondents are positive about their fellow staff members and fellow students, and about the relationship between teachers and students. Interestingly, respondents specifically mentioned experiencing a 'helping' environment; follow-up questions by the investigator confirmed a general absence of negative forms of competitiveness. In the investigator's experience, this can be a contentious issue in the context of art education; it should be noted that this particular investigation encountered no mention of negatively perceived competition.

Since only one single respondent reported experiencing a problematic imbalance of power between teachers and students, this topic was not further investigated.

Social safety: sexual harassment

Since respondents only mentioned in this regard the particular staff member against

whom specific reports of sexual harassment had been made, and who will be the subject of a separate report, the investigator is unable to reach any conclusions related to possible incidents of sexual harassment at the Willem de Kooning Academy, other than the general observation that this does not seem to be a widespread problem, based on the experiences reported by the interviewed respondents.

Social safety: discrimination

Based on the experiences reported by respondents, discrimination is clearly a point of concern. The Willem de Kooning Academy cannot escape the ongoing discussion in the Netherlands and abroad about topics such as ‘white innocence’ and discrimination based on gender. With regard to the latter, respondents indicated that women at the Willem de Kooning Academy are still treated differently from men, and that white men in particular still occupy the most important positions. Although the investigator is persuaded that the men in question do not think of themselves as acting or thinking in a sexist way, it remains essential for the Willem de Kooning Academy to genuinely invest in developing a working and learning environment in which no one can be subjected to discrimination based on gender. There should be an effort to identify, together with students, the specific behaviours and situations that make women feel disadvantaged, and the steps that can be taken to ensure a truly equal environment. In this regard, it is important to understand the necessity of working together toward establishing a desirable environment, which also means that people should feel comfortable in pointing out (sometimes subtle) sexist or exclusionary comments.

With regard to racial discrimination, it is imperative to engage students as well as staff members in thinking differently about diversity and inclusion. Only when white people become aware of how most white people – including in all likelihood themselves, though almost always unintentionally and without malice – act in ways that demonstrate an attitude of superiority with regard to people of colour, can we take actual steps toward equality. This requires both motivation and concrete efforts on an organisational level; the Willem de Kooning Academy should certainly consider surveying its students and staff members to find out how well it is actually performing in this regard.

One single respondent mentioned discrimination based on physical disability. This is to some extent due to the characteristics of the building, which is not, or not sufficiently, accessible. The investigator realises that making the building more accessible would not be a trivial task. On the other hand, since we are in 2021, it is worrying to note that students are still excluded from a study programme based on their physical disability, or at the very least are seriously hindered in their functioning in a building that is insufficiently adapted to their needs.

It is worth mentioning that, despite previous agreements regarding accessibility and physical disabilities, this student regularly encounters obstacles because teachers do not consider it necessary to actually respect these agreements. In the opinion of the investigator, this leads to unnecessary suffering and is thus in fact unacceptable.

Social safety: bullying

Based on the experiences reported by respondents, there seems to be no indication of an environment of bullying within the Willem de Kooning Academy. This may definitely be seen as a compliment.

Social safety: aggression and violence (including verbal aggression and intimidation)

Again, based on experiences reported by respondents, there appears to be very little aggression and violence, with the exception of a single isolated incident. Here too, a compliment is in order.

Social safety: didactical skills and assessments

The experiences reported by respondents about didactical skills and assessments vary. With regard to didactical skills, one respondent described an approach of 'breaking down and then building up again'. The notion that students should first be 'broken down' so that they can later be 'built up again', is by no means an acceptable teaching method in this day and age, regardless of any underlying justification (for example, the idea that one is thus preparing students for a harsh future).

It was also mentioned that it sometimes seems as though, rather than teachers functioning in a coaching, listening and questioning capacity, students sense that they are expected to produce work that appeals to the teacher.

Although the Willem de Kooning Academy clearly pursues an active policy of didactical teacher training, the Academy's educational vision could possibly be updated to better reflect this ambition. It would be well worth investing in a collectively shared vision of the necessary conditions for the development of students, and of the role of teachers in this regard. Two respondents reported experiencing assessments as not sufficiently objective. However, these two instances did not provide the investigator with sufficient information to draw any reliable conclusions. The investigator does however assume that the application of specific assessment competencies constitutes a deliberate attempt to achieve the highest possible level of objectivity.

Rating your own sense of social safety

As indicated in the report of findings, all respondents indicated that they felt sufficiently safe. It seems that the aspects that have, up to this point, been deemed unsatisfactory (such as alleged sexual harassment by one practical instructor, or experiences of discrimination) do not make people feel generally unsafe. The Willem de Kooning Academy maintains an active policy for safely reporting undesirable situations. In this context, students mentioned for example their study guidance coaches, while teachers mentioned their supervisors and confidential advisors. The investigator believes that both the visibility and the obvious trust placed in these individuals, contribute significantly to the feelings of safety experienced by both students and staff members. These generally positive experiences are not in line with the need expressed by respondents to remain anonymous in this report. The comment by one respondent that some people will not dare to speak out because they believe it might negatively impact

their career or study, means that the investigator cannot conclusively determine that everyone feels sufficiently secure in terms of social safety.

Workload

Though respondents indicated that there is indeed a high workload, the concrete experiences reported did not lead the investigator to conclude that there is any direct cause for alarm. The investigator assumes that management is well aware that the workload is generally perceived as being (too) high, and that actions are being taken to amend the curricula to make the study programme more manageable.

Professional distance, heartfelt commitment, and the possibility of romantic involvement

The fragile balance between professional distance and confidential proximity is a recurring problem within art schools. This seems to play less of a role at the Willem de Kooning Academy than might otherwise be expected, based on experiences reported by respondents describing the professional relationships between teachers and students. In the eventuality of a romantic involvement between a teacher and a student, most respondents are well aware of the position of the Willem de Kooning Academy and the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences in this regard. On the topic of possible romantic involvements, some respondents referred to the staff member whose behaviour originally led to this investigation and report. The investigator has established that at least these respondents are aware of the policy regarding such romantic involvements – which does not mean that everyone agrees with this policy. Those who disagree with the policy of not tolerating any romantic involvements between teachers and students argue, for example, that the age of consent would provide a better guideline in this regard. However, this argument completely ignores the role of the imbalance of power and relationship of dependency, as well as the effect of such a situation upon the broader working and studying environment. Fellow students and fellow staff members are likely to feel less secure within the environment created by such a romantic involvement. One is no longer certain of what can still be discussed confidentially, and the chance that opportunities will be handed out in the bedroom is by no means imaginary.

Diversity and inclusion

Regarding diversity and inclusion, we refer back to the previous section on the topic of discrimination.

The investigator realises that the Willem de Kooning Academy is working hard to realise a more diverse and more inclusive community. The investigator wishes to emphasise that any individuals or groups aiming to invest in improvements in this regard should be able to count on the unconditional support of the Academy's management. Issues of diversity and inclusion are not solved by merely developing policy and giving sensitivity workshops, but rely on an in-depth understanding of the need for an integrated approach, in which management must be prepared to lead by example.

Alcohol and drugs

Alcohol and drugs do not seem to be a major problem at the Willem de Kooning Academy, at least not when it comes to the quality of education.

Conclusions

- Due to the small number of respondents, this report should not be seen as the result of a general survey of the working and learning environment, though it does reflect to some degree the environment prevailing at the Willem de Kooning Academy.
- The interviewed respondents indicated experiencing a sufficient degree of social safety.
- The point of attention that was generally perceived most negatively had to do with diversity and inclusion (discrimination).

Recommendations

- Investigate which conditions will be necessary to further improve diversity and inclusion; find out the concrete needs of people and groups of people.
- Hold consultations with students to develop a code of conduct regarding the use of social media in referring to situations within the Willem de Kooning Academy.
- Investigate whether enough is currently being done to reduce the workload to an acceptable level, also taking into account the balance between theory and practice (including spaces for practical activities).
- Investigate whether the visibility, role and position – as well as the professional duty of secrecy – of confidential advisors is sufficiently clear to students.