



GRADUATE
SPIRIT

Graduate School Program for International Researchers and Interdisciplinary Training

INNOVATION #METOO

FOR TRIPLE-I DOCTORAL TRAINING

Addressing harassment and exploring solutions through a theater play

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BACKGROUND

Harassment in academia is of all times, but it has been made urgent again by the #MeToo and Time's Up movement. Many of us think academia will provide a safe, sensible and intellectual environment in which #metoo behavior is absent. A systematic review of published research by Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) suggests, however, that "the prevalence of sexual harassment among students is reported by on average one out of four female students." Currently, a wave of other research underlines these findings and demonstrate their devastating effects on the personal lives and professional developments of PhD-candidates (a.o. Henning et al., 2017; Tenbrunsel et al., 2019; Thakur & Paul, 2019)

THE INNOVATION

Following this important movement against bullying, (sexual) harassment and exclusion, one of the Graduate Spirit Partners invited a theater company to develop a play that would function to share experiences and open up discussions. After the performance of the play, different academic stakeholders and the audience discuss what you can do if you find yourself, your colleagues or members of your team in such situations. Through the play, the SPIRIT partners seek to create awareness of harassment in academia – which tends to impact young researchers or support staff in particular – while also exploring individual and institutional ways to address these issues and create a safe working environment.

While the play is a work of fiction, it is based on published interviews in the Dutch magazine Science Guide, and on confidential interviews with PhD researchers and members of staff at Erasmus University Rotterdam. From these stories, the theatre company developed a 30-minute play about sexual intimidation and abuse of power in the university context, called *The Learning Curve*.

Suzanne De Jong is a talented second-year graduate student. When her promotor returns from sabbatical she's delighted. The internationally renowned Professor Loek Dekker is amusing, approachable and inspirational. But during a conference in Berlin Suzanne encounters a darker side of the famous academic. And when the great man doesn't get his way the consequences for her become catastrophic. Where can she turn for help?

REACTIONS

Apart from numerous performances in Dutch universities, the play was especially performed for the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and junior researchers, convening in Brussels on April 2, 2019. There were some 200 people in the audience, staff and PhD researchers alike. The performance was followed by a panel and audience discussion, which focused on the identification of the universities as high risk environments, individual experiences and repertoires of action and resistance.

A common element in the discussions concerned the prevalence and seriousness of the problem and pointing at other forms of harassment in academia, besides sexual ones. Many audience members pointed at more subtle forms of exclusion, jokes and condescending language. This led some to speak of the university as a toxic environment, although wide differences between research groups and disciplines were also discussed.

However, in Brussels, after some audience members questioned the extent of the problem, individual PhD-candidates stood up to share their own, painful experiences, and the lack of response and support they received from their institutions. An important repertoire of action was sought with colleagues and bystanders, who often witness bullying or harassment but miss a perspective on how to act or support. Bystander support, however, is crucial for creating a safer environment at the universities.

FOLLOW UP

The Graduate Spirit Team has witnessed the power of theatre to raise the issue of harassment, share experiences and discuss strategies for action. In most universities where the play was performed, it was part of a wider training and resilience programme, aimed at both staff and PhD researchers. The theatre group can be found and invited at <http://www.hetacteursgenootschap.nl/productions/metooacademia-the-learning-curve/>

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